Languages as Social Objects*

DAVID WIGGINS

1. There is a tendency nowadays for linguists, philosophers and other theorists of language, to dismiss the notion of an object like the English language or the Polish language as simply mythological or mythopoeic—as of no interest to any serious science of language. Some theorists even appear to deny that there are such things as languages (in the plural). 'This notion [of a public language] is unknown to empirical inquiry and raises what seem to be irresolvable problems', Chomsky said in a lecture he gave recently in London (1994).¹

My purpose here is to speak for an opposing view, which I shall call the common sense view, to extend it a little, and to gesture towards some of its theoretical implications for mind and language. This is the view that a language like English or Polish is a social object, a public thing with attributes irreducible to the individual psychology of speakers. A language is an instrument by which speakers may frame their thoughts, something not concrete, yet 'out there' and wide open to be encountered in the human world. It is an object with an origin, a past, a present and a future, not a thing essentially defined by a particular set of syntactic or semantic axioms or by a set of syntactic and semantic structures (etc). Nor is it something existent only so long as such and such specificationary axioms are 'in force'. (This is the way in which, in our times, some who are less professedly sceptical than Chomsky have sought to

* This essay was written at the time of Chomsky’s Jacobsen Lecture in London in 1994, mainly for the sake of discussion with colleagues in London. The publication in Mind 1995 of a printed version of what Chomsky said in 1994 has encouraged me to revise and submit the essay for publication. See ‘Language and Nature’, Mind, vol. 104, 413, Jan. 1995.

I thank Menno Lievers and Martin Davies for encouraging me throughout to try to set down in writing the nature of my reservations. I thank Barry Smith for helping me to understand a little better than I otherwise should have done the nature of what I am opposing. I thank Jennifer Hornsby for criticisms and suggestions.

¹ ‘Language as a natural object’, Jacobsen Lecture, May 23rd, 1994, part 1 of ‘Language and Nature’ op. cit. In this Mind version, the passage I have quoted occurs at page 24. See also pages 13, 29 (where Chomsky quotes Davidson to the same effect), 41, 48–49. From now onwards, square bracketed references are to this version.
secure real reference to languages, in the plural.) Rather it is an historically given object, changing or changeable and possessed of sentences that have, as a matter of history, such and such meaning at this, that or the other time and place.²

How then are languages like English or Polish singled out as objects of reference? Well, English is a language arising under the influence of Norman French from the West Germanic language, Anglo Saxon; it is the language possessed of many forms and dialects spoken in the British Isles, North America, etc; it is the language in which you can say ‘Fear no more the heat of the sun’, ‘Unto those who have shall be given,’ or ‘Never say die’. That is a definite description of the English language. If you *disjoin* enough true statements, each having the form ‘at time *t* sentence *s* means in English that *p*, then you will easily manufacture a complex sentence that you or I could not possibly deny of English without putting in jeopardy our claim to know what the English language is. But this is a very weak claim. It falls far short of the essentialism that is espoused by those who prefer to see a language as a function from expressions to intensions and are happy with the consequence that English, ‘as it exists now and here’, is a distinct language from English, ‘as it existed’ at the time of (say) Dr Johnson. (Let not the utter obscurity of this kind of ‘as’ lend credibility to the strange denial that we share the language of English with Dr Johnson, the first lexicographer of that very language.) It is as alien from that essentialism as it is from the view of those who are moved to say that really there is just ‘one human language, with minor variants’[13].

2. What else is immediately apparent about languages conceived in the broadly historicist fashion here advocated? On the common sense view, a particular language with its past and present semantic attributes, with all its achievements and latent resources, is something that influences normatively, by its palpable presence in the social world, the linguistic strivings of children, adults, foreigners, poets, writers, politicians and the rest. The judgments that these and other speakers make of significance, appropriateness, accuracy, aptness and taste would need, if they were fully spelled out, to make irreducible reference to this thing.

It is a further and interesting question (if not for present purposes a very important one) whether we should see English as something properly exemplified in the totality of its forms and dialects—² Languages do not have to change. Unless you count as change the regularization of spelling or the simple taking in of new words, Old Norse (Icelandic) has barely changed in two millennia. But languages are by their nature changeable.
Languages as Social Objects

even as the determinable red is exemplified in all its determinations or shades—or whether, in certain cases, some ‘outlying’ dialects should be seen as deviations from more central forms (in which case the language is unequally exemplified in its dialects). If the common sense view sought to close such questions, it would be extending itself beyond its strength. (But see below, section 18 following.) In advance of theory, the view does not even exclude the possibility that two distinct languages (Russian and Bulgarian, say, or Provençal and Catalan) might each count among their present or past forms, dialects, variants, etc. some one dialect or variant. Nor again is it any part of the ordinary view that all speakers of a language, no matter when or where they live, should be even in principle conversationally accessible to one another. For the ordinary view is free to acknowledge that writing has long since been one part of the account of how speakers gain access to one another’s meanings, and an indispensable part of the process by which languages are propagated and perpetuated. One of the roles of dictionaries is to put a larger semantic store at the common disposal of speakers.

3. Those who express scepticism about the existence of social objects like English and who insist that what we should prefer to talk about is not this or that language, but language taken as a mode of psychological functioning shared among all human beings, are apt to emphasize the quantity and quality of the specialized neural and cerebral provision that underlies all human language skills. What they say about that provision (which is undifferentiated among different linguistic groups) is both arresting and interesting, but it seems to me that we have yet to hear the adherents of Chomsky’s scepticism concerning public languages furnish an argument that leads persuasively from what they tell us about the specialized language faculties of human beings to the conclusion that speaking a language is no more than a psychological function of individual human beings. Of course it is at least a psychological

3 To conceive that one variant could be a variant of two distinct languages is to conceive that the individuation and differentiation of L₁ and L₂ need not depend upon some locally evaluable discontinuity among variants of languages L₁ and L₂. Compare the differentiation of the determinables red and yellow.

For determinables and their determinations or determinates, see W. E. Johnson, Logic volume I, p.174 follg.

For the claim that colours and their hues are particular, not general things and the explanation of how the predication of colours is possible and the predication of colours of colours is possible, see my ‘Verbs and Adverbs, and some other Modes of Grammatical Combination’, Aristotelian Society Proceedings, vol LXXXVI 1985–86, section X ad fin.3.
function. But sceptics could never show by the means they have chosen that speech can be adequately described otherwise than by reference to public language, or that speaking can be adequately conceived otherwise than as speaking a particular dialect of a particular language. (See below §18.) Is it not strange to seek to exclude culture, mores, social institutions and social objects from the theoretical picture, when it is the early forms of these things that must be presumed to have created the evolutionary pressures which brought into being the neural and cerebral provision that Chomsky and his followers insist upon, and then progressively enhanced it?

