Introduction

No meaning without other people

This book is about meaning. Probably no society has ever been more concerned with meaning than the one in which we live. Never before have so many people felt such an urge to make sense of the world they live in and of the lives they are leading. They find this sense not so much in themselves as in the discourse, which is the entirety of everything that has been said and written by the members of the discourse community to which they owe their identity. It is communication, this verbal interaction with others, which reassures them about their notions and ideas, and in which they find interpretations they can accept, rework or reject, and in which they can recognise themselves.

In principle, everyone has a voice in the discourse. But in reality we find that our modern society is neatly divided into those who are commissioned to produce texts for the media and the rest of us who consume them. While each of us may say whatever we want, it seems to carry less weight than what we are told by the discourse we find on the shelves of our content merchants: newspapers, magazines, television, much of the web, NHS brochures and similar pamphlets issued by our authorities, instruction manuals and even those old-fashioned things called books. Secondary experiences supplied by the media have taken over the role that a person's own experiences and those of their friends and neighbours had for former generations. Even when we want to find out what our own experiences mean, we trust the texts offered by the content merchants more than our own judgement or that of our friends and neighbours. The media, not the common sense we exercise in conversation with family and friends, will tell me whether feeling fed up with my workload means that I have depression and should take pills. Such a dependence is hardly surprising. Even in the good old days when the media had little power over our thoughts, we always needed a discourse community to make sense of our experiences. Interpretation is inevitably a collaborative act. We do not interpret our experiences for ourselves; we do it for an audience, imagined or otherwise. We want to learn from the interpretations offered by others, and we want others to share our interpretations. There is no meaning without society.

My view is that the world, our lives, the things we do or don't do, and what happens to us, have no meaning at all, in as much as we do not

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appropriate them through interpretation. Our experiences only make sense when we reflect on them, or when we share them with others by talking about them, or when we weigh them against other people's experiences as we find them in the media we consume. This is indeed what we do most of the time when we talk with each other: we assign meaning to what we do and what others do. The only reality that counts is the reality we find constructed in the discourse, in this entirety of texts that have been exchanged and shared between the people who make up society. We never cease contributing to this limitless, all-encompassing blog uniting humankind that I call the discourse. The discourse tells us how we experience, how we 'feel', what happens to us and what we do. We have learned how to experience things through the stories other people have told about their experiences. For us, too, the only way to communicate our personal experiences is by contributing them to the discourse. We cannot do that without interpreting them, without assigning meaning to them. It is the discourse that makes our lives meaningful. The discourse tells us how we can view the world, our private lives, the things we do or don't do, and the things that happen to us. Without the discourse, these things, and even life itself, remain devoid of meaning. This is why chimpanzees, lacking language, are not concerned with the meaning of their lives.

The word *life* means what life is for us. The meaning of life is therefore not really different from the meaning of the word *life*. It is all that has been said about it. Google lists *c*. 229,000 occurrences of the phrase '*the meaning of life is*'. Here are a few citations, taken from the first fifty entries:

> *The meaning of life is* that there is no meaning at all.
> *The meaning of life is* to live.
> *the meaning of life is* what you make of it
> *The meaning of life* is to make life meaningful.
> *the meaning of life is* to reach Nirvana
> *The Meaning of Life is* the title of a 1983 Monty Python film.

The results for '*life means*' are not so different. Among the first entries (of 1,130,000) listed by Google, we find:

> Where *Life Means* Getting a Little Sand in Your Shoes
> When *Life Means* Life.
> *Life means* so much.
> *Life means* suffering.
> eternal *life means* serenity
> *Life Means* Nothing.
> *Life Means* Nothing Behind the Green Wall

It is difficult to imagine that by pondering we would find an answer to the meaning of life/*life* that is not already expressed in the discourse. The same is

true for all the other things our world consists of. We are aware of no other things, concrete or abstract, beyond those which have already been discussed. By reflecting on them we may hope to find something new. But once we take a closer look we find that what we have taken to be new is no more than a recombination, a permutation, a reformulation of what has been said before. This is how new ideas come about. As long as we keep talking to each other, as long as the discourse goes on, there will always be innovation.

That content needs a discourse is not such a new idea

The idea that there is nothing 'really' new is not new. It has been with us, it seems, since the beginning of time. In Ecclesiastes 1, 9–10, we find it already spelt out:

The thing that has been, it is that which shall be; and that which has been done is that which shall be done: and there is no new thing under the sun. Is there any thing whereof it may be said, See, this is new? it has been already of old time, which was before us.

