

## The Uses of Language

We use language in many different ways and for many different purposes. We write, speak, and sign it. We work with language, play with language, and earn our living with language. We court and seduce, buy and sell, insult and praise, all by means of language. Much of the material in subsequent chapters of this book will present techniques for simplifying language and its use. In doing so, it is important that we not forget the complexity behind what we are doing. Logic is one, but only one, approach to the study of language.

One way, though not the only way, we use language is to reason. It is this use of language with which logic is primarily concerned. The purpose of logic is to improve our critical thinking. To think critically is to recognize, construct, analyze, and evaluate arguments. Doing these things requires that we be able to separate the argumentative uses of language from the other uses.

Arguments, as understood by the logician, are not disputes or confrontations between people, though the logician's analysis of arguments may well have a bearing on such disputes. An argument in logic is a linguistic entity, an object having properties that can be discovered and described. These properties will be the subject of several chapters later in this book.

### Types and Tokens

We must use language to talk about language. This is a source of some confusion. The first problem is to determine just what sort of thing a bit of language might be. What is it that occurs below?

It rains in Spain.  
It rains in Spain.

Are these two different sentences? Are these two occurrences of the same sentence? If there are two occurrences of the same sentence, in virtue of what are they the same?

We want to say that there are two different sentences, for we can easily refer to and identify the first sentence and the second sentence. The first occurs above the second on the page. The first is like the second in that it contains four words, the verb is "rains," etc. We are able to discuss these two different sentences because we are treating them as different sets of physical marks on the page.

Marks on a page are not the only physical way in which sentences occur. They can occur as sounds. As I write this, the two sentences occur in specific memory locations of my computer and as specific pixels on the video display screen. Soon they will become magnetized portions of a computer disk. Or are these copies, and if so, where are the originals?

When we are discussing the different physical occurrences of linguistic entities, we are treating the *tokens*. We also want to say that we have two occurrences of the same

sentence. That which is identical in the two occurrences above, as well as in the computer memory, the video display, and the disk, is the *type*.

The type is not a physical entity. It is abstract. Many people of good sense, and even some philosophers, have qualms about the introduction of or discussion of abstract entities. These are things that cannot be seen, heard, smelled, touched, or tasted. They are not in any physical place. There are great philosophical disputes over whether they are discovered or invented. Nevertheless, they seem to be part of our world, and necessary tools for understanding that world.

Sentence types are not the only kind of abstract entity. Numbers are also abstract, as are songs. The number three occurs between two and four, but it is not on the bookshelf rather than on the table. The William Tell Overture preceded each episode of The Lone Ranger. It exists on paper, vinyl, and tape. Yet it is the type that is identical in each case.

### **Use and Mention**

We use language to talk about both language types and language tokens. When we are talking about a given bit of language, we are mentioning it. Quotation marks are a standard convention for mentioning language. For example, "It rains in Spain" was the example used above.

It would be nice if use and mention could be clearly distinguished in every case. However, it is not possible to do so. The only way we can mention anything, including bits of language, is to use language. In Gulliver's Travels, Jonathan Swift satirized the attempt to avoid this problem. In the voyage to Balnibarbi, Gulliver met the professors of the school of languages at the "grand academy of Lagado." There,

many of the most learned and wise adhere to the new scheme of expressing themselves by things; which hath only this inconvenience attending it; that if a man's business be very great, and of various kinds, he must be obliged in proportion to carry a greater bundle of things upon his back, unless he can afford one or two strong servants to attend him...

But, for short conversations, a man may carry implements in his pockets and under his arms, enough to supply him, and in his house he cannot be at a loss; therefore the room where company meet who practice his art, is full of all things ready at hand, requisite to furnish matter for this kind of artificial

converse.

Such a custom as Swift here imagines would not only be inconvenient, but it would not even solve the problems of use and mention! As the instructor silently waves the book in the air, how is the student to determine whether she is mentioning her particular copy (the token), and thus using the book to refer to itself, or is mentioning the class text (the type), and thus using her copy as the type of all the copies in the class?