4. Nobody denies that human languages, once we take them seriously and in the plural, confront us with formidable problems of identity and individuation. But so do all sorts of other artifact.

Languages are not concrete. They may be the common possession of far-flung communities of speakers. They are part of the larger compact between the dead, the living and the as yet unborn. But each of these features can be matched mutatis mutandis for other human artifacts or institutions. On the common sense view, there is no more reason to allow the problems of identity and individuation of distinct languages to dissuade us of the reality of natural languages than there is to allow the problems of identity and individuation affecting artifacts such as pictures, roads, canals, ideograms, codes, laws, deliberative assemblies, alphabets, symphonies, texts, sewing machines, bicycles or combined harvesters, to persuade us that there are no such things. It may be to some degree indeterminate what is or is not a part of one of these artifacts. In the case of the concrete ones, it may be indeterminate where its spatial or temporal edge is. Perhaps one artifact may even share a common part with another artifact. But none of this is any reason to concede that artifacts are in such poor shape, individuatively speaking, that it can be indeterminate what thing or which thing a given artifact is. There are special difficulties in the very idea of an indeterminate object. Something would be an indeterminate object if it were indeterminate which object it was and this could not even be rendered non-capriciously determinate. But why should we think that matters are as bad as this with historically given social objects like English or Polish?

* The common sense view of languages may benefit from a perfectly general point which is consistent with the definiteness of identity: that one can make it clear which object one means without settling there and then every identity and/or difference question about it. (Or so I claim in ‘Singling out an object determinately’ in Pettitt and McDowell (Editors) Language, Thought and Context Oxford 1985.)

Questions of sameness and difference are rarely if ever to be settled by

502
5. Linguists love to repeat Weinrich’s saying that a language is simply a dialect with an army and a navy. The common sense view, so far from shrinking from what this claim actually says (contrast the contemptuous tone, which we must discount), will be positively eager to accommodate the fact that armies and navies and other instruments of domination loom large in the histories of particular languages and confer a special role upon certain dialects. For common sense is just as eager to accommodate historical contingency as it is to do full justice to the normativity of language use. What the upholder will rather protest against is another suggestion, supposedly following from Weinreich’s, namely that, by parity of reasoning, a dialect is simply an idiolect with a goad or a gun (in a sense of ‘idiolect’ to be defined by the theorist) and the further suggestion that even a whole language like English, if we deign to recognize it at all, is best understood bottom up as a vast aggregation of idiolects. The commonsensicalist will protest how difficult it would be to rewrite every fact about English—e.g. (at random) what ‘perilous’ means in English and why it means that—as a fact about individuals trying to influence other individuals. Rather he will insist that the pressures that seek here for linguistic domination are social pressures, and pressures that reflect rival perceptions of a social and routine. There is no limit to the empirical information that may be needed for their determination, case by case. But it is surely not foolish to wonder here whether, in virtue of old discoveries of general laws in historical linguistics concerning vowel shifts, consonant changes, etc, taken perhaps in conjunction with new discoveries such as Bickerton’s about the ways in which pidgin languages can settle down and enter the condition of stable (‘creole’) languages, the prospects may be better now for the understanding of questions of language identity than they can appear for the corresponding questions about bicycle-identity or road-identity or sewing machine-identity.

Surely the prospects are better, moreover, for the understanding of the individuation and differentiation of public languages than they are for questions of idiolect identity. Do I now speak the same idiolect, I ask myself, as I spoke in 1966, at the time when I was perfectly innocent of all sorts of problems of philosophical communication which I am now better aware of (and have made countless if insufficient allowances for)? When one tries to answer that sort of question about idiolects and seeks to discover what on earth is meant to be at issue here (unless it is the question of what makes a carbon copy), one will soon reach for the thought that talk of idiolects needs to be abandoned in favour of talk about different ways of speaking the shared common language we all speak and do ourselves use only one fraction of. Indeed if anything cries out for ontological condemnation, one finds oneself saying, it is the particular idiolect, not the particular language.
public thing, namely the language that is in question, English or Spanish or Mandarin or whatever it is. 5

6. So much for what the common sense conception seems to amount to and the claims by which it makes itself almost invisible to current linguistic theory. But what is there to be said positively in favour of the view?

Let us begin with a point that seems to be important, however limited may be its initial force to persuade. On the view that dispenses with languages as social objects, what are the efforts of ordinary speakers aimed at? A helmsman steers for port. A doctor aims to cure. What does a speaker aim for? Normally, it may be said, he aims to be understood. But that isn't quite right. A speaker aims to be understood, but not as saying just anything. He aims to get across a certain thing, but he aims, if possible, to say this thing and to be understood as saying it. And to do that much, he has to go on record to such and such an effect. The theorist who would describe the speaker’s efforts has then to describe what it amounts to for a speaker to go on record to that effect. Can the theorist do this consistently with denying the existence of the public language in which the speaker is to go on record? If there were no such thing as a public language, what would be the difference between someone’s simply being understood (correctly, as it happens) by an audience as wanting to communicate that such and such and someone’s successfully going on record to that effect—their saying this or that?

Simply to frame such questions is scarcely conclusive for the common sense view. (The matter is resumed below, §19.) So here let us pass on to something more immediately tractable, namely how benignly (despite the individuative responsibilities that it incurs) the common sense conception of natural languages as social objects will advance (or so I would claim) all sorts of vexed questions, questions about speakers, knowledge and the role of semantic compositionality in a putative Tarskian definition of ‘true sentence of English’, and how appealingly the common sense view can address

This is to say that the common sense view is not only anti-essentialist, and historicist. It is also anti-reductive. Better, it will insist upon honesty in question of reduction. There are well considered rules about what it takes to achieve reduction. (See Tarski, Woodger, Hempel, Nagel.) These rules set standards that are hard to satisfy—as, in the long run and in the nobility of their failure, British phenomenalists so painfully discovered. Why should one suppose that, if a serious attempt were made to reduce talk of languages to talk of idiolects (in some sense of ‘idiolect,’ to be determined by the individualist, along with the specification of the biconditionals that were the recipe for the reduction), then the outcome would be any more favourable to the reductive claim than it was in the case of phenomenalism?
the outstanding question of the nature of the reality to which a grammatical account of English (or, similarly, a definition of ‘true sentence in English’) needs to be answerable if it is to count as a grammar of English (or as an adequate definition of ‘true sentence in English’).

