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## On Certain Peculiarities in the Act of Communication

*When people are fairly young, and the musical composition of their lives is still in its opening bars, they can go about writing it together, exchange motifs [...] but if they meet when they are older [...] their musical compositions are more or less complete, and every motif, every object, every word, means something different to each of them.<sup>1</sup>*

Below I offer some reflections on the act of communication, the process of transmitting a piece of information ('idea') from a speaker to a listener. If these reflections have any foundation, they have, I think, far-reaching implications, not only for semiotics, but also for theoretical and practical linguistics. I am not in a position at the moment to enumerate these consequences in detail, and so I shall confine myself to setting out the basic idea in schematic form.

In *The Philosophy of Language*, Jerrold J. Katz describes the process of communication as follows:

*The speaker's message is encoded in the form of a phonetic representation of an utterance by means of the system of linguistic rules with which the speaker is equipped. This encoding then becomes a signal to the speaker's articulatory organs, and he vocalizes an utterance of the proper phonetic shape. This is, in turn, picked up by the hearer's auditory*

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<sup>1</sup> [Kundera 1995: 84–5].

organs. The speech sound that stimulates these organs is then converted into a neural signal from which a phonetic representation equivalent to the one in which the speaker encoded his message is obtained. This representation is **decoded into a representation of the same message that the speaker originally chose to convey** by the hearer's equivalent system of linguistic rules [Katz 1966: 104; emphasis added].

As we can see, the process of recoding has several stages: the piece of information (=idea) is transformed into a phonetic representation, this in turn to a 'signal for the speaker's articulatory organs', and this into the utterance. The utterance becomes a neutral signal (a 'signal for the brain', one might say, by analogy), and this becomes a phonetic representation, and this, finally, a piece of information (=idea).

Or here again, according to the definition of the 'code model' offered in Schiffrin's *Approaches to Discourse*:

*A sender has three sequentially ordered roles. First a sender has an internally represented proposition (perhaps we can think of this as a "thought") that she intends to make accessible to another person. Second, a sender transforms a thought into a set of externally and mutually accessible signals, here drawing upon knowledge of a code that is shared with an intended recipient of the message. Finally, a sender **transmits that thought** (a transmission allowed by conversion of the thought into code-derived signals) to its intended recipient; the recipient then relies upon essentially the same procedures to decode the signal, retrieve the message, and thus access another's thought [Schiffrin 1994: 391; emphasis added].*

This envisages fewer stages in the recoding process, but clearly expresses the notion that the 'idea' is located within a channel of communication, and that the speaker *sends* it along this channel, and the listener *extracts* it from there. Very good.<sup>1</sup>

So, let's take stock so far: The speaker transmits to the listener (along the channel of communication) some piece of information encoded in a particular way. This piece of information is encoded in the form of linguistic signs. These signs comprise, as would be expected of them, a signifier and a signified.

It is evident that until the act of transmitting 'the idea' (i.e. the act of communication) begins, the signifier exists solely in the con-

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<sup>1</sup> Schiffrin then goes on to discuss two other models of communication, the inferential and the interactional, but both depend on the same underlying notion that some body of knowledge is adequately replicated in the recipient, having been transmitted by the sender: *'The inferential model assumes that an individual displays intentions that are inferred by a recipient who relies upon both a shared code and a shared set of communicative principles allowing the use of inferring strategies. The interactional model assumes that an individual displays situated information that is interpreted by a recipient'* [Schiffrin 1994: 405]. [Editor].

sciousness of the speaker. After the act of communication has ended, the signifier appears in the consciousness of the listener. But there is a subtle point at issue here:

*The linguistic sign has no existence as such within the channel of communication.*

The fact is that we do have a way of transmitting the signifier — the speech organs of the speaker transform the phonological and intonational, etc., elements of the utterance into a collection of acoustic vibrations, the auditory organs of the listener transform these acoustic vibrations back into the phonetic image of the utterance. But *there is no way to transmit the signified down the channel of communication*: hence it is far from clear how a signified can in fact be transmitted from one consciousness to another.

Benveniste's corrections to Saussure's schema [Benveniste 1974: 90–6] do not seem to be much help here. Commenting on the arbitrary nature of the linguistic sign, Benveniste clarifies Saussure's proposition on the signifier and the signified, stressing Saussure's assertion that *'the linguistic sign does not link together an object and a name, but a concept and an acoustic image'*,<sup>1</sup> but, in fact, drawing a four-part rather than two-part schema: 'object in the real world ↔ concept (signifier) ↔ acoustic image(=signifier) ↔ name', according to which 'the sign' is understood as the synthesis of two intermediate elements (the concept=signified ↔ the acoustic image=signifier): *'The signifier and the signified, the mental representation and the acoustic image, are therefore in reality the two sides of a single notion [...] the signifier is the phonetic translation of a concept; the signified is the mental equivalent of the signifier.'*<sup>2</sup> And Benveniste deduces: *'The link between the signifier and the signified is not arbitrary; on the contrary, it is inevitable. The concept ("signified") "boeuf" in my consciousness is inescapably identified with the acoustic complex ("signifier") böf.'*<sup>3</sup> In this way, he concludes, the arbitrary is expelled beyond the boundaries of the linguistic sign.

