Language and Imaginability

Language and Imaginability

By

Horst Ruthrof

**CAMBRIDGE
SCHOLARS**

P U B L I S H I N G

For Yingchi, my wife

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In writing this book I have been indebted to a very large number of writers, and especially to those with whose arguments on the description of language I felt I had to disagree. I owe them a special gratitude because it has only been in my conversation with their positions that I have been able to put the finger on the pulse of language in a way that would allow me to carve out my path towards what I believe to be the foundational role of *imaginability*. I hope that in my pursuit of this explanatory avenue I have not distorted standard accounts beyond sound reasoning in order to merely score points. If an apology is needed, it is to acknowledge that my opposition to many of the dominant discourses in the study of language is the consequence of my firm commitment to *intersubjective mentalism* in matters of linguistic meaning. My obvious debts in philosophy are to Locke and Kant, to the phenomenology of Husserl and Ingarden, in analytical philosophy to a broad spectrum of positions from Frege to current writings on hyperintensional semantics, in semiotics above all to Peirce, in linguistics to Vygotsky and the cognitive literature. A special debt is to the ongoing work of Michael Tomasello whose empirical research has revived a number of Husserlian notions that seem to me crucial for our understanding of what goes on in meaningful linguistic communication.

I acknowledge my debt to a number of brief email exchanges with Tecumseh Fitch, Michael Corballis, and David Chalmers, whose writings have had a corrective influence on my thinking, even if none of them would be prepared to take on board my emphasis on *imaginability*. I also extend my gratitude to my former students and colleagues. Even where intellectual disagreements were the outcome, I wish to thank Richard Hamilton, Alec McHoul and Lubica Ucnik for intensive and fruitful debates, as well as other colleagues at Murdoch University and the University of Western Australia for stimulating exchanges. A very special "thank you" goes to my old friends Professors Thomas Alexander Szlezák, eminent Plato and Aristotle scholar, and *anglist* narratologist Volker Schulz for the most exciting and challenging in-depth exchanges. Let me emphasize, however, that none of the faults of the book can be laid at the doorstep of any of the many scholars who have helped me improve my

thinking. My wife, Dr Yingchi Chu, to whom this book is dedicated, deserves my gratitude for patiently listening to my repetitive attempts at trying to clarify matters of language that seem so very obvious.

Last, I acknowledge the editors of the following journals for allowing me to draw on published materials and arguments throughout the book. *Philosophy Today* for papers on Locke, Kant, and 'conceptual blending', *Review of Contemporary Philosophy* for the use of a programmatic paper on the role of imaginability in natural language, *Linguistic and Philosophical Investigations* for papers on Husserl and Wittgenstein, *Rivista Italiana Filosofia de Linguaggio* for papers on Saussure and Vygotsky, and *Language Sciences* for permission to use excerpts from my recent paper "Metasemantics and Imaginability". Above all, I wish to thank the editorial staff at Cambridge Scholars Publishing for their prompt, polite and professional correspondence and help.

HR

INTRODUCTION

IN THE BEGINNING WAS RESEMBLANCE

> There is a lack of clarity about the role of *imaginability* (*Vorstellbarkeit*) in our investigation … namely about the extent to which it ensures that a sentence (*Satz*) makes sense. (Wittgenstein, *PI* §395)

At the centre of this book the reader will find a suggestion that is as simply put as it is difficult to argue, for it flies in the face of most of our dominant theories about how language means. The suggestion is this. "If you are able to imagine what I am talking about and the way I am saying it, then there is meaning; if not, there is not". And vice versa, if I am able to imagine what others are talking about and the way they do so, an event of linguistic meaning has occurred; if not, it has not. We could sum this commitment up under the umbrella of the *imaginability thesis.* Accordingly, the emphasis throughout the book will be on the role of *imaginability* in a double sense, in the sense of what must be imaginable in response to the sounds of language in order for meaning to occur and in the sense of what sort of capacity humans must have to respond in this way. With this broad goal in mind I will attempt to argue the position of an *intersubjective mentalism* that avoids two threatening options, the semantic privacy of solipsism and subjectivism on the one hand and, on the other, the semantics of a radical externalism, that is, a position according to which all there is to language is observable as public performance. The first option led John Locke to the aporia of not being able to reconcile language as public discourse with his private *ideas,* which he chose to provide word sounds with content.[1] To anticipate, I will argue that to let the fly out of the bottle here is to reconcile observable public signifiers with intersubjectively sharable, *indirectly public* signifieds. At the same time, I want to show that externalist theories of meaning as publically observable phenomena fail because they cannot account for what happens when language deals with absent things, as the

---

[1] See Chapter One.

bulk of natural language typically does. The classic example of such a theory is Wittgenstein's definition of linguistic meaning as *use.* I will try to argue a way of modifying Wittgenstein's influential but in my view flawed notion of use to satisfy what actually happens when we engage in language.[2]

As such, the present project shares certain emphases with cognitive linguistics. I am sympathetic, for instance, to the two-component analysis in LCCM theory (lexical concepts and cognitive models) distinguishing between symbolic units (signifiers) and cognitive models (signifieds),[3] even if both "concept" and "models" are not simply transferable to the kind of picture I wish to draw. There are parallels in my project to be found in broad conviction with Esa Itkonen's discussion of analogy as a central and "psychologically realistic" tool of human thinking as part of a "picture" theory of language and his Aristotelian assumption of the "ultimate unity of all types of perceptual experience".[4] Where my focus differs is in the accent I place on the all-important role of imaginative variation of realist mental scenarios. This is one reason why I regard the notion of the "image schema" limiting. Why limit our perspective to the metaphors of "container", "balance", "compulsion" and their associations in "conceptual blending" when the entire system of natural language stands in a resemblance relation with perceptual reality and its imaginative variations? Nevertheless I will acknowledge in some detail my debts especially to the early work of Mark Turner and his colleagues George Lakoff and Mark Johnson.[5] Likewise important to my enterprise is the

---

[2] This will be the topic of Chapter Five.