The answer that the common sense conception offers to these questions is this. The reality to which theories concerning a particular language $L$ are answerable is the language $L$ itself, not (in the first instance) anything psychological or neurophysiological. Grammars of $L$ (in the sense of treatises about the language $L$), like definitions of true sentence of $L$, do not have to aim to recapitulate the ‘implicit knowledge’ or the subpersonal linguistic routines that a theorist might attribute to speakers and/or hearers of $L$. It is not the business of grammars (grammatical accounts) or truth definitions to correspond point by point to an independently ascertainable cognitive architecture that may be hidden from speakers themselves. (If a satisfactory grammar for a language as it stands at time $t$ is directly useful to the neurophysiologist or neuroanatomist, well that is a bonus; conversely, if computing analogies suggest a useful linguistic generalization, that too is simply a bonus.) Rather, grammars, truth-definitions and the nascent practical abilities of speakers are all, in their entirely different ways, equally answerable to the public facts about $L$. These facts do not, of course, float free from the linguistic behaviour of $L$-speakers—no more than the requirements of justice float free of the practices and justificatory and justificatory findings of moral communities and moral agents. However essentially contestably, these requirements are linked to those practices and findings. Yet they are obstinately irreducible to them. There will always be more to justice than that which we do in its name or find to be just.

7. How to support the claim that the truth definition and speakers’ practical abilities are equally answerable to the language itself?

6 Except perhaps in so far as this aim helps to give grammatical proposals a naturalness that speakers themselves can recognize (e.g. as in accordance with their own conscious efforts to divine the composition and parsing of obscure or ill-made utterances).

7 The comparison with justice is in one way far fetched. The aim of acting justly in such and such present situation is a different sort of aim (I know and do not need to be reminded) from the aim of going on record here now with a correct statement to the effect that such and such. The normativity that is involved in the two cases is different. But the point of the comparison in no way depends on these things being the same. It resides in the utter implausibility of any general presumption to the effect that anything and everything that depends for its identifiability on $X$ must be reducible to $X$.
The particular route by which I now propose to enter into these matters is to take sides in a dispute that some may still remember between Crispin Wright and John Foster.8

In discussing Donald Davidson's conception of what it would take to write a definition of 'true English sentence'—which was a compositional conception, similar to Tarski's in respect of its requiring the definition to recapitulate the semantic contribution of each expressive device and each mode of grammatical combination —, Foster rightly remarked on the abstractness of the compositional account. He expressed doubt whether knowledge of a set of axioms akin to the Tarskian axioms for each expression, device and mode of combination is even the kind of thing one should attribute to a speaker of English. Foster wrote

The knowledge we should have to attribute to [the speaker] is not typically what he would attribute to himself. His mastery of English equips him to interpret its expressions, but not to state the general principles to which these interpretations conform. Is it not unnatural, even incoherent, to ascribe states of knowledge to which the subject himself has no conscious access? (Pages 1–2 loc. cit., quoted in Wright at his op. cit. page 210).

Next, having raised this doubt, a doubt that Foster would be entitled to think too many people have too easily learned to live with, Foster then suggested that it might be best to put Davidson's project the other way round.

Rather than ask for a statement of the knowledge implicit in linguistic competence, let us ask for a statement of a theory [the] knowledge [of which] would suffice for such competence. Instead of demanding a statement of those metalinguistic facts which the mastery of a language implicitly recognizes, let us demand a statement of those facts explicit recognition of which gives mastery. What we are then demanding is still a theory of meaning, but without the questionable assumption that one who has mastered the language has, at some deep level, absorbed the information which it supplies. The theory reveals the semantic machinery which competence works, but leaves undetermined the psychological form in which competence exists (page 16, op. cit., quoted in Wright at his op. cit. page 210).

In his commentary on this passage, which is extremely helpful to all parties, Crispin Wright finds in Foster two thoughts. The first thought is that it is for the theorist of the semantics of English to aim to state axioms knowledge of which would generate mastery of the English language. The second thought is that what the compositional theorist should really be concerned with is the way in which the English language itself works. ‘The primary object is to describe the semantic machinery which drives the language’ (Wright, p. 210).

8. My comment on the first thought—which has had a long history, because of its influence on Davidson, who was recruited to reply to Foster in the same volume where Foster published his article—is that his first thought is at best a bosh-shot at the second. A small boy is sent off all by himself, aged fifteen, to live for four weeks with a family in France. Since the year is 1948, he has already had from those who taught French at school much theoretically and practically indispensable knowledge of the grammar and vocabulary of the French language. He knows a fair amount about its formation rules, its accidence and its syntax. Many perfectly indispensable irregular verbs have been forced into his memory. He has been drilled in the order for stacking up pronouns and auxiliaries in front of verbs. But this mass of information does not suffice for any proportionate mastery of the language. Nor would it have sufficed proportionately better if the boy had been more attentive in school. This is not to say that the facts he had been given were dispensable. He would have been far worse off without them. But there is an essentially and irreducibly practical component in knowing a language—if knowing a language requires being able to speak it and hear it and improvise in it—and this practical component entirely disables the attempt to vindicate in Foster’s first way the requirement that a definition of ‘true sentence of English’, should be given by means of a compositional theory. Correct though it is, one cannot ground this requirement upon the need for the definition to impart facts the knowledge of which would give mastery. There are no facts of the relevant sort that would, by themselves, give mastery. If this approach represented the best way to justify the compositional requirement, then there would be no hope for the compositional requirement.

9. But there is still Foster’s second thought. My comment here is that, as interpreted by Wright, the thought is simply correct. The reason why the theory of meaning for a particular natural language (or the definition of ‘true sentence of such and such natural language’) needs to be a compositional theory, in some such way as
David Wiggins

Davidson then envisaged\(^9\) is that that is how the language itself works. The compositionality of language is what reveals itself when we try to translate from one language to another. It is what reveals itself to you when you try to work out what the manufacturers must mean by the arcane instructions they have supplied to help you to assemble the mysterious collection of pieces they have sent in lieu of that which you thought you had ordered.

Why does the language work like that? One familiar sounding claim is that, by encompassing within a finitely stateable vocabulary, syntax etc. the possibility of an indefinite number of messages, natural language is ideally suited to the limitations of creatures like us. The compositionality of language is then a practical necessity. A slightly less familiar but far, far less misleading thought, and one that will occur to readers of Michael Dummett, is that the compositionality of language mirrors—and mirrors non-accidentally—the articulation of our thoughts; that thought of a given level of richness and complexity cannot precede—but rather it needs for its expression and for its existence—language of at least that level of richness and complexity. In that case, finitude of base, compositionality, and all the other things insisted upon by advocates of the truth-conditional view of meaning now appear as the features of language that suit it to be a vehicle of thought. That is what makes compositionality an essential feature of language. It is not just a happy accident that compositionality fits language to our thoughts. Language is not thought and thought is not language; but they are developed together and extended together. And only in concert can they be cantilevered outwards at each successive stage of their development.