My book is yet another text, in a world flooded with texts on a scale our ancestors would not have dreamt of. Like most other books, it builds on previous texts. The ideas it presents have been around for a long time. What I try to do in this text is to recombine, permute and rephrase them in such a way that perhaps something slightly new takes shape. We can look at the discourse as the memory of all the hands of a deck of cards that have ever been played, and we can see every new text as a new hand, more or less similar to previous hands but not quite identical to them, made up mostly of the very same cards. Sometimes an author may try to smuggle in a new card, and, if she or he is very lucky, the other players will accept it as long as they do not notice.

Rearranging existing units of meaning is more than playing with words. It is presenting the world to us in a new light. We always have the power to change this discourse-internal world by adding yet another, our own, interpretation onto previous texts. If other people take notice, if it leaves traces in future texts, it will have had an impact.

It is the discourse that turns the stuff of reality out there into objects. As objects of the discourse, they are at our disposition. All we have to do when we want to change things as we find them is to reconstruct them, to assign a new meaning to them. Karl Marx was wrong when he said: 'The philosophers have only interpreted the world differently, what matters is to change it' (Marx 1888: 7). The only way to change the world as we encounter it, mediated through the discourse, is to reinterpret it.

When we talk, we never start at point zero. We react to things that have been said before. We praise, or accept, or criticise, or reject what has been said before. Perhaps we proffer a counter-example to the example we were given. Even if we

invent a new story, it will be modelled on existing stories. Indeed, unless we had been talked to we would never say anything. For we learn to speak by reacting to those who speak to us first. Whatever we may say, it is made up from the building blocks provided by the existing discourse. All we do in a new text is to rearrange these elements.

The text that I contribute to this discourse is a reinterpretation of previous texts, which, of course, were also nothing but interpretations of interpretations of interpretations. For us, the interpretive community, symbolic content never refers to anything tangible. All we can see is how it refers to something said before. The first arbitrary sign used by someone to signal something to someone else referred not to something in the world outside but to an object constructed through symbolic interaction. Any new text is always in some way a comment on previous texts, a re-assignment of meaning. Even those who disclaim the plausibility of this assumption, advancing instead the equally convincing idea that we only speak because we have something new to say, show unwillingly that they are, too, treading no uncharted territory but paths already well-trodden. Noam Chomsky provides an excellent example:

The first [creative aspect of language use] is that the normal use of language is innovative, in the sense that much of what we say in the course of normal language use is entirely new, not a repetition of anything that we have heard before and not even similar in pattern – in any useful sense of the terms 'similar' and 'pattern'– to sentences or discourse that we have heard in the past. *This is a truism*, but an important one, often overlooked and not infrequently denied in the behaviorist period of linguistics, to which I referred earlier, when it was almost universally claimed that a person's knowledge of language is representable as a stored set of patterns, overlearned through constant repetition and detailed training, with innovation being at most a matter of 'analogy'. (Chomsky 1972: 11f., my emphasis)

How innovative is this text segment really? According to the Cobuild dictionary, a *truism* is 'a statement that is generally accepted as obviously true and is *repeated* so often that it has become boring'. What Chomsky had to tell us was, it seems, nothing new; it was no more than a reformulation of what we had been told all along. But as such, it was enormously successful. It was the foundational idea of the paradigm of generative transformational grammar which has dominated much of theoretical linguistics for half a century.

My aim in this book is to look again at what has been said about meaning in various fields of linguistics, social studies and the philosophy of language. I will focus on two perspectives. The goal of Chomskyan linguistics and of cognitive linguistics (two prominent schools of linguistic thinking) has been to build a model of the language system, seen as the mechanism for turning thought into utterances and utterances into thought. The mind, both schools agree, is the seat of this mechanism. This is the perspective that I will show to be defective. Instead, I will propound the view that meaning is only in the discourse. Our

world, to the extent that we can make sense of it, is a world we have constructed for ourselves, or, to be more realistic, that others have constructed for us. What we take to be reality is always mediated by what has been said.