[3] As elaborated by Vyvyan Evans in *How Words Mean: Lexical Concepts, Cognitive Models, and Meaning Construction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

[4] Esa Itkonen, *Analogy as Structure and Process: Approaches in Linguistics, Cognitive Psychology and Philosophy of Science* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2005), 85; 136f.

[5] Mark Turner, *Death Is the Mother of Beauty: Mind, Metaphor and Criticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987); *Reading Minds: The Study of English in the Age of Cognitive Science* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991); Mark Turner and George Lakoff, *More than Cool Reason: A Field Guide to Poetic Metaphor* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989); George Lakoff, *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987); George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980); Mark Johnson, *The Body in the Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987). For a discussion of more recent works by these authors and other cognitivists, see Chapter Seven.

work of Michael Tomasello, in which imaginability turns up in such ideas as "intention-reading", "attention-sharing", and the manipulation of "one another's intentional and mental states for various cooperative and competitive purposes". For Tomasello, as for *Language and Imaginability,* "it is this *mental dimension* that gives linguistic symbols their unparalleled communicative power".[6] What makes Tomasello so valuable for my critical-speculative project is that it provides empirical support for my concept of *imaginability.* Nor can his findings be restricted to the acquisition of language in children. They apply centrally to the mastery of language by the adult native speaker. Where the book differs from the cognitive literature is that it attempts to shed light on the presuppositions that underlie some of the most influential theories of natural language and meaning. In this sense, the book is a contribution to *metasemantics* rather than semantics. Above all, the book is conceived as a tentative answer to the question of how our dominant theories of language in philosophy and linguistics cope with our folk-psychological opening definition of meaning as a social event requiring the successful projection of mental scenarios as a *sine qua non* on the part of the listener (or reader) engaged in linguistic exchanges.

A cursory list of intellectual debts must also mention the philosophical background that more than just shines through the chapters of this book. In spite of my criticisms of certain positions in the analytical philosophy of language, I have always admired its rigour, clarity and elegance. The criticisms that I do make, especially in Chapters Four and Five, have to do mainly with the consequences of regarding language as a too narrowly conceived object of inquiry.[7] Kant has been a deep and abiding impression on my thinking, as he has for Mark Johnson, except that I remain more firmly committed to Kant's version of schematism and his notion of the *monogram.*[8] From Peirce, whose pragmatic reading of Kant I greatly admire, I take and elaborate a strong commitment to *iconicity,* as the central ingredient of the content of conceptuality, with the aim of revising the Saussurean signified as *motivated.*[9] Phenomenology has had a profound methodological influence on my thinking since the early 1960s,

---

[6] Michael Tomasello, *Constructing a Language: A Usage-Based Theory of Language Acquisition* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003), 3f.; 8; see also Chapter Seven.

[7] Cf. especially the banishment of *Vorstellung* (understood here as "mental projection") from meaning by both Frege and Wittgenstein.

[8] *Passim* and specifically Chapter Two.

[9] *Passim* and definitionally in Chapter Ten.

especially in its Husserlian version and its realist extension by Roman Ingarden.[10]

Language and Imaginability wants to paint a broad picture of issues central to the way meaning events occur in natural language. In trying to capture, at least in principle, as many components as possible that are indispensable for a comprehensive description of language, I am taking a wide-lens perspective suitable for a generous form of *pragmatics.* Whatever semantic characteristics can be distilled from such a pragmatic approach, I suggest, promise a more life-like picture than formally driven approaches of what actually goes on when we use language. As to the various philosophical and linguistic positions discussed in the book, I have for the sake of convenience divided them roughly into two camps, theories that emphasize *resemblance relations* and theories that follow a *propositional* path of inquiry. Both branches can be shown to have their roots in Aristotle's foundational remarks in *De Interpretatione, De Anima, Categories, Rhetoric, Poetics* and *Metaphysics.* Foremost, Aristotle separates arbitrary word sounds (*pathema*) from non-arbitrary, or motivated, resemblance relations (*homoiomata*) between things in the world (*pragmata*) and their representation via words, a resemblance which we experience as mental projections (*pathemata*). Word sounds are public and as such accessible to anyone. Mental projections in response to word sounds (*Vorstellungen*), though not publicly observable, are nevertheless "the same" for every native speaker.[11] This view is re-enforced in *De Anima* where Aristotle describes words as signs for *Vorstellungen* (*pathemata,* usually rendered in English as "affections of the soul"). Furthermore, *pathemata* should not be regarded as detailed pictures of reality but rather as concepts, sorts, or schemata (*kaputon logon*).[12] This

---

[10] See *passim* and especially Chapter Three. Arguably the most sophisticated account of the constitution of complex objects can be found in Roman Ingarden's *Time and Modes of Being,* trans. Helen R. Michejda (Springfield, Ill.: Charles C. Thomas, 1964). I leave an engagement with the relevance of his ontological dependence relation for the description of language to another publication. What I take from Ingarden here is the conviction that language is an ontically heteronomous process and so escapes narrowly definitional descriptions as an object within the ontic domains of either materiality or ideality.

[11] Aristotle, *De Interpretatione,* trans. J.L Ackrill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 1, 16a, 3-8; Aristoteles, *Metaphysik,* trans. Thomas Alexander Szlezák. (Berlin: Akademieverlag, 2003).

Aristotle, *Poetics.* Trans. Joe Sachs. Newburyport: Mass.: Focus Publishing, 2006.