What then is knowing a language according to the conception that is emerging from these findings? (As this conception outgrows the status of common sense, I shall call it the autonomy conception.) Knowing a language is simply being able to hear well enough, to interpret well enough and to speak well and aptly enough some sufficiency of the sentences that have currency or acceptation in that language. How speakers get into a position to do that is a further question—a question about their training or their skills. It is not necessary to deny that this question can ever turn into a partly neurophysiological question about the basis of those skills. Yet none of these further things, however interesting they may be in themselves and however essential their existence was to the evolution of language itself, belongs in a first account of what it takes for someone to count as knowing a language. (Contrast the neurolinguistic account of what is needed to realise that which it requires.) They do

\(^9\) As Plato, Carnap, Montague and countless others have envisaged too.
not belong there even if the study of these further matters can cast unexpected light on what it is about languages that makes it possible and/or easy for human beings to learn them.

10. Wright sees very clearly the attractions of the claim that what the theorist of English should be concerned with is the way in which the English language functions rather than the way in which its speakers function. But then he says that it generates an intolerable [division] between the concepts of meaning and understanding: [for] truths about meaning have to be, ultimately, constituted by facts about understanding. So to aspire to a theory which aims to describe ‘semantic machinery’ independently of any assumptions about what speakers know is to aspire to theory with no proper subject matter.

Then, in further elaboration of this response to Foster, he writes:

This response may involve over-simplification—depending on how ‘ultimately’ is understood. But it has great force, it seems to me, at the level of semantic primitives: expressions whose meanings are independent of the meanings of all other expressions of the language except those of which they are constituents, and to which a Davidsonian theory would devote its proper axioms. I do not think we can attach any content to the supposition that such a primitive expression has a meaning except in so far as meaning is thought of as constituted, at least in part, by convention; and I do not think we can attain to an account of the distinction between a convention and a corresponding regularity except by invoking the idea of practitioners’ intention, qualified in various ways, to uphold that regularity. If both these, admittedly very vague, thoughts are correct, then the proper standing of the axioms of a theory of meaning must, it would seem, be grounded in speakers’ intentions; and Foster’s apparent belief that the theory can have an autonomous subject matter is of doubtful coherence. (211 op. cit).

There is a directness here that I applaud. Wright means real life intentions. No doubt these can be inarticulate, but Wright does not envisage their being attributed vacuously or on the basis of a larger view that is already parti-pris with respect to the issues we are concerned with. On this point he is on the same side as Foster. I am not convinced, however, by what we find him going on to say against Foster’s autonomy conception. How could such considerations as those Wright puts forward show that the language itself, the subject matter of one who studies language, must be the same as the subject matter studied by one who studies speakers and speakers’ under-
standing? Speakers’ understanding of *what*? Surely the second study presupposes the results of the first (even if this second study might sometimes incidentally reveal that the findings of the first needed revision).

Let it be plain that my taking this stand against Wright does not mean that I think one should try ‘to describe semantic machinery independently of any assumptions about what speakers know’. The parallel already invoked with justice sufficiently illustrates how one who claims distinctness for the two subject matters, for language X and X-speakers’ competence, is not obliged to address the task of constructing a grammar of English from a state of indifference to any of the facts about speakers.

11. Let us now consider Wright’s argument about semantic primitives and convention. For this purpose, we may as well make our beginning, in a manner Wright seems to sanction, with David Lewis’s account of convention. (In due course, we shall work back to something more primitive.)

A Lewisian convention in a population G is a regularity R such that it is common knowledge in G that

1. everyone conforms to R
2. everyone in G believes that everyone else in G conforms to R
3. everyone in G has a reason to conform to R, furnished by (2)
4. there is a general preference in G for general conformity to R, rather than slightly less general conformity
5. there is an alternative regularity R’ which would have served G equally well.

Wright’s thought seems to come to this then: that one must say that a predicate like ‘red’ only has the sense that it has, namely the sense that a truth-theorist would register by an axiom given in the form

\[ \text{for any } x, \text{ ‘red’ is true of } x \text{ just if } x \text{ is red,} \]

by virtue of that sense’s being grounded in a convention; that the convention in question will take the shape of some regularity’s being upheld and upheld by population G as the regularity it is. This—not how things are with the language itself—is the self-sufficient fact.

What sort of regularity does Wright have in mind? Presumably the regularity has to be something like this: for speakers to employ sentences in the form ‘t is red’ and to take care to employ these sentences only with respect to things that are red.\(^{10}\) It is this regularity that must, according to Wright, be sustained, and sustained by

\(^{10}\) Or should one say ‘only with respect to things that they believe are red’? It is no accident, I think, that we are uncomfortable here.
Languages as Social Objects

virtue of the putative facts (i) that enough of the time almost everyone in G conforms to the 'red' regularity; (ii) that almost everyone believes everyone conforms to it; (iii) that everyone has a reason to conform to the 'red' regularity, consisting in the fact that everyone thinks everyone thinks everyone conforms to it; (iv) that there is a general preference for this regularity in respect of red things over other regularities in respect of red things; (v) that there is an alternative regularity, which might reside in the possibility of using another word instead of 'red' ('rot', for instance). Or so Wright may think the story would have to go.\footnote{Let me record that Wright himself is not himself an enthusiast for the story. This is not because he sides with Foster, but because of general doubts that he has entertained about the current preconceptions of philosophical semantics. Like Foster, Wright doubts whether it even makes sense to ascribe to people intentions that they cannot articulate, and he doubts that the appeal to 'implicit knowledge' can really explain speakers' capacities. He asks whether, once Foster's conception is rejected, there is anything for anyone to do here except to describe the causal structure of the dispositions that correspond to the truth-conditional theorems that record what sentences mean. My comments will be readily reconstructible on the idea that such a description could dispense with all reference to a particular public language.}

12. So this is the state of play. Foster is committed to see an axiom in the form

\[ \text{for all } x, \ 'red' \text{ is true of } x \text{ if and only if } x \text{ is red} \]

as descriptive of the language itself which competent speakers have mastered the art of speaking, hearing and understanding. Wright, on the other hand, says that the meaning that this axiom records for 'red' must supervene on something else. What Wright himself will want in the end to say it supervenes upon is simply the behavioural dispositions of those who understand. But the interim formulation he is exploring, in seeking to arbitrate the issue between Foster and psychologizing semanticists, is that it supervenes upon convention.