The distinction between using and mentioning becomes even more blurred when language is used to mention itself, that is, when it is used self-referentially. Some self-referential sentences are quite harmless, such as

This sentence contains five words.

Here is an interesting example that mentions and uses, and requires the type/token distinction to explicate.

"Polysyllabic" is polysyllabic.

There are two tokens of the word spelled p-o-l-y-s-y-l-l-a-b-i-c. The tokens are of different types. The first token is used to mention the word. The second token is used to describe the word. This is all possible because the word is self-descriptive. Conceivably this could simply say

Polysyllabic is.

Not all examples of self-reference are so harmless. Language can be self-referentially inconsistent. A classical problem is the case of the Cretan who asserts that Cretans always lie. If he is telling the truth, then he must be lying, for what he says about Cretans applies to himself. This is called the liar's paradox. A more straightforward version is

This sentence is false.

If the sentence is false, then it is true. If it is true, then it is false! Self-reference is not the sole problem in this example. The same paradox arises from

The sentence below is true.  
The sentence above is false.

Neither sentence mentions itself directly, but each mentions the other. Self-reference is the root of some of the most profound problems in logical theory.

You need to be aware that in using language to talk about language, extreme care must be exercised. Contradictions lurk behind the doors and paradoxes lie around the corners. Exercise vigilance in your use of language!

## Exercise 1.1

Identify the parts of each sentence that are used to mention bits of language.

1. "All the world's a stage," wrote Shakespeare.
2. The way to spell "receive" is not r-e-c-i-e-v-e.
3. This course is Logic I.
4. This sentence is the fourth example in the exercise.
5. "Run for your lives!" cried John as the building burst into flames and the walls tumbled under the force of the earthquake.

## Cataloguing the Uses of Language

A helpful scheme for analyzing the uses of language involves five broad categories: the *informative*, the *evocative*, the *expressive*, the *evaluative*, and the *performative*.<sup>1</sup> These categories are not mutually exclusive. A sentence may be used in more than one way on any given occasion. Furthermore, it may be possible to account for our uses of language using fewer than five categories. These particular categories, however, will aid us in focusing upon the uses that are immediately subject to the tools of logic.

The categories which logicians use to study language are similar to, but not identical with, the categories which grammarians use. Grammarians have divided sentences into the categories of declarative, imperative, interrogative, and exclamatory. These tell us how sentences are punctuated, but do not always tell us how they are used.

## The Informative Use

What we express, when using language informatively, can be judged true or false. We may not know which it is, but we know it is one or the other. For example, consider the sentence, "There are intelligent life forms in other galaxies." It may be the case that there are no life forms of any kind in any other galaxy. If so, the sentence expresses something false. There may be myriad forms of life throughout the universe, many of which are far beyond us in intelligence. If so, the sentence expresses something true.

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<sup>1</sup>The foundation for this categorization for laid by J. L. Austin, How to Do Things with Words (New York: Oxford University Press, 1962), and further developed by John R. Searle, Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969) and Expression and Meaning: Studies in the Theory of Speech Acts (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

Either way, it is an informative use of language because the sentence expresses something that is either true or false.

A sentence used informatively is usually, but not always, a declarative sentence. If we wish not only to inform, but also to add emphasis to the information, we might use an exclamatory sentence. A rhetorical question may be used informatively. A worker might say to the foreperson, "Is it already noon?" The purpose is not to inquire, but to tell the foreperson that it is time to stop for a lunch break. As we shall see, not all declarative sentences are informative. There are many other ways to use declarative sentences.

The informative use of language itself has many uses. Included are reports, descriptions, analyses, explanations and arguments. In this book, the primary concern is with arguments. Much of what is covered will bear upon other uses as well.