[12] Aristotle, *De Anima,* trans. R.D. Hicks (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1907), II, 5, 417; 418a, 3-6.

suggests at least these two things: concepts are iconic and at the same time schematic. As to schematic mental images, Aristotle adds later that they "are like sensuous content but without matter". At the same time, he separates thought from images by suggesting that though the former should not simply be equated with images, they "cannot occur without images".[13] Yet Aristotle by no means celebrates the human capacity to imagine things. He soberly notes that "while perceptions are always veridical, imaginings are for the most part false".[14] Nevertheless, even imagined worlds, whatever their truth status, can be usefully expressed by language, as he amply demonstrates in his *Poetics*. So it seems appropriate to cast our theoretical net widely. For, as Paul Grice noted, "language serves many important purposes besides those of scientific inquiry".[15] This strikes me as a wise reminder that in an age of science and technology we are likely to have developed a somewhat lopsided horizon of expectations, favouring a reductive attitude towards language both as *definiendum* and *definiens*.

Positions in the history of language theorization that foreground resemblance relations can be represented by Locke, Kant, Peirce, Husserl, and writings in cognitive linguistics. Because of their emphasis on likeness in mental representations, it should not be surprising that they are committed to some sort of mentalism, known also somewhat misleadingly as "ideational" approach to meaning. On the other hand, language theories foregrounding truth and falsity, that is language viewed in terms of propositions, comprising those by Frege and the entire post-Fregean tradition up to current writings in hyper-intensional semantics, can glean support from Aristotle's realism and his observation that "it is because the actual thing exists or does not exist that the statement is said to be true or false".[16] With respect to this opposition in the philosophical theorization of language, linguistics appears more ambivalent. While the Saussurean structuralist heritage has tried to realize its goal of a scientific description of natural language, the psychological school of Lev Vygotsky has retained its interest in the mentalist side of meaning, an emphasis which current cognitive linguistics is attempting to consolidate by proposing "cognitive models" in an attempt to corral mental iconicity and its abstractions. What links all these theoretical enterprises is the Aristotelian

---

[13] *De Anima,* III, 8, 432a, 11-17.

[14] *De Anima,* III, 3, 428a, 19f.

[15] Paul Grice, *Studies in the Way of Words* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 23.

[16] Aristotle, *Categories,* trans. E.M. Edghill (Adelaide: University of Adelaide, 2013), 4b, 8f.

primacy of schematic resemblance of which analytical notions of the "concept" must take note as much as do phenomenological notions of "typification". For only formal systems, such as various forms of mathematics, escape the constraint of resemblance. Without it, natural language would not be what it is, that is, *natural*.

If in the West language has been theorized mainly along the Aristotelian principles of resemblance and proposition, this is by no means a necessary global starting point. In sharp cultural contrast, Chinese views of language for instance have been consistently anchored to this day in what one could call a "normative nominalism" and the tradition of the "rectification of names" from Confucius to Xunzi and beyond. Normative, because language in the Chinese tradition was primarily conceived as prescriptive in terms of social rules. A prince must behave like a prince, a father like a father, according to the Confucian *Analects*. One can call this conception of language also a "nominalism" in the sense that the terms "prince," "father," "wife," "elder brother" denote social particulars rather than ideas. "*Ming"* in the *Analects* and other early writings still means "name," "title," and "rank" all at the same time. As Confucius is recorded as having advised, "Let the prince be a prince, the minister a minister, the father a father and the son a son". [17]This very much chimes with what is known as the source of the idea of the "rectification of names". In answer to the question "Why should language be corrected?" the Master in the *Analects* says, "If language is incorrect, then what is said does not accord with what was meant; and if what was said does not concord with what was meant, what is to be done cannot be effected".[18] The main function of language in the Chinese classical tradition, then, has been what contribution it can make to the stabilization of the existing social order.

Given the two very different points of departure in the Western tradition, it should not be surprising to find one recent branch, language philosophy from Frege to current writings in hyperintensional semantics, favouring formalisation as capturing best the propositional principles discoverable in or imposable on language, while the other branch, exemplified most prominently by Locke, Kant, Husserl, and much of cognitive linguistics, has remained committed to the way our shared *pathemata* about the world are transformed in language. Even if resemblance plays a different role in each of Locke's successors, they all acknowledge its foundational role,

---

[17] Confucius, *The Analects,* ed. Arthur Waley (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions, 1996), Book 12, 11.
[18] Confucius, *The Analects*, Book 13, 3.

reflecting as it does the function of language as complement to, replacement of, and economizing hierarchization of its gestural and perceptual precursors.[19] From such an abstract perspective, two important shifts appear to characterize the evolution of language. One is the gradual semantic disembodiment of signifiers, a process of which onomatopoeia is a minimal leftover. The other shift underlying the development of language is the transformation of nonverbal concepts into more precise linguistic signifieds. So in order not to lose sight of the *content* of the signified, I emphasize throughout its two components, iconic mental materials and their conceptual regulation. This is why I deviate from the practice in both analytical philosophy and cognitive linguistics of conflating content and regulation under the term "concept". As I will try to show, a consequence of this conflation is that it discourages us from specifying what the content consist in and what sort of regulatory mechanisms that content is governed by.[20] Here, the regulated, motivated signified is claimed to be activated by *imaginability* in two ways, one by the reconstruction of what a speaker is talking about, in short, *aboutness,* immediately modified by the reconstruction of speech intention, *implied deixis* carried by *voice.* I conceive 'voice' broadly, allowing for Roland Barthes' personal "*grain* of voice", as well as for Foucault's pragmatic notion of "enunciative modalities".[21] Accordingly, the meaning event is regarded as result of the realization of both in the mental states of the language user. Throughout the book, natural language, as for example Chinese, French, Navajo, Turkish, or English, is understood as "a set of social instructions for imagining and acting in a world". That imaginability in this formulation precedes "acting" is no accident, for without the projection of some relevant mental scenario (at very high speeds in habitual speech) we cannot meaningfully act on linguistic cues. The proposed primacy of the imaginability of linguistic content then applies to these two fundamental ingredients of all natural languages: (1) *aboutness,*

---

[19] Not everyone agrees. David McNeill, for instance, in *How Language Began: Gesture and Speech in Human Communication* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012) argues against gestural communication as a precursor of language; cf. however Adam Kendon, *Gesture: Visible Action as Utterance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) and "Language's Matrix," *Gesture* 9, 3 (2009), 352-372.