Does the convention story for the axiom about 'red' furnish the insight Wright envisages that it will furnish to psychologizing semanticists? One can indeed discover a regularity that consists in speakers using the word 'red' and normally not calling non-red things 'red'. Such a description will only catch hold of some actual regularity, however, if we take care to specify among which people it holds. Does the theorist specify the people in question geographically? By culture or religion? By genetic make up? All such variants will be wrong. Is there any other way to specify the group than by reference to the language they speak? Surely not. Our first result then is that, on the Wright-plus-Lewis account of language and convention, linguistic regularities can only be described as conven-
tions if we are allowed, at least at the level of theory, to make use of
the idea of a particular language, the very thing to which Foster and
I say the truth definition is answerable: in which case the particular
language is something just as fundamental as the supposed conven-
tion.

But that is not all. If speakers themselves are to have common
knowledge about a regularity $R$ in a community $G$, which is what
Lewis requires, then it seems that not only theorists but speakers
themselves must have the idea of the particular language $L$ that they
speak.

So much for the effect of Lewis’s conception and conditions (1),
(2). Perhaps Wright never really envisaged so literal-minded a use
of David Lewis’s conception of convention. But now let us consid-
er the operation of conditions (3) and (4). Is the fact that everyone
believes that everyone conforms to this regularity of using the word
‘red’ and not using it on non-red things really the reason why speak-
ers conform and use ‘red’ as they do? Surely this sorts remarkably
badly with people’s actual reason to conform. It may be suggested
that people conform to this convention, and do so simply in order to
be understood. That might be said. But it would be much more
accurate to say that English speakers’ actual reason to conform is
that they know that $\text{that’s how to say in English}$ that a thing is red.
In comparison with this simple statement of their reason, it is
implausible in the extreme to say that ordinary people in $G$ conform
to the ‘red’-regularity for a reason furnished by the fact that every-
one in $G$ believes that everyone in $G$ conforms to it. (Perhaps
English speakers conform on grounds they would give like this:
‘that is the way in which to say that a thing is red’. If so, they are
wrong because there is no such thing as ‘the way’. There are too
many languages. So what I offer corrects or fills out the reason they
would offer.)

Wright says ‘I do not think we can attain to an account of the dis-
tinction between a convention and a corresponding regularity
except by invoking the idea of practitioners’ intentions, qualified in
various ways, to uphold that regularity’. That is not quite the Lewis
account of convention. But never mind. (Perhaps it ought to have
been.) Let us ask whether speakers conform to the ‘red’ axiom in
order to uphold or sustain the regularity that consists of using ‘red’
but not using it except of red things. Do they for instance conform
to the regularity and seek to sustain it in the particular way that is
followed by those who now call men or women with the office of
chairman by the name ‘chairs’ and do so (at least in part) in order to
induce others to call chairmen ‘chairs’, and in order to induce them
not to call men or women without that office ‘chairs’? (To induce
them also, one can say, not to call chairmen ‘chairmen’... Well, such is a passable description of some linguistic behaviour in the period 1993/6 with respect to the substantive ‘chair’. For many who talk like that do seem to do so precisely in order to initiate or sustain such a regularity. They reflect perhaps that such a putative regularity goes against the grain—that if it is to catch on at all, the regularity does indeed want some promotion. That is what makes the present usage of the substantive ‘chair’, such a special case. But would such a description really be required, or be in place, for the cases of ‘red’ or ‘desk’ or ‘table’?

The regularity that consists of using the word ‘table’ and not calling non-tables ‘tables’ needs no help from anybody. It’s there already, safe and secure ‘in the language’. But what is more, that is precisely the sort of thing speakers in G can say too. In which case, would it not be simpler and better to say that their reason to call some things ‘red’ and not to call non-red things ‘red’ should be given (or given corrected) like this? ‘They’re speaking English and the English predicate ‘red’ is true of x if and only if x is red.

13. Are any of these points, such as they are, made available to me by virtue of some error or overspecificity in Lewis’s account of convention? Are any of them owed to some special feature—to Lewis’s ignoring forms of convention that are not fully-fledged, or something? Maybe. But the point about the need for the theorist to identify G itself by reference to a particular language does not arise from anything readily removable from Wright’s own account. Nor is it surprising that, when we work through the effects of Lewis’s third and fourth conditions, we discover not the intention to uphold a regularity but the intention to exploit an existing resource. For the chief effect of taking Wright’s suggestion seriously and following him in making a candid use of the ordinary idea of an intention is to come face to face with a substantial doubt whether calling some things ‘red’ and not calling non-red things ‘red’ is a convention at all.

Isn’t this doubt unnerving? It will unnerve one less, I think, if one registers here the obvious point that Foster or I now have to make. This is that, even if we have been led towards the possibility that the present use of ‘red’ is not really a convention, there is no question of the autonomy theorist’s wanting to reinvent the view (once fully explored by Plato and Leibniz, as well as by sundry theorists outside philosophy) that words and things have naturally mediated connections. That was never any part of the common sense or the autonomy views. But in the face of the discovery that language seems to be turning out not to be a convention (or not a David Lewis type convention), perhaps defenders of the autonomy
view ought to be prepared to speculate about what part convention did play in the history or prehistory of language. There must be some truth of some sort in the commonplace idea that convention figured conspicuously in the workings of those processes, about which we can only guess, by which there came into being the social objects we call languages. Let the autonomy theorist show how he accommodates this truth.

In the search for primitive forms of convention, let us first weaken Lewis’s account, so as not to require the complicated intentions we were concerned with when considering Wright’s argument. Let us make more use of the simpler idea of shared habits that can propagate themselves and prompt their own continuations—habits that are contagious (cf. Putnam, McDowell). The so far declared position of the autonomy theorist is that, as soon as anything with the richness and dependability of a particular language has come into being, convention has long since done its main work, because by that time the question that speakers are concerned with is not one of linguistic regularities that meet certain conditions but one of how best to make use of the resources that their language offers them to frame their thoughts and say them aloud. If that is right, however, then let the autonomy theorist try to say how this comes about. How did human beings arrive at this point? His obligation to address this question is not greater than that of anyone else. But nor is it lesser.