The futile quest for a language system

Is there a language system? This is not a question I am really much concerned with. This book is about meaning, and not about the rules and regularities we find in the field of grammar. The rules we are supposed to observe in a language like English have evolved over centuries. That they are relatively stable and largely accepted wherever English is spoken is on the one hand due to inertia – there is no need to change things as long as they work well. On the other hand, there have been, time and again, efforts to standardise language in cases where we find variants. The rule systems for English and for many other European languages, as we encounter them today, owe much to the creation of the modern nation state in the nineteenth century. A unified school system presupposes not only a unified curriculum, but even more a common language. Every pupil had to be taught an inventory of grammatical rules. To a certain extent, this unification also concerns word usage. While in many English dialects *borrow* and *lend* can still be used interchangeably, we are required to use them as converse correspondences in contemporary standard English. What I lend to you is what you borrow from me. In this process of standardisation, dictionaries have played a major role, not only as repositories of the linguistic heritage, but also as voices of authority for the meaning of words.

We should distinguish between rules and regularities. Rules are what we find written down in grammar books, and what is taught in school. While we may not always be aware of our own rule-following, we can look rules up. Regularities concern practices we normally follow without being explicitly told. In English, we would normally place the modifying adjective in front of the noun. In French, it is often the other way around. This is not something native speakers have to be taught; they pick it up quite 'naturally' when they acquire their first language. What is a regularity for a native speaker often has to be learned as an explicit rule by the foreign learner.

This also holds for the vocabulary. We tend to take for granted that words are the 'natural' elements of any language. Language acquisition, whether learning one's mother tongue or a second language, seems to be first of all learning the meaning of words. Dictionaries tell us how they are to be used. Even more than the more loquacious monolingual dictionary, its bilingual cousin fosters the illusion that there is a system behind word meanings. But in spite of all attempts to pin down the accurate meaning(s) of a word, word meanings have a tendency to remain fuzzy. Most frequent words can mean many a thing, but dictionaries rarely agree on the number of word senses and their definitions for any

given word. The reason it is quite impossible to standardise the meaning of words is that many single words in isolation have no fixed meanings. It very much depends on the contexts in which they are embedded, on the words we find to the left and right of the word in question, as to how they contribute to the meaning of a sentence. Indeed, from a semantic perspective, the word as the basic unit of language has been shown to be a rather poor choice. Single words are notoriously ambiguous. Yet we language users normally have no problems with them, as the contexts in which they are embedded tend to tell us how we should read them. The unambiguous units of meaning that we intuitively make out, when we listen to someone speaking or read a text, are often larger than this chain of letters between spaces, often consisting of two or more words, which do not even have to be adjacent. Even though many of these units have never found their way into dictionaries, we use them intuitively as elements of the discourse that we have encountered before, in the same or a similar form. These units of meaning create their own regularities, but not a system. A few lines above I have used the phrase *quite impossible*. Originally I had written *sheer impossible*. There is no rule that tells me that one does not use this phrase. After a friend pointed out my 'mistake', I checked it on Google. There are about 2,000 hits for it (as compared to *c*. 600,000 for *quite impossible*), and most of them are translated from other languages. There is no rule, and certainly no law, that tells me *sheer impossible* is wrong. How systematic is language?

While the founder of the modern discipline of linguistics, the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, did not distinguish explicitly between rules and laws, the discovery of language laws has been the main objective of much of theoretical linguistics since the second half of the twentieth century. These laws would have to be universal and valid for all languages; we would have to follow them, largely unaware of them, just as the apple knows nothing about the law of gravity that makes it fall to the ground. Like the apple, we language users would be in no position to violate the rules. I am somewhat unconvinced concerning such laws. Apart from the (obvious) truism that language, at least spoken language, is organised in a linear fashion, there seem to be few candidates for universal language laws that cannot be violated. The jury is still out on this fascinating question. I will revisit it in greater detail in the next chapter.

There are few rules concerning the meaning of words or phrases, or what I call units of meaning. Of course, as all academic teachers keep complaining, students often misuse words, particularly rarer words that are part of a specifically academic register. It seems that students are not aware of how these words are normally, perhaps even regularly, used. They may have previously encountered them only a few times, and hardly ever in a situation where it would have been feasible to ask the speaker for a paraphrase. Just encountering a word once or twice, or even more often, is rarely enough to understand its meaning. The user has to be told how to use a word and what it means (which is not always the same).

There are a number of language theoreticians who would disagree with me concerning these ideas. This is why a discussion is needed. This book is intended as a contribution to a dialogue on meaning. The different points of view allow us, in an exchange of ideas, to pick and choose among the notions that have been used by either side. By recombining and rearranging the elements of which they consist, we will find formulations that will differ more or less from what was there before. The result will be innovation, a new way to look at meaning. It is only possible if the disputants focus on the differences between existing views more than on what may link them together. Only if the dialogue on meaning speaks in many voices and clearly expresses differences, only if it is truly plurivocal, can we hope to achieve some progress.