[20] The reader who requires a more detailed description of the components of the redefined linguistic signs is invited to go straight to Chapter Ten.

[21] Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text,* trans. Richard Miller (London: Jonathan Cape, 1976), 66; Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (London: Tavistock, 1986), 55ff.

or what a discourse, sentence, phrase, or word is about; and (2) *voice,* or the manner in which expressions are spoken. *Aboutness,* as I will argue later is conceived broadly (swan, walking), including such special applications as in realist reference (Venus, this swan) and fictional reference (electric sheep). At the same time, I will emphasize the *iconic* nature of aboutness as something we must be able to imagine, even though we appear to do so schematically and often at the speed of a camera shutter.[22]

In choosing the term *voice* I sum up a broad conceptual field, comprising Austin's technical "illocution," [23] Foucault's pragmatic and political "enunciative modalities," [24] as well as explicit and especially *implicit deixis.*[25] The notion of *voice,* broadly conceived, is also meant to remind us that natural languages are primarily spoken, their written forms being a fairly recent invention. Terms like "language," "*linguagio*", "*lingua,*" and "yu yan" all remind us of the essential role of the tongue, while terms such as the German noun *"Sprache"* or the Swedish "språk*"* still carry the idea that languages are above all spoken forms of communication. But my main reason for anticipating the fundamental distinction between *aboutness* and *voice* here is that I want to alert the reader from the outset to a principle of natural language that distances it sharply from formal languages. Put simply, formal languages have neither *aboutness* nor *voice* in any comprehensive sense. Applied formal languages have only *aboutness* but no *voice.* This is why approaches to natural language that take as their ideal the case of a formal sign system will from the start be misled in vital respects. In contrast, all natural languages are characterized by the inextricable interaction of these two components. The fact that we can, by the use of an ironic tone, reverse the propositional content of an expression into its opposite only indicates the tip of the iceberg that is the domain of enunciative modalities which is crucial to the ontological status of a natural language as a process rather than an object. In order to help clarify such issues, each chapter will focus on one or more theoretical positions on language from the perspective of the way they handle the *imaginability* of aboutness and voice.

---

[22] Cf. "Shutter-Speed Meaning, Normativity, and Wittgenstein's *Abrichtung,*" *Philosophical and Linguistic Investigations* (2014; in press).

[23] John Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962).

[24] Michel Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge,* 55ff.

[25] Horst Ruthrof, *The Body in Language* (London: Cassell, 2000), 48-53.

Chapter One "Resemblance in Language" revisits Locke's philosophy of language, asking the question of what sort of arguments would be required to not merely defend his linguistic meaning as a mental event but to claim that Locke, in spite of the shortcomings of his semantics, was basically on the right path towards a satisfactory description of natural language. In foregrounding mentally realized *resemblance relations*, or *Vorstellung*, as the mainstay of Locke's semantics, the chapter argues that Locke's modest *mentalism* is closer to the mark than our dominant externalist solutions in their sentential, propositional, and formal varieties. Next, Locke's notion of *immediacy* is analysed in terms of speed, exclusivity, absence of mediation, and as a case of strict rule following. Locke's theorization of *abstraction* is then viewed in terms of Peirce's *hypoiconic* generalization, before I address Locke's rejection of radical *externalism*, his arguments against meaning identity, and his four constraints on meaning: human biology, world, language as system, and the speech community. The chapter concludes by dissolving Locke's seeming paradox, the contradiction between private meaning and public discourse, by the notion of linguistic meaning as *indirectly public*.

Chapter Two "Iconicity in Kant and Peirce" explores the ways the two philosophers conceive of resemblance relations. Although Kant did not leave us a theory of language, I suggest that we can distil from his *Critiques* a number of concepts that help us shore up an intersubjective mentalism conducive to arguing for a *semantics of imaginability*. Foremost amongst those concepts are his notions of *schemata* and the monogram, the role he grants *Vorstellung,* and the power of the productive imagination (*Einbildungskraft*) in cognition. The chapter further claims that Kant's emphasis on the mechanism of schematization allows us to lift Locke's empiricist notion of "idea" to a level of abstraction that is conducive to non-subjectivist arguments about mental resemblance relations and so can play an important role in a *semantics of imaginability*. Kant is also shown to be useful for such an enterprise in terms of his perspectivism, in which language could be said to occupy a prominent position. The chapter then addresses Peirce's insistence on *iconicity* as essential for the comprehension of non-formal sign systems, such as a natural language. I want to show that the Aristotelian and Kantian schematic resemblance relations that I argue are vital for linguistic meaning, receive in Peirce a systematic placement in his theory of semiotics on which we can draw substantially for a *semantics of imaginability*.

Chapter Three "Meaning and Imaginability in Husserl" takes its cue from the intriguing evolution of Husserl's phenomenology from idealist semantic convictions towards a view of linguistic meaning in tune with his later focus on the life-word. The chapter argues for a way of bringing Husserl's semantics in *Logical Investigations* up to date by drawing on a variety of critical tools gleaned from his later writings. My argument proceeds in two steps. First I offer a summary of the main ingredients of Husserl's theorization of natural language, with an emphasis on his description of linguistic meaning as a Platonic ideal species. The chapter then gathers a number of concepts from Husserl's later works up to *Experience and Judgment* for the kind of repair work that could make his semantics once more a competitive candidate in the arena of natural language semantics. For this to be possible, his early commitment to meaning ideality, which proved incompatible with Husserl's later writings on the *Lebenswelt,* has to be replaced by iconic resemblance, which is precisely the ingredient we find in such later concepts as *appresentation, quasi-perceiving, non-essential typifications,* and *semblance acts.* With this re-emphasis the chapter reformulates Husserl's approach to linguistic meaning in terms of a *semantics of imaginability*.