### **The Evocative Use**

Language, when used evocatively, serves to bring about a response, usually from another person. Commands are one large group of evocative expressions. If I use the sentence, "Close the door," presumably there is an open door and someone present whom I want to close it. The sentence is used to evoke the action of door closing.

There are ways of getting that door closed besides commands. One can request it. "Please close the door." It can be put in the form of a question. "Would someone mind closing that door?" As a last resort one might say, "I beg and beseech you to close the door."

Questions, like commands, are an evocative use of language. The function of a question, in normal cases, is to elicit an answer. Rhetorical questions are used evocatively, though the point of using them is not to evoke answers. If your instructor asks, "Are you sure you've studied enough?" she probably is encouraging you to study more.

Feelings or emotions, as well as actions, may be evoked by language. One of the things we must be cautious of is language that pretends to be informative, but is actually evocative. A sentence such as "Joe Jones, who incidentally is a member of an all white country club, was appointed to the Civil Rights Commission," not only informs, but also evokes our feelings regarding racial exclusiveness.

### **The Expressive Use**

The expressive use of language is best characterized by its lack of other directedness. We can express our joy, sadness, or pain privately or publicly. Expressions such as "Oh," "Wow," and "Ouch," curses and cheers are typical of the expressive use.

Because we are social beings, and language is a primary vehicle of our social interaction, it is frequently the case that language is simultaneously used to express and evoke. We have empathy with others. When they express joy through laughter, we laugh with them. When they cry, we cry with them.

### **The Evaluative Use**

Language is used evaluatively to express ethical, aesthetic, or functional judgments.

Terms like "good," "bad," "right," "wrong," "beautiful," "ugly," "efficient," and "inefficient" are clues to the evaluative use of language.

Evaluative language falls into three major areas: ethical, aesthetic, and technical. Ethical language is about right and wrong, duties and obligations, rights and responsibilities. Aesthetic language is about beauty and ugliness, the pleasing and displeasing. Technical language is about what is useful and useless, efficient and inefficient, functional and dysfunctional.

The evaluative category has been the most controversial in philosophy. Various attempts have been made to reduce it to one or another of the other categories. While important issues arise here, they belong in a value theory course. For the sake of initial clarity, it is best to separate evaluative uses of language from the others.

### **The Performative Use**

A performative expression is one used to accomplish some social act, in contrast to reporting, evaluating, provoking, or reacting to it. To say, "I apologize for my offensive behavior," is to apologize for that behavior. It is not to report an act, which has been performed or will be performed. It is the performance of apologizing. When the minister or justice of the peace, in performing a wedding, asks, "Do you take..." and you reply, "I do," you've done it.

Both the recognition and the execution of performatives require knowledge of social roles and actions. Certain kinds of performatives can only be executed by socially authorized persons. Marriages are performed by priests, ministers, judges, and captains of ships at sea. They are not performed by electricians or retail store managers. Voting is done by citizens or by members of organizations. Promises are generally binding only on those who make them.

### **Exercise 1.2**

Identify the primary use of language in each of the following examples. If there are secondary uses, identify them and describe the situations in which the language might be used that way.

1. George Washington was the first president of the United States.
2. Abraham Lincoln was the third president of the United States.
3. Abraham Lincoln was the most effective leader the United States has had during war.
4. Jonathan is a county supervisor.
5. Jonathan is the youngest member of the board of supervisors.
6. Jonathan is the most active politician in the county.
7. Jonathan is a radical and a troublemaker!
8. What a beautiful sunset!
9. "What a beautiful sunset!" exclaimed Jane.
10. American Express - don't leave home without it.

11. Which president never won a presidential election?
12. All presidents of the United States have won office by popular election.
13.  $3 + 9 = 15$
14.  $3 + 9 = 12$
15. Think carefully about each of these examples.