Language in the mind?

In the first part of this book I will try to point out what is wrong with a theory which claims that the meaning of a word (or a phrase) is the mental concept to which it corresponds. This is, as I see it, the foundational stance of all cognitive linguistics, in spite of the fact that some varieties of this theoretical framework are more interested in the construction of 'cognitive' models and less in the factuality these models claim for themselves. Other 'cognitive' schools increasingly delegate the responsibility for the 'true' nature of these concepts to the neural sciences. But mental, or cognitive, concepts, or representations, are a staple fare of many twentieth-century language theories that proclaim that there is a mind endowed with a mechanism that processes linguistic input and generates linguistic output. Against this view, I raise two objections. Firstly I insist that meaning is symbolic. What a word, a phrase or a text (segment) means is something that has to be negotiated between the members of a discourse community. Unless I am told, a word means nothing; it is not a sign. Meaning is not what happens in our individual, monadic minds; it is something that is constructed within the discourse. Of course, each of us has individually learnt what words mean. But unless we actually use them in our contributions to the discourse, this passive knowledge will leave no traces. Second, we know nothing about the mind, and there is no way to access what may be in it. Nobody has ever seen a mind. A mind is something we have successfully constructed as an object of the discourse, and as such it serves many good purposes. But we have no way to find out whether minds occur as objects of the reality outside of the discourse, and they are not even objects of a discourse-internal reality shared by everyone. We use the construct 'mind' to give a name to a virtual interface between our body and our symbolic, meaningful behaviour. Mental concepts, even if they existed, would not be accessible to any empirical investigation of meaning. Of course we can build one model after another of mental concepts. But they will never be more than models.

Language in the discourse community

In the second part of this book I want to develop my view that meaning can be found nowhere else but in the discourse. I do not want to distinguish between meaning and knowledge. The word *globalisation* means all that has ever been said about the discourse object 'globalisation'. Meaning and knowledge are public. Public knowledge, as I see it, does not have to be true. 'Truth' refers to a reality out there, outside of the discourse. But globalisation is not something that we can see, hear or otherwise feel. What I experience is that I can now access my email in an internet café in almost any remote valley in Papua New Guinea, and equally that the gap between the poor and the rich is constantly growing. We can agree to calling it globalisation. But would such an agreement make it a 'true' statement? Whatever people say about globalisation, it is neither true nor false. Other people may like it or find it stupid. If it is repeated by others, it will become part of the meaning of the lexical item *globalisation*. Thus meaning, unlike 'truth', is never final; it is always provisional. Whenever we are unhappy with the way someone uses a word or a phrase, or with a longer piece of text, we will open a discussion about its meaning or, more often, about the discourse object for which it stands. We may not be able to convince our interlocutor of our view. But by talking about the word, or the object (which is the same for me), we will jointly come up with a new interpretation of it that will be added to its meaning or our knowledge about the object, and thus modify it. The discourse is the place where new texts react to existing texts, by discussing, questioning or averring what has been said. The discourse has a diachronic dimension and it goes on forever. New interpretations reinterpret earlier inter-pretations, and new knowledge is constructed in addition to existing knowl-edge. We are not at the mercy of the reality the discourse presents to us. Together, we have the power to change it.

This is why I want to look at the discourse as the collective mind of the discourse community. Unlike the monadic minds of individual people, it is open to our investigation. Linguists are in no way privileged. The discourse is at the disposal of all of us. We all can at least check what Google kindly lists as the meaning of 'life' or of *life*. Linguists are not experts in meaning or knowledge. They do not know more about the meaning of a lexical item than any other member of a discourse community.

Since antiquity, it was the *trivium* of the *artes liberales* (grammar, rhetoric and logic) that was seen as dealing with language. In the course of the Continental university reforms at the turn of the nineteenth century, the home of these language studies was seen as part of the *sciences humaines*, or the *Geisteswissenschaften*. David Hume called them the 'moral sciences'. But this categorisation was to change. Ever since the end of the nineteenth century, linguistics (like psychology) has been keen to be counted among the hard sciences and to lose its stigma of

belonging to the human sciences. As the positivists saw it, only the hard sciences, such as chemistry or physics, could lay claim to 'true' knowledge, based on brute 'facts'. Only the hard sciences were seen to be dealing with the reality out there. They were considered important because what they discovered could make a valuable contribution to society; they embodied 'progress'. A new interpretation of Shakespeare, a new dictionary of ancient Greek, a new look at a painting by Piero della Francesca might enchant a few connoisseurs but could not contribute to the technical revolution.