Chapter Four "The Propositional Route: From Frege to Hyperintensional Semantics" offers a non-technical introduction to the most powerful tradition in the philosophy of language, its analytical branch.[26] Mindful of our overall theme of imaginability, the chapter addresses first Frege's influential and yet untheorized conflation of two kinds of sense, the formal sense we find in geometry and arithmetic and the non-formal sense of meaning in natural language. Mindful of not wishing to torture the reader with details of formal semantics, the chapter traces the presuppositions of the post-Fregean tradition up to some recent publications in hyperintensional semantics. In so doing, the chapter argues that as a result of formalisation

---

[26] There can be little doubt that the dominant discourse about natural language has emerged from analytical philosophy in the wake of Gottlob Frege's seminal paper "On Sense and Reference" (*"Ueber Sinn und Bedeutung")* of 1892. Nor is there any doubt as to the pre-eminence of his influence in a recent wave of collections of papers, such as Ernie Lepore and Barry C. Smith (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Language* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006); Michael Devitt and Richard Hanley (eds.), *The Blackwell Guide to the Philosophy of Language* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 2006); Stephen Davis and Brendan S. Gillon (eds.), *Semantics: A Reader* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); and Peter V. Lamarque (ed.), *Concise Encyclopedia of Philosophy of Language* (Oxford: Pergamon, 1997).

the object of inquiry, natural language, has been fundamentally transformed from a sign system in which *iconicity* is vital to a sign system reduced to *syntax*. This transformation is argued to be visible in the reduction of *aboutness* to empty place holders and the elimination of *voice*.

Chapter Five "A Critique of Meaning as Use" turns to the later Wittgenstein and his highly influential definition of linguistic meaning as use.[27] In asking the impertinent question of what "use" consists in, the chapter attempts to show that in its Wittgensteinian form "use" can only partially account for what actually occurs in the process of meaning making. In particular, the chapter focuses on Wittgenstein's elimination of *Vorstellung* (mental projection of relevant scenarios) from meaning by relegating it to the side show of a mere playing of tunes on the keys of our *Vorstellungsklavier,* our piano of the imagination. Instead, the chapter argues that Wittgenstein's radical semantic externalism only captures a relatively small portion of the total of linguistic meaning events. After all, the argument goes, the bulk of meaning as "use" is not open to public inspection. The chapter concludes by suggesting that Wittgenstein's notion of meaning as "use" can be improved upon by reintroducing the banished *Vorstellung* as an essential ingredient of the meaning event.

Chapter Six "The Linguistic Route: Saussure and Vygotsky" opens with confronting two central tenets in the *General Course in Linguistics* of 1916, Saussure's conviction that without language we would live in a "nebulous" world and his radical arbitrariness thesis of the linguistic sign. Neither hominids nor tigers can be conceived to live in a woolly world. Rather, it makes sense to regard their worlds as clearly distinct and no doubt simpler than ours, but not as less precise. Otherwise, survival would be unlikely. As to the alleged arbitrariness of the linguistic sign, it is crucial for a *semantics of imaginability*, as it is for all cognitive approaches, to insist on the theorization of the *signified* as *motivated,* leaving the signifier much as it is defined by the father of modern linguistics. As I put it elsewhere, "at the level of the signified we are iconic beings."[28] The chapter also points out that the arbitrariness thesis as its stands rests on a quite straightforward *pars pro toto* form of reasoning. What remains unresolved in the chapter are the consequences of these criticisms, which will be resumed in detail in Chapter Ten. The second part of Chapter Six is dedicated to an analysis of Lev Vygotsky's

---

[27] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations,* trans. G.E.M. Anscombe, P.M.S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte (Oxford: Blackwell, 2009).
[28] Horst Ruthrof, *The Body in Language* (London: Cassell, 2000), 152.

arguments on the transformation of perceptual thinking into linguistic concepts by way of pedagogy. This is important in light of the aim of the book to argue in favour of meanings not only as schematically iconic mental entities but also as *indirectly public* and so sharable to a high degree by the members of a speech community. In drawing on Vygotsky's findings I extrapolate that language pedagogy must have two sides, one that secures knowledge of public signifiers and their standard syntactic constellations, the other, which aligns these with *indirectly public* signifieds as conceptualized mental iconic materials.

Chapter Seven "Cognitive Linguistics and Conceptual Blending" first identifies a few important differences between some of the axioms we find in cognitive linguistics and the position advocated here, in spite of many parallels. A fundamental difference, for example, is shown to be the distinction drawn by Vyvyan Evans between "lexical concepts" and "cognitive models" and my return to the basics of Saussure's arbitrary signifiers which, as no more than arbitrarily sounds, do not "contain" any meaning whatsoever, but are meaningful only to speakers of the language as a result of having been trained to associate those sounds with the mental iconic scenarios of motivated signifieds. In contrast, lexical concepts are meaning entities independent of speakers to be activated by individuals via conceptual models. The chapter selects a number of positions in cognitive linguistics, rehearsing their presuppositions from the position of the theme of imaginability. By way of conclusion, I look at the influential theory of "conceptual blending" as proposed by Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner (2002), asking how its principles relate to graded iconic schematization. In particular, the chapter asks how conceptual blending deals with non-visual, non-spatial mental entities.

Chapter Eight "Brain, Consciousness, and the Evolution of Language" opens with the sobering finding that current research results in brain language research are anything but grand and that we must stay content for the time being with a paucity of discoveries in support of any kind of semantics. The chapter takes issue with the common confusion of brain and person by insisting that a deep chasm exists between the two. After all, a brain cannot be "embarrassed," only a person can be. After discarding the Chomskyan claim of a "language organ" in the brain, the chapter embraces the idea of the plasticity of the brain and the speculative likelihood that all perceptual and sensory-motor neural pathways are involved in the processing of natural language. This is argued to support the idea of a fundamental link between semantic performance and

iconicity which can draw not only on brain cells needed for perception but also, and more importantly, on the massive presence in the brain of neurons not directly involved with perceptual activities but rather with their internal monitoring. The extraordinary asymmetrical ratio between perceptual input and neurally driven internal monitoring neurons, I suggest, strongly supports the emphasis on the *primacy of imaginability*. The chapter then turns to a leading researcher on consciousness, David Chalmers, whose impressive work on "conceivability" I argue underestimates the basis of iconic awareness on which propositional conceivability supervenes.[29] The chapter concludes with a discussion of some findings in research on language evolution with a view towards buttressing some of the evidence in brain and consciousness studies in support of the role of *imaginability* in natural language.