14. Once upon a time, he may speculate, there were creatures of a gregarious nature who needed certain positive things from the world (food and shelter) and needed other negative things (such as security from predators). By chance, or for whatever other reason, certain among them began to respond vocally as well as in action to that which was a cue for the satisfaction of these needs. By virtue of pre-existing general tendencies to imitate, the kin (as well as the non-kin) of these innovators began to imitate the vocal responses that these initiators’ kin were initiating, as well as the acts associated with that vocalization. Then, as luck would have it, some started to respond in both ways to the vocal signs alone,—to respond even when it was dark, say—both vocally and in action. This advantaged others, but especially it advantaged those who tended to find themselves in closest proximity to these second wave initiators, i.e. their kin. Among special beneficiaries were kin-members who could themselves in imitation add the vocal response to the rest of the normal behavioural response made by their kin. Darwinian forces then favoured genetic strains that were apt to produce among their offspring creatures with both tendencies, namely the tendency to add vocalization to the response in action towards a cue and the tenden-
Languages as Social Objects

cy to treat the vocalizing as if it were itself the cue. In the new form of life that started there, with new things being positively or negatively needed, some of these creatures (by chance again or for whatever other reason) went on in other cases to add a vocal response to the active response with which they reacted to the cues for various other positive or negative needs. We may speculate that, at this sort of moment, the forces of selection favoured not only strains that were able to produce or participate in an extended range of vocal signals, not only those with a tendency to associate the signal with the act, but those with further tendencies, namely tendencies to participate in and perpetuate any settled tendency to add a signalling response to the rest of their response to things in the environment, and that selectional forces favoured among these especially those disposed to link the rest of the response behaviour with the vocal response that becomes its concomitant.

Here the idea of a contagious habit replaces the David Lewis conception of convention. There are scarcely yet the rudiments of language as we know it in this story. But the autonomy theorist will say that it must be from some such point as the one just described that the path leads upwards to the evolution of what are recognizably languages, to language users’ recognition of their own language (in whatever condition it may be at each stage), and to their recognition of one another as producers of that language. Among the decisive moments in that process (he will speculate) there must have been the moment at which there was a change in the role that was played at the beginning by the creatures’ tendency, which Darwinian forces first favoured, to perpetuate any settled tendency to signal differentially in response to different things in the environment and treat signals themselves as clues. This role must itself have been modified to allow for the signalling tendency to be on a given occasion inhibited or delayed or withheld. Then the recognition of the signalling system itself, and the recognition of the participants in it as participants in it, must have made possible the recognition of a signal as a signal—and the idea of a signal as something that was available and ready and waiting for signallers to avail themselves of on a given kind of occasion, whether or not it was used there. Here or hereabouts, towards the top of the spiral staircase, lies the doorway to language itself. No doubt the spiral was supported by a concomitant growth (gradual or explosive, depending upon the intensity of evolutionary pressures) in the cerebral provision for participation in some language.

15. So much for the autonomy theorist’s inchoate effort to connect up (a) evolution and language-specific cerebral development, (b) primitive conventions construed as tendencies to perpetuate cer-
David Wiggins

tain sorts of tendency, (c) differential signalling responses, and (d) particular signalling systems, considered as repositories of autonomous meaning, as cultural objects and as inchoate particular languages.

If the sole aim were to make the common sense conception visible again, then this really ought to be enough. The obligation to begin the business of speculation is satisfied and the restatement of the autonomy view is complete—except in so far as the preliminary defence of the view has incurred certain further responsibilities. These responsibilities, which will be discharged here only in strict subordination to the matters mentioned in paragraph 1 of §1 above, are to minister to any new disquiet that arises about the problems of the individuation of such artifacts as languages and to say something more in answer to special doubts that the Chomskians sometimes express by saying such things as this:

‘Italian’, has no real world denotation in the technical sense [cp. 48–51].

Maybe a third thing is necessary too, namely to diagnose the unease that so many will feel when they see the common sense conception insisting simultaneously upon the *contingency* of particular languages as they historically are at a given time t and the *normativity* that needs to be registered and elucidated in any correct account of what it takes for a speaker to qualify at time t as saying that such and such in this or that language.

16. As regards individuation and the individuation of languages, we have long been prepared for many of the difficulties. I refer to the difficulty that we are caused in framing a theory of animal species by the imperfect transitivity of the relation ‘x and y mate in the wild, with the real possibility of viable offspring’, for instance, or the difficulty we are caused in the theory of artifact-identity by cases that involve both the disassemblage of artifacts and the repair of the same artifacts with new matter.12 Such difficulties demonstrate a real obstacle to finding general or universal principles to resolve all particular cases. What is less clear is that they show that that piecemeal, exploratory approach will be *ipso facto* unprincipled which tailors particular responses to particular cases in determining what is at issue in each case.

At this point, however, as if in anticipation of the general line I

12 See *Sameness and Substance*, (Blackwell: Oxford 1980), (second edition, Cambridge 1998), Chapter Three. An important further contribution to these subjects which will help us to live with and expect the appearance (though only the appearance) of indeterminacy is Timothy Williamson; *Identity and Discrimination* (Blackwell, 1990) pp. 137–41.
am preparing to take about reference and identity, the Wittgensteinians and Chomskians may join forces, however momentarily. They may offer general reasons to discourage one from proceeding on the kind of assumption one might otherwise make, to the effect that words for non-natural objects, i.e. words like ‘London’ or ‘Jerusalem’ or ‘Chinese’, refer to things in some public language [in which] ... we might try to sharpen meaning and ideas for conditions under which the presuppositions of normal use do not hold [21].

In the same lecture from which I quoted at the outset, Chomsky says

Even the status of (nameable) thing, perhaps the most elementary concept we have, depends crucially on such intricate matters as acts of human will, again something understood [by human subjects] without relevant experience determined by intrinsic properties of the language faculty and others. A collection of sticks in the ground could be a (discontinuous) thing—say, a picket fence, a barrier, a work of art. But the same sticks in the ground are not a thing if left there by a forest fire [22].

Chomsky goes on to remark that ‘space-time continuity has no particular relevance to these issues, contrary to what is sometimes assumed’. I applaud this remark. But for Chomsky it is part of the build-up to further and increasingly demanding conclusions, namely (1) that ‘it is hard to extricate [from the investigation of how it can be that speakers agree about how to understand substantives and names] very much that might be subjected to naturalistic inquiry’ [23] (this is a claim that any conceptualist realist of my persuasion will agree with—even if he only agrees with it by coming down harder on the ‘naturalistic’ than Chomsky intends): (2) that we should ‘drop the empirical assumption that words pick out things apart from particular usages’ [24]: and (3) that we should not ‘assume that expressions pick out things intrinsically’ (which any conceptualist of my persuasion can again agree with, or at least—for lack of explanation of what ‘intrinsically’ means—let pass) . Then there is a further conclusion (4), which Chomsky puts like this:

A good part of contemporary philosophy of language is concerned with analysing alleged relations between expressions and things, after exploring intuitions about the technical notions ‘denote’, ‘refers’, ‘true of’, etc, said to hold between expressions