While it is true that some philologists in the nineteenth century professed to have discovered laws of the language system which could match the laws their colleagues in the natural sciences kept discovering, the majority of them set out to interpret the textual remnants of bygone ages, in all their diversity, inconsistency and unruliness. They were discourse linguists *avant la lettre*. In their thesauri of Sanskrit, Hebrew, Greek and Latin they showed how much the meaning of a word depended on the context in which it was situated. They were more interested in interpreting texts than in language laws as stringent as the second law of thermodynamics. It was this interpretive agenda that Ferdinand de Saussure opposed so fervently. To demonstrate the relevance of linguistics, he set out to rebrand it.

Should the mind be an object of scientific enquiry?

To establish linguistics as a hard science, however, required one important move. It necessitated the exclusion from the research agenda of people's intentionalities, of their experience of reality and of their interpretation of what their reality was about. In order to be accepted, linguists had to present their object of study as a system that was independent of unpredictable human intervention. 'In their [Saussure's immediate predecessors'] eagerness to achieve scientific status for their linguistic studies by assimilating the discovery of linguistic patterns to the discovery of laws of Nature, they were more than content to sacrifice any distinction between rules and regularities' (Harris 1987: 109). But there is a categorical difference between language as a system and the kind of systems we find in the natural sciences. As far as the latter are concerned, we observe and describe them from the outside. The entities and their interrelationships that make up the Newtonian system of gravity, the apple and the force that makes it fall to the ground, are not affected by our observation, our deliberations, our scientific discourse, our interpretations. Mainstream linguists in the twentieth century, in their quest for the language system and in their yearning for recognition, insisted on studying language as a zoologist would study the communication system of ants. They postulated an unbridgeable abyss between the object of observation and the observer. For Chomskyan and cognitive linguistics, the language system is something outside of the

reach of language users. But we as linguists can never escape the fact that we ourselves are language users. All language users engage in the generation and interpretation of utterances. Meaning is an integral part of language. Once we take meaning away, language ceases to be symbolic, to be language. Without intentionality, without the property of an utterance to be about some content that can be discussed, language is no longer language. Apples do not have intentionality. They do not mean. Gravity is a force independent of what we say about it. But language is different. We can never escape the discourse in which we are imprisoned whenever we negotiate the meaning of what is said. All we say becomes meaningful only through the discourse. Thus all we say has an impact on the discourse. The discourse is self-referential. This makes language something that belongs to a category different from that of gravity. There is no Archimedean point, no discourse-independent vantage point, from which we can describe language, as we can describe a falling apple.

It is true that we will never gain access to another person's individual experiences. Yet we do not fare better with our own experiences. I experience myself and the world in which I am, the things I do or don't do, directly and immediately, unmediated. But this immediacy is lost once the moment has passed. Not only am I unable to recall a past experience at will in some future situation, I also cannot let someone else share it. All I can do is to reflect on it, or to give testimony of it, to myself or to other people. This involves, however, translating, or rather re-creating, such an immediate experience into symbolic content, into a representation of an experience, into something that I can recall on a future occasion, and into something whose meaning can be collectively negotiated, something that has inexorably become an indirect and mediated account of my 'raw' experience. Intentionality, as I see it, leads us away from 'raw' experience; it can be described as being conscious of having experiences. Intentionality is the conscious creation of symbolic content, and the reflection on such content through the act of interpretation. The way in which I re-create my experience, turn it into symbolic content, and interpret it, is unpredictable. There is no mechanism for doing it. Language is not a system for turning my perception of myself or of the world outside into a representation. There are no rules that I follow without being aware of them, as the apple follows the law of gravity. Intentionality is outside of the remit of the hard sciences.

We will never be able to say anything about anyone's immediate, unreflected experiences, not even if they are our own. But there is another way to look at intentionality. The way in which a person transforms their experience into symbolic content will always remain hidden. But how we talk about experiences, assign meaning to them and interpret them, is something that happens inside a discourse, whether an imaginary one in our heads or a real one within a