Chapter Nine "Imaginability and Pragmatics: From Grice to Habermas" addresses standard pragmatics in terms of *imaginability*. Gricean and other "presuppositions", like truth-conditions, are shown to be parasitic on imaginary scenarios, that is, clusters of *Vorstellungen*. The chapter argues that pragmatics should incorporate the bridging process of *imaginability*, understood as "mental iconic transformations of perception". In such a broadened conception of pragmatics, *imaginability* must be acknowledged as a formative component not only of *logical* presuppositions, but of all meaning events in natural language. The chapter includes a critical reassessment of the kind of pragmatics we find in Deleuze and Guattari, especially in *A Thousand Plateaus,* and in Foucault's *Archaeology of Knowledge.* The chapter concludes with what I regard as the most inclusive pragmatic vista, the notion of "communicative action" argued by the social philosopher Jürgen Habermas.

Chapter Ten "Language and Imaginability" is a comprehensive statement of an iconically driven theorization of meaning in natural language. At its centre stands the notion of *imaginability,* understood as mental, iconic transformation of perception. As such, *imaginability* is what determines the way word sounds are given iconic content in the mental acts of native

---

[29] David Chalmers, *The Conscious Mind: In Search of a Fundamental Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996); cf. also his *The Character of Consciousness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010) and "Does Conceivability Entail Possibility?" in *Conceivability and Possibility,* ed. T. Gendler and J. Hawthorne (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 145-200; see Chapter Eight below.

speakers which are regarded as *indirectly public* as a result of pedagogy. In pulling together the observations made in the preceding chapters, Chapter Ten presents a series of redefinitions of standard notions in our dominant discourses on language in philosophy, semiotics, and linguistics. Foremost amongst these redefinitions are the Saussurean linguistic sign, with an emphasis on the *motivated signified.* Reference is revised as a special case of *aboutness,* while deixis is shown to require a stronger emphasis on *voice,* or *implicit deixis.* The chapter redefines the concept as regulatory component of the signified, governing its mental iconic materials by way of directionality, quality, quantity, and degree of schematization. Other notions to be revisited are meaning and metaphor, referential and deictic background, as well as the constraints imposed on natural language by *sufficient semiosis,* which replaces meaning identity and allows for a more realistic description of language than does truth-conditional semantics.

The Conclusion "Language as Heterosemiotic, Intentional Construct" begins with the summary observation that in the event of meaning, language, in combining the symbolicity of arbitrary signifiers with the iconicity of motivated signifieds, is fundamentally *heterosemiotic.* This contrasts sharply with the widely held belief that language is a symbolic system. Language is argued to be made up of two interacting systems, the *public* system of observable linguistic expressions, including their specific syntactic sequences and standardized phonetics, and the *indirectly public* system of *motivated signifieds* consisting of iconic mental materials within the conceptual boundaries of directionality, quality, quantity, and degree of schematization. This picture of natural language, the Conclusion claims, is compatible with phenomenological ontology, according to which traditional ontologies cannot account for ontically compound objects because they confine themselves to the domains of materiality and ideality. I end the book by suggesting the possibility of extending the phenomenological idea of *ontic heteronomy* to include natural language.

CHAPTER ONE

RESEMBLANCE IN LANGUAGE:
LOCKE

Introduction

John Locke's semantics of natural language has not been well received in the literature mainly because of its empiricist psychologism, its private notion of linguistic meaning, and the deficiencies of its theory of abstraction. However, re-reading the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* today, especially in the context of cognitive linguistics, tells us that it is still making a substantive contribution to a theory of natural language semantics.[1] Locke has a good deal to say about the speech community, the distinction between signifiers and signifieds, the arbitrariness of the signifier, a shared perceptual world, and speakers with a common biological make-up suitable for speech production, mental acts for meaning-conferment and meaning-fulfilment, and the fundamental communicative purpose of language. So why should Locke's semantics be regarded as a grand failure? There is broad agreement that his "private" notion of meaning prevents him forging the vital connection between speaker, public language, and speech community. One solution would be to argue language strictly along externalist lines, as public performance. This is what Wittgenstein's notion of meaning as *use* is trying to accomplish. Another solution is to revise Locke's concept of *semantic privacy*, a path I will explore below. I want to show how the connection between public discourse and intersubjectively shared mental meanings can be argued in order to resolve Locke's "central paradox". This I feel is justified in light of the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* still

---

[1] John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding,* ed. John W. Yolton (London: Dent). For balanced summaries, see Norm Kretzmann, "The Main Thesis of Locke's Semantic Theory" in *Locke on Human Understanding: Selected Essays,* ed. Ian Tipton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 123-140; or Paul Guyer, "Locke's Philosophy of Language." In *The Cambridge Companion to Locke*, ed. Vere Chappell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 115-145.

posing a serious challenge to many of our post-Fregean theories of linguistic meaning in their formalist, externalist, and syntactic guises. It does so by addressing biological and social *constraints* on ideas as meaning, by its insistence on the impossibility of *identity* of meaning in natural language, the rejection of radical semantic *externalism,* and as a firm alternative to the Fregean treatment of natural language meaning as *formal sense.* To be sure, the kind of semantics envisaged by Locke stands in stark contrast to a plethora of recent publications in the philosophy of language. [2] But Locke's *Essay* has to be appreciated for its insistence on natural language carrying Aristotelian *resemblance relations.* [3] Locke differs radically from our dominant theories of language in that he resumes the Aristotelian theme of *pathemata* and *homoiomata* by which we are able to signify aspects of the world in their absence not only in their radically formalised transformations, but as *iconic schematizations.* [4] If we foreground *resemblance relations* as a vital ingredient of natural language, a point resurrected in cognitive linguistics, Locke's *Essay* once again looks like a serious candidate in the arena of natural language semantics. [5]