13 Which I should claim, however mutely and ingloriously, to have anticipated, see Sameness and Substance, preface.
and something else. But there can be no intuitions about these notions, just as there can be none about ‘angular velocity’ or ‘protein’. These are technical terms of philosophical discourse with a stipulated sense that has no counterpart in ordinary language—which is why Frege has to provide a new technical meaning for ‘Bedeutung’, for example. If we rerun the thought experiments with ordinary terms, judgments seem to collapse, or rather, to become so interest-relative as to yield no meaningful results. ... It is sometimes maintained that such technical notions are required to account for communication. The belief is groundless [however]. ... ‘Chinese is the language of Beijing and Hong Kong but not Melbourne’ ... is true but [the term] ‘Chinese’ has no real world denotatum [24-25]. [Italics not in the original]

At this point it is becoming clear that, by the standard which Chomsky proposes, a passable relation of reference of the kind envisaged in philosophical semantics between substantive and thing—e.g. ‘English’, and English—would have to consist of the word’s picking the thing out ‘intrinsically’. It seems that, according to Chomsky, it is a necessary condition of such an intrinsic relation’s obtaining that the kind of thing in question should be or belong to a kind singled out by one of the serious ongoing sciences (i.e., presumably, some science methodologically continuous with physics, biology or experimental psychology). It is also apparent that, according to Chomsky, it is the interest-relativity of the ordinary concepts that we have for singling out such things as public languages (or cities, dwellings, stuffs or artifacts14) that disbars the conceptions that generate these concepts from mediating genuine relations of reference between words and things.

17. This is the background to the Chomskian denial which I am concerned to counter. (See again §1 above.) How much is it necessary for one with my very limited brief to dissent from in the method by which Chomsky reaches the conclusion he reaches about reference and individuation? Remarkably little, I believe, considering the great gulf between that which Chomsky stands out for and that which I need to stand out for as an upholder of the common sense and autonomy conceptions. We can agree in finding many of the claims of philosophical semantics overblown. We can agree in treating ‘Bedeutung’ as a technical term that needs to establish its credentials as a technical term. We can agree in finding something

14 The relativity is relativity to human will, or to what Chomsky calls ‘internal reference frames’ or whatever, not of course relativity to the interests of a serious scientist who is in search of projectible predicates that figure in generalizations that are fruitful for prediction or control.
Languages as Social Objects

special and impressive in the ontological commitments that we incur by the pursuit of science, and in refusing to apply tests of ontological commitment to sentences other than those that we are seriously and fully content to be committed to affirm.\textsuperscript{15} Agreeing about so much else, how then can we have come to such utterly different conclusions?

The answer to that question is this: we chiefly diverge by taking different attitudes towards concepts that are interest-relative (that is relative to a non-scientific interest, Chomsky means) and/or by taking different attitudes towards conceptions ‘from which it is hard to extricate anything that might be subjected to naturalistic inquiry’. A theoretical defender of the common sense view will say that the fact that such concepts and conceptions are interest-relative, and in some cases, relative to acts of human will (as our conception of artifacts frequently are) does not mean that it is a matter of human will whether a given object does or does not answer to (or fall under) a given concept. It may be up to us (collectively) how to conceive of an egg-timer or a house or a statutory instrument or perjury or contempt of court or legal possession. But once that is sufficiently stuck down for us to raise the question whether or not a given \( x \) falls under the concept in question, it is not up to us whether the answer is yes or no. To suppose that this was up to us would be closely analogous to a doctrinaire refusal to mark any distinction between sense and reference.

Interest-relativity affects sense. It need not in the same way affect reference or truth-value. That, in a word, is the chief point at issue. I think that, if I could convince Chomsky or his followers of this, then there would be some hope of convincing them further that, in order for reference and satisfaction to do what reference and satisfaction need to do in philosophical semantics, they never needed to be ‘intrinsic’ relations. What is more, reference and satisfaction simply do not need to be programmatically confined to those developing sciences by which we are to discern the features of natural reality—not if we mean by ‘natural’ that which pulls its weight in some science of matter or in the extensions or applications of such sciences. For that reality is not necessarily the whole of reality. Nor is it sensible to suppose that the naturalistic viewpoint is the right one to adopt if we want to arrive at a sensible view of the objects that are non-naturalistically discerned. Indeed I think Chomsky himself

\textsuperscript{15} This is not to say that the common sense conception will let pass the question of what the recipe will be for dispensing with the sentence ‘Chinese is the language of Beijing and Hong Kong but not Melbourne’.

Surely we cannot allow this or similar facts simply to disappear without trace from the objective world-view.
David Wiggins

provides the *reductio ad absurdum* of this point of view when he writes in another place, almost equally recently:

If we abstract from the perspective provided by natural language, which appears to have no names in the logician sense ..., intuitions collapse: Nixon would be a different *entity* I suppose, if his hair were combed differently.\(^\text{16}\)

In the light of this last claim, which I think is absurd, I shall venture a counter-claim to Chomsky's: any discourse that can make a non-arbitrary distinction between truth and falsity—any kind of inquiry that can lay claim to put us into a position to come to believe that \(p\) precisely *because* \(p\)—can aspire to discern its own reality. There is nothing outré or strange in this. Perhaps that is what mathematics must do. Surely that is what morality must aspire to do. This is not to say that it is an easy aspiration for the subject matter of a kind of discourse to succeed in. To vindicate the claim that morality succeeds in this way would involve the philosophy of morality in showing forth the wealth, strength and resilience of morality's dialectical resources. Nor yet, however, is it a self-evidently absurd claim for ethics or aesthetics to enter on their own behalf. Nor then is it an absurd claim for Foster or me to enter on behalf of the subject matter comprising social objects like institutions or languages.

18. So much for the position I need to advocate and the position I need to oppose, and so much for the Chomskian rejection of any serious ontology of human artifacts, social institutions etc. What more needs to be said about languages in particular? I owe more on the points I began making in §1, not least on the possibility of a comparison between the language-dialect relation and the determinable-determinate relation. But in advance of any of that, I seek to register the dialectical situation.

Particular languages, I claim, influence normatively by their presence in the social world the communicative efforts of speakers. (That is why language users—at least those who are ambitious to make full use of the language—still, despite the laissez faire attitude of new wave linguists or lexicographers, have an insatiable appetite for prescription. That is why they want prescriptions that reflect *how it is* with the language and would be disappointed by dictionaries that did no more than record actual talk.) But if particular lan-

\(^{16}\) Noam Chomsky in *Philosophical Topics* 20.1 (1992), page 226. If I had known earlier of this exchange between Chomsky and Putnam, it would have expedited my opposition to Chomsky's conception. In the event, there is a pleasing complementarity and/or convergence between Putnam's and my reactions to his position.

520
Languages as Social Objects

guages need to be recognized not only as repositories of signs and their meanings that speakers can draw upon at will, not only as that in which speakers can ‘go on record’ as saying this or that, but as that to which all particular lexical and grammatical descriptions are answerable, then the dialectical situation is that the problems of identity and individuation are problems for everybody.