### **Some Misuses of Language**

Just as language has many uses, it also has serious misuses. When a misuse affects or threatens to affect our critical reasoning, we call that misuse a *fallacy*. At an earlier time, it was thought that correct reasoning could be achieved by cataloguing all the fallacies, then simply avoiding them. There are several problems with this approach, the greatest being the virtually unlimited ability we have to get things wrong in novel ways. Even if a complete catalog of all the fallacies committed could be composed, we would still come up with new mistakes to make.

Nevertheless, there are fallacies that are committed more commonly than others. It is good to be able to identify these, and even more important to understand why these fallacies are mistakes. By thinking about incorrect reasoning, we can gain a greater appreciation of the importance of correct reasoning and the difficulty of achieving it.

### **Appeal to Authority**

The fallacy of appeal to authority occurs when something is claimed to be true because someone, usually a respected person, says it is true. Here is an example.

Harry Howard, candidate for the U. S.  
Senate, deserves our support because Rev. C.  
W. Jones, chairman of the Moral Coalition,  
said he was the most honest and capable of  
those running.

There is more than one reason why a person might, fallaciously, accept this kind of claim. One reason, the worst reason, is simply because Rev. Jones said it. There is no relation, however, between the truth or falsity of an assertion and the identity of the person making the assertion. There may be a relation between the believability of an assertion and the person making it, but truth and believability are independent of one another.

Especially when authority is backed by force or the threat of force, there is the possibility of confusing the informative and performative uses of language. Judges, ministers, presidents, even teachers, in virtue of the authority socially or politically conferred upon them, are able to make certain pronouncements. What is not conferred upon individuals is the ability to make something true simply by pronouncing it such.

We do, of course, rely upon authorities in forming our judgments. None of us can be an expert on everything, though most of us are experts on something. Thus when

radiologist Dr. Smith and oncologist Dr. Jones pronounce that a growth on a vital organ may be malignant, we are well advised to seek medical treatment. Drs. Smith and Jones have access to information and skills, unavailable to most outside the medical profession, which makes them qualified to form a judgment. They may be wrong in their judgment, but in accepting their authority, we are assuming that the probabilities are that they are right. Furthermore, there are ways to check their judgment. We might develop our own medical knowledge or we might seek the opinion of a second medical team.

In all cases where an authoritative opinion is offered, we are entitled to know why that individual is deemed an authority and why they have reached the judgment being offered. If they are entitled to be considered authorities, they have logical reasons for their judgment. These reasons then constitute the justification for the conclusion, and should be equally good reasons regardless of who offered them. People are authorities, not in virtue of who they are, but in virtue of the reasoned judgments they can offer.

### **Ad hominem (to the man)**

The ad hominem fallacies occur when, rather than replying to an argument, we attack the person presenting the argument. There are three forms of ad hominem arguments: abusive, circumstantial, and tu quoque (you too).

The ad hominem abusive occurs when the person who has presented an argument is abused personally. Name-calling and attacks on character are substituted for analysis and argumentation. The ad hominem circumstantial fallacy occurs when the circumstance of the person presenting an argument is made the subject of discussion rather than the substance of the argument. The ad hominem tu quoque fallacy is the "you do it too" response.

What makes the ad hominem fallacious is that they avoid rather than address the issues of arguments. Once an argument is presented, either orally or in writing, it deserves to be examined and evaluated on its own terms. The source of the argument should have no bearing on the strength of the argument.

### **Killing the messenger**

Continuing with the example of the radiologist and oncologist, Drs. Smith and Jones are not the causes of the malignancy they diagnose. To blame them for what they merely report is to commit the fallacy of killing the messenger. Many people seem to feel that if bad news isn't reported or discussed, it will go away.

When political figures get into trouble, they and their supporters often try to blame the press. It's as if had their dastardly deeds gone unreported, everything would be fine. During the Nixon administration, Vice-President Spiro Agnew was particularly adept at the fallacy of killing the messenger by shifting blame for administration failures to those who criticized the administration.

### **Appeal to force**

The fallacy of appeal to authority is sometimes accompanied by the fallacy of appeal to force, as in the following example.