---

[2] Cf. Alex Barber and Robert J. Stainton (eds.), *Concise Encyclopedia of Philosophy of Language and Linguistics.* Oxford: Elsevier, 2010; Keith Allan (ed.), *Concise Encyclopedia of Semantics.* Oxford: Elsevier, 2009; Ernie LePore and Barry C. Smith (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Philosophy of Language*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006; Michael Devitt and Richard Hanley (eds.), *The Blackwell Guide to the Philosophy of Language.* Oxford: Blackwell, 2006; Stephen Davis and Brendan S. Gillon (eds.), *Semantics: A Reader.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004; and Peter V. Lamarque (ed.), *Concise Encyclopedia of Philosophy of Language.* Oxford: Pergamon, 1997.

[3] Benjamin Hill, ""Resemblance" and Locke's Primary-Secondary Quality Distinction," *Locke Studies* 4 (2004), 89-122; Michael Jacovides, "Locke's Resemblance Thesis" *Philosophical Review* 108, 4 (1999), 461-496; and Roland Hall, "Locke and the Senses," *Locke Newsletter* 26, (1995), 13-27. Hall asks the question: "Where did Locke find his basic materials?" before tracing a number of connections between the *Essay* and Aristotle, especially in *De Anima* III, 7, a passage that suggests a tight link between consciousness and imaginative resemblance. This supports my emphasis throughout on *homoiomata.*

[4] A compatible pathway towards the theorization of schematic resemblance relations can be found in the work of Eleanor Rosch, as or example in her "Principles of Categorization" in *Concepts: Core Readings*, ed. Eric Margolis and Stephen Laurence (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1999), 189-206.

[5] Victor Gallese and George Lakoff, "The Brain's Concepts: The Role of the Sensory-Motor System in Reason and Language," *Cognitive Neuropsychology* 22, (2005), 455-479; Mark Johnson and George Lakoff, *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and Its Challenge to Western Thought.* New York: Basic Books, 1999. What must remain doubtful is the notion of the "neural concept," which is

Whatever flaws have been discovered in Locke's semantic project, its strength lies precisely in his attempt to provide an explanation for that fundamental relation. However, instead of taking the avenues opened up by recent work in cognitive linguistics, I will approach Locke's central paradox from a related but somewhat different angle: the perspective of *imaginability*.[6] Crudely, we can sum up such an approach by saying that "If I can imagine what you are saying, and the manner in which I say it, there is meaning; if I cannot, there is not". To see the relevance of imaginability for Locke we first need to find out what it means to know a language. This is Locke's starting point: a speech community roughly shares ideas about the world, as well as their basic relations, and has created a language as a vehicle to facilitate at least rough communication amongst its members. Speakers have inherited their ideas about the world by way of a shared biology and their transformations into verbal ideas by culture. Higher-level terms owe more to culture; lower-level terms more to biology and the natural world. Even if painted crudely, this picture points to the powerful intervention Locke's semantics makes: unlike the "rear view mirror" approach characteristic of our dominant forms of semantics,[7] Locke attempts to bridge the mysterious gap between perception and language by way of "ideas" or *Vorstellung,* rendered here as "mental iconic transformation of perception". To demonstrate these claims, I want to discuss some of the fundamental issues underpinning Locke's enterprise, (1) his limited form of *mentalism*; (2) the four components of *immediacy;* (3) arguments concerning *abstraction*; (4) the rejection of radical *externalism*; (5) *semantic latitude* and the *non-identity of meaning*; and (6) his fourfold set of *semantic constraints*: human biology, world, language as system, and the speech community.

difficult to reconcile with both primitive concepts and linguistic concepts as social rules. There also remains the traditional worry about the theorization of the relation between brain and consciousness in the sense that while the neural basis of the mind is not in question, what remains entirely opaque is how bio-chemical-electrical relations turn into awareness. Cf. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason,* trans. Norman Kempt Smith (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1965), *CPR* A141/B181 and Wittgenstein's "unbridgeable gulf," in *Philosophical Investigations,* trans. G.E.M. Anscombe, P.M.S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte. Oxford: Blackwell, 2009), § 412; See also David Chalmers' arguments in Chapter Eight.
[6] Horst Ruthrof, "Semantics of Imaginability – *Vorstellungssemantik*: 13 Theses," *Review of Contemporary Philosophy* 10 (2011), 165-183.
[7] Cf. the emphasis on logical relations in the ontogenesis of language, as for example in Stephen Crain, *The Emergence of Meaning* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

Idea as *Vorstellung* and *aboutness*

Mentalism takes many forms, some of which should be laid to rest, while others remain competitive candidates in the quest for a satisfactory explanation of how language works. The charge that Locke's semantics is *imagist* belongs to the group to be discarded, as has been argued by David Soles, on the grounds that to reduce notions such as "succession" and "duration" to images is untenable.[8] (*Essay,* Book II, xiv, 3; cf. II, xvii, 7f) One could add olfactory, gustatory, thermal, gravitational and other nonverbal readings of the world for which the notion of "image" is inappropriate. Following Locke, we should also resist the temptation to think that any mental abstraction would primarily have to be verbal. Some other form of *schematization* may have to be stipulated. A convenient entry into Locke's mentalism is the question of the semantic scope of his notion of "idea".