On the understanding that they are problems for everybody, here follows a small contribution from me.

He who speaks or writes goes on record in a public language as saying this or that. But what language? Which language? Well, it is normal, or was normal until recently, for speakers and writers to have terribly precise intentions with respect to their choice of language. They will aim to speak or write not just English (say) or 20th century English, but that sublanguage of their contemporary English that meets certain extra conditions—colloquial English, nautical English, diplomatic English or whatever. Consider here Mark Twain’s ‘explanatory note’ for Huckleberry Finn, which was a part of his literary endeavour to get as far as he could from the ‘showiest kind of book talk’:

In this book a number of dialects are used, to wit: the Missouri negro dialect; the extreme form of the back-woods South-Western dialect; the ordinary ‘Pike County’ dialect; and four modified varieties of this last. The shadings have not been done in a haphazard fashion, or by guess-work; but painstakingly, and with the trustworthy guidance and support of personal familiarity with these several forms of speech.

In this passage we are reminded that, in addition to any philosophical or theoretical problems there may be about language individuation, there are more particular questions about which sentences count or do not count as belonging to the sub-language that the speaker or author has in mind. We are also reminded that there are recognized ways of determining the answer to the question. But to understand either the sophisticated use of unsophisticated language or sophisticated language itself (which deserves no less attention, surely, than unsophisticated), it seems we need to recognize both the determinable and the determinate or determination, both English and the Pike County dialect. The determinable is a stable enduring changing thing. It exists in its determinations. But its determinations exist as determinations of that determinable.

Here, however, in pacificatory spirit, let me enter one concession: that to find oneself needing to speak of sublanguages of a language (both in connection with languages and their dialects and in connexion with choice of special colorations) is to make it evident that
David Wiggins

neither languages nor their sublanguages can purport to be things like substances. For there is no such thing as a ‘sub-substance’ of Socrates or Kallias.17 But then neither the autonomy view nor the common sense conception of language has any need to liken the social objects that are particular languages to the natural substances that Socrates and Kallias are. There are all sorts of objects in the world that are not, in Socrates’s and Kallias’s sort of way, substances.

19. Finally then historicity and normativity. It was said in §6 that it was not a sufficient condition of going on record as saying that so and so either that one should have attempted to go on record as saying this or that one should have attempted this and been perceived by one’s audience as attempting it. Nor will it be enough (I said) if, in addition to all that, it is common knowledge between speaker and audience that the speaker was so perceived. Rather (I suggested), one’s performance has to qualify by a certain public standard as a saying thus or so, the standard being the standard that is determined by the language in question.18 From there let me go on and insist that it has long been common ground between all parties that there is no anhistorical, unconditioned standard that a speaker needs to have observed if he or she is to count in the way he or she wishes to count as having said that so and so. It is not a question of how, starting from scratch, the speaker is to speak in order to perform a certain linguistic act. It is a question of how the speaker is to proceed given what has been done so far, what has worked so far and what has been enshrined so far in the language. Sometimes this is a question of what will work, or what the speaker or writer can cause to work. (Consider Aeschylus’ experiments with Attic Greek, not all of which can have seemed at the time, or were said later, to have succeeded. Or, on a more heroic scale of invention, consider Dante’s special position in the history of the Italian language.) But mostly it is a question of what does count by the (however essentially contestable) standard of the language itself.

20. Let me conclude with the two central contentions of the autonomy theorist.

The first contention is that, if we omit from the account of linguistic communication all mention of the language in which speech is conducted, if we take this piece from out of our philosophy of language, then the linguist leaves no locus at all for normative considerations—not even for informed judgments to the effect that

17 The claim condenses a great deal of Aristotelian insight. But see e.g. *Metaphysics* Z.4–5.

18 When that standard is satisfied, moreover, many of the other supposed requirements can fall away.
uttering sentence $s$ there and then qualified the utterer there and then as saying that $p$. Still less can any locus remain for judgments by speakers or theorists of error/ineptness/aptness/excellence in an utterance. The Chomskian who feels that he has to oppose or obstruct what the autonomy theorist claims here will end up with nothing else to say but ‘anything goes’ or ‘provided enough people will now go along with it, anything goes’. On these terms there will be no question of there being mistakes that most or all people make, for instance, and no question of saying seriously and objectively that such and such an utterance is apt or inept, well-made or ill-made, or not in good English.

Some theorists purport to believe this. But nobody who actively and energetically and carefully speaks a language could possibly accept it. (Many will feel an almost irresistible temptation to remark that the deliberate self-impoverishment of current linguistic theory is not only deeply considered but also singularly well made for the current state of writing and speaking. The current state of writing and speaking is that remarkably few people, even among those professionally somehow involved in these activities, have any aspiration to make their speaking be a sort of thinking, or seek to make their every choice of word or phrase correspond to a choice to say and think this rather than that. This is an exacting task—not to be simply equated with one of its concomitants, namely the task of calculating how some audience will react to what it is presented with. What the common sense conception says is that, even to an audience that knows no better, you cannot utter the sentence ‘the sonatas are just the anecdote to a gloomy summer’s day’ and count as having said that the sonatas are an antidote to such a day, or utter the sentence ‘a wind machine is used to emulate breathing at the start and finish of the work,’ and count as having said that a wind machine is used there to imitate or simulate breathing. That will only become possible when the day dawns on which so many people use these words in this way, and they use them thus so deliberately, and they are so multiply and densely defended and reinforced in these choices of words, that that is what these words mean in the language.)

21. The autonomy theorist’s second and final contention is that the problem of discerning standards from the observation of practice is a special case of a problem that is totally familiar in moral philosophy, political philosophy and aesthetics. It is only the specialization of present day philosophizing that spares those who are tempted by the claim ‘anything goes provided enough people seem

David Wiggins

prepared to go along with it,'—and spares those who want to find nothing more to say about normativity than to record facts about who pushes whom around and how far—from being publicly compared to those who, in the fields of art or morality, would strike almost everyone as shameless, or as ignorant, or as cynical, or as Martians, or as Philistines, or as vulgarians playing only to the gallery. But in truth the denial of the objective reality of cultural objects such as languages (in so far as it represents more than the incontrovertible claim that the method of hard science and the method of whatever can successfully imitate hard science is something very special indeed) is far too strange, too hard to understand and too apparently self-subversive for me to want to liken the philosophical attitude that it expresses to any of these states of mind.

New College, Oxford

20 These categories deserve to be distinguished. I take the predicate ‘Martian’ to signify, in its application to terrestrial beings, the incapacity to enter into sensibilities (with correlative meanings) that can only be culturally and/or interactively imparted.