The President has said that continued support of the rebels is necessary to the national security. To oppose him in this position is treason and will be treated as such.

The only reason given for there being a national security issue involved is the President's having said it is involved. This is an appeal to authority. That is followed up by the threat of prosecution. This is an appeal to force. The linking of force with authority is often persuasive, though it should not be.

### **Unauthorized performative**

An unauthorized performative involves the attempt to express a performative by someone who does not have the social position to do so. A judge can declare the accused guilty of a crime. The chief of police cannot. Ministers and justices of the peace can pronounce a couple married. A plumber cannot. Since performatives involve social acts, only the proper people in the proper situations can execute them.

### **Big lie**

Two political adages are related to this fallacy. The first is that if you say something often enough, people will begin to believe it. The second is that the bigger the lie, the more likely people are to believe it. Unfortunately, both techniques have been effective.

The big lie fallacy is often employed out of evil motives or political and social cynicism. But people who think that truth is determined by political or social will also employ it. They think that there is no objective truth to be established. What we call truth is merely what most people, or the most influential people, say is the truth. Thus if we want something to be true, and we work hard enough at convincing others, then it will be true.

This second group may feel more than morally justified in perpetuating a big lie; they may feel morally obligated to do so. They see research, scholarship, and scientific inquiry, not as cooperative attempts to learn what is true, but as competitive struggles to establish some particular viewpoint as the truth.

This is another way in which the informative and performative uses of language become confused. Recognizing that certain realities are socially established, such as contracts, marriages, and promises, it is assumed that all realities are similarly established.

Just as some seem to think that saying something can make it true, others think that not saying something keeps it from being true. The hero of The Emperor's New Clothes was capable of speaking the truth. No performative is capable of clothing a naked emperor.

### **Word fetishes**

Fetishes are things with which we are obsessed or even treat as if they had magical or evil power. Some religions have held that the name of their god was too powerful to be pronounced. Writing the name of the god backward was a way to evoke demons.

Word fetishes involve confusion between type and token and between signifier and signified. "Damn" and "d--n" are different tokens, but are tokens for the same type. To approve of one, but reject the other as improper, is a fetish. The comic, Lenny Bruce, made much of our word fetishes in his routines, and spent time in jail as a result.

### **Appeal to pity**

Appeal to pity is the attempt to use language evocatively, to gain the sympathy of another, when the informative use is appropriate instead.

I know I had a low score on the last exam,  
but if I don't keep up my grade point average,  
I will lose my financial aid, my parents will  
be disappointed in me, and my fiancée will  
break our engagement.

All these horrible consequences may follow from the low-test score. Nevertheless, they do not explain, justify, or mitigate against the low grade. The language is being used to evoke the pity of the instructor in hopes that she will assign a higher grade than is deserved.

### **Complex question**

Questions are normally used evocatively. The point of asking a question is to evoke an answer. The complex question fallacy occurs when a question is used both evocatively and informatively, when an unestablished fact is presupposed in asking the question. The question,

Are you still cheating on your boyfriend?

presupposes that you have been cheating in the past. If you answer "No," then you have admitted you did it in the past, though you've stopped. If you answer, "Yes," you have admitted you did it in the past and are continuing to do it.

The proper response to a complex question is to divide the question, to separate the informative and evocative uses. To the above complex question, one can reply:

Your question assumes that I have been  
cheating on my boyfriend. That assumption  
is false. I have not done so in the past, nor

am I doing so now.

### **Expressive/evaluative**

The expressive/evaluative fallacy occurs when one person uses language evaluatively and another dismisses that use by classifying it as expressive. The expression,

I am revolted by the dictatorship of Haiti.

can be used expressively. It is a way of expressing the feeling I have toward that social system. The expression,

The dictatorship of Haiti is immoral.

is evaluative. The reply, "That is just your opinion," fails to address what has been said.