Locke's "idea" is conceived as a mental representation mediating between perceptual world and language. It is "something in the mind between the thing that exists, and the name that is given to it". (*Essay,* Book II, xxxii, 8) This "something in the mind" is "whatsoever is the object of the understanding when a man thinks". (I, i, 8) As such, the term "idea" also covers resemblance in and as *Vorstellung*, "a memory of an actual perception being "made an actual perception again". (I, iv, 20) This suggests a realist conception of *imaginability*. The affinity of perception and its mental modification comes across clearly also in Locke's assertions that "having ideas, and perception" are "the same thing" (II, I, 9) and that ideas are "nothing but bare appearances or perception in our minds". (II, xxxii, 1) We can see why Husserl regarded Locke as an important forerunner of phenomenology in spite of his reservations.[9] If ideas function as the mental mediation between perceptual reality and language, their main task is their transmission of *aboutness* from world to word and vice versa. Whether we call this "*intentionality"* and its specific object of

---

[8] See David Soles, "Is Locke an Imagist?" in *John Locke: Critical Assessments by Leading Philosophers, Series II*, ed. Peter Anstey (London: Routledge, 2006), 47-81; 70.

[9] Edmund Husserl, *Psychological and Transcendental Phenomenology and the Confrontation with Heidegger (1927-1931),* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1997), 97; cf. also Edmund Husserl, *Phantasy, Image Consciousness, and Memory (1898-1925)*, trans. John B. Brough, *Collected Works*, ed. Rudolf Bernet, v. XI. Dordrecht: Springer, 2005.

thought the "*intentional object,*" as does Landesman,[10] or characterize it in some other way, what is pivotal in Locke's account is his insistence on a process from percept via concept to language (and vice versa) if *aboutness* is to be preserved in some way. Furthermore, whatever the degree of abstraction which *aboutness* undergoes in the transition from perceived world to language, at the moment of the mental event that Locke terms "idea" we have a "representation of the thing" in the mind (IV, xxi, 4) with "greater or nearer correspondence" with actual objects "than any words or sounds whatsoever". (IV, iii, 19) Resemblance is likewise in the foreground when Locke writes, "our simple ideas are clear, when they are such as the objects themselves, from whence they were taken … in a well-ordered sensation or perception". (II, xxix, 2) Here Locke identifies what we might now call *iconic resemblance relations* as the point of departure for mental abstraction as a necessary step towards linguistic meaning. At a certain level of generalisation of aboutness we are in a position to conceive of "diagrams drawn on paper"[11] as "copies of the ideas in the mind" which Locke thinks are "not liable to the uncertainty that words carry in their signification". (IV, iii, 19) On the way to language, Locke distinguishes ideas that are merely "mental" from those that are "verbal". (IV, v, 2) He also distinguishes merely "mental" propositions which permit us to decide on true and false relations from "verbal propositions" formulated in affirmative or negative sentences. (IV, v, 5)

When Locke speaks of ideas as "thoughts," he is drawing our attention to the fact that they remain "hidden from others". (III, ii, 1) Whether Locke's "postulation of unobservables" is a necessary consequence of his empiricism remains a moot point.[12] What is pivotal to his semantics is that an important part of the meaning event is not open to *public inspection*. Here Locke's semantics defies any simple form of externalism. Instead, the accent is on the performance of "meaning conferring" and "meaning fulfilling" acts, as Edmund Husserl is to describe them much later in his *Logical Investigations*.[13] The threatening solipsism in Locke's insistence

---

[10] Charles Landesman, 222f; cf. also Michael Ayers, "Are Locke's "Ideas" Images, Intentional Objects or Natural Signs?" *Locke Newsletter* 17 (1986), 3-36.
[11] Cf. the notion of "schema" in Kant, *CPR* A141 and Charles Sanders Peirce, *1984: Writings of Charles S. Peirce: A Chronological Edition*, vol. 2. 1867-71. Peirce Edition Project (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), EP 2.273.
[12] As discussed by David Soles in "Locke's Empiricism and the Postulation of Unobservables," *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 23 (1985), 339-369.
[13] Edmund Husserl, *Logical Investigations*, trans. J.N. Findlay (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973), §7f.

on the concealment of the linguistic meaning event appears to be reinforced by his characterization of "thought" as fundamentally reflexive: "thinking consists in being conscious that one thinks," (II, I, 19). What considerably weakens the charge of solipsism, however, is Locke's introduction of a number of constraints, as we shall see. One such constraint is his concept of "immediacy". The split-second event of comprehension, which I have discussed under the term "linguistic linkage compulsion," defines the fully trained speaker of a language.[14]

Immediacy

A forceful argument in favour of Locke's notion of mental *immediacy* is that our other semantic explanations (sentential, propositional, truth-conditional, and formal) are all parasitic on our ability to imagine what we are talking about and comprehend when we listen to the words of others. When we imagine what others are saying, we first appear to construct *aboutness,* qualified by our construal of *voice,* or *modality* in a broad sense, the manner of the utterance, before we are in a position to play such language games as paraphrasing, forming propositions, entertaining truth checks, or translating natural language into formal strings. Locke's *immediacy* of the meaning event is the baseline on which any language-like operation can be performed: without the performance of imaginable scenarios in the minds of the speakers of a natural language there would be no such things as meanings at all. Where Locke speaks of "words in their primary or *immediate* signification" standing for the ideas in the mind, immediacy has been addressed in the literature as a feature of his mentalism,[15] a characteristic of linguistic signification,[16] and in terms of propositions.[17] Yet none of these objections account for the fact that *immediacy* is so much in the foreground of the *Essay*, and rightly so. What seems understated in the literature is that Locke was quite aware of the astonishing speed, force and exclusive *compulsion* that characterize the combination of public language and mental event in response to the sound of words. In stressing the importance of immediacy in linguistic

---

[14] Horst Ruthrof, "Semantics of Imaginability," 168.

[15] Hannah Dawson, "Locke on Private Language" in *John Locke: Critical Assessments by Leading Philosophers, Series II*, vol 2, ed. Peter Anstey (London: Routledge, 2006), 412-439; 413.

[16] Landesman, 229.

[17] David E. Soles, "Locke on Ideas, Words, and Knowledge," in *Locke: Epistemology and Metaphysics,* ed. Udo Thiel (Dartmouth: Ashgate, 2002), 411-433; 433.