This is all fine, so far as it goes, but let us note that Benveniste's formulation contains an important loophole: *'in my consciousness'*. In the consciousness of *one* person, yes; and in the consciousness of the other person also. But this does not mean that the two processes

<sup>1</sup> *'le signe linguistique unit non une chose et un nom, mais un concept et un image acoustique'* [Saussure, quoted in Benveniste 1966: 50].

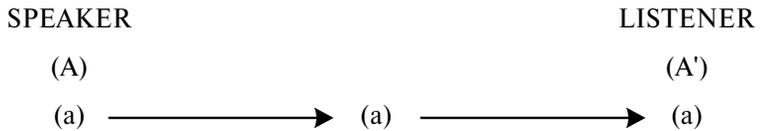
<sup>2</sup> *'Le signifiant et le signifié, la représentation mentale et l'image acoustique, sont donc en réalité les deux faces d'une même notion [...] le signifiant est la traduction mentale d'un concept; le signifié est la contrepartie mentale du signifiant'* [Benveniste 1966: 52].

<sup>3</sup> *'Entre le signifiant et le signifié, le lien n'est pas arbitraire, au contraire, il est nécessaire. Le concept ("signifié") "boeuf" est forcément identique dans ma conscience à l'ensemble phonique ("signifiant") "böf"'* [Benveniste 1966: 51; emphasis original].

of ‘identification’ are identical, given that it is not clear how the signified may be transmitted down the channel of communication.

In other words, the speaker dispatches a certain signal (signifier (a)), and the listener receives it, and this signal in turn calls up a specific signified in the consciousness of the listener, or, to put it differently, *finds* in the consciousness of the listener some corresponding signified. And the speaker hopes that the meaning (A) that corresponds to the signifier (a) in his consciousness will coincide with the idea that corresponds to this signifier in the mind of the listener.

But the speaker has no guarantee of this. It is not at all unlikely — indeed, it is very likely — that the meaning (A) that corresponds to the signifier (a) in the consciousness of the speaker will not be precisely identical with the meaning (A') that corresponds to the same signifier in the consciousness of the listener. To schematise:



To put it another way, the linguistic sign exists at both ends of the channel of communication, in the consciousness of the speaker and the consciousness of the listener, but *not in the channel of communication*; only one of the two aspects of the linguistic sign — the signifier — is transmitted along this channel.<sup>1</sup> The physical vibrations in the air that are created by the organs of speech, and sensed by the auditory organs, are capable only of transmitting the signifier: the signified that is supposedly inseparably ‘glued’ to this in the consciousness of the listener (as in Saussure’s image of the ‘*recto and verso of a single piece of paper*’)<sup>2</sup> is absent from the channel of communication. There is no place for the signified in this channel.

## II

All the same, we do know that communication is possible, and that, as a result of the speech act, the ‘idea’ somehow does get across from the speaker to the listener. And this even though the only information about the *signified* that passes down the channel of communication is in the form of an acoustic signal, which *is transformed* in the consciousness of the listener into *a stimulus for the activation of a signified*. But the signified itself, the *meaning* that the speaker wants to impart to the listener, is absent from the channel of communication.

<sup>1</sup> Let’s ignore here the question of glitches and ‘white noise’ that might interfere with the transmission of the signifier, and assume that the communication process is faultless.

<sup>2</sup> ‘*La langue est encore comparable à une feuille de papier; la pensée est le recto et le son le verso*’ [Saussure, quoted in Benveniste 1966: 52].

*If an idea does not get transmitted down the channel of communication, then how does it get transmitted?*

At the moment when a speech act takes place, ‘the idea’ that a speaker is imparting in the piece of information s/he sends is created, *reconstructed* in the consciousness of the listener — almost instantly, it would appear, after the signal is received. This reconstruction of information takes place on the basis of the shared semantics, world-picture, and linguistic system which the speaker and the listener command, but at the same time, on the basis of the material that the listener has at his or her disposal (grammar, semantics, pragmatics), and not on the basis of the material that the speaker has at his or her disposal (grammar, semantics, pragmatics).

Here, too, a very important point should be emphasised: if it is correct to contend that there is no way of transmitting *content-bearing* information from the speaker to the listener, then this must hold for *any* kind of communication and for *any* kind of content, including those which pass on information about the exact parameters of the grammar, semantics, and pragmatics of linguistic units. What one person cannot transmit to another through the act of communication *must include* didactic information on the structure of the linguistic system he or she inhabits. If the property of the act of communication as described above is accurate, then it is accurate for any act of communication, including those as a result of which a child acquires language. A child — if one presses the implications of my assertion to its limits — *does not receive from adults any information about the structure of the linguistic system*; rather, it is forced, relying on collections of linguistic signals that at first make no sense at all, to construct in its own mind a model of a linguistic system, and then by means of constant trial and error to adjust that model so that it more or less closely fits the models operated by adults; but a child will never achieve total identification — this is impossible in principle.

A child that is learning to speak has, if one returns to the four-part schema set out by Benveniste, to construct independently, in its own consciousness, relying on its innate abilities and by means of the method of trial and error, four different levels of connection or correlation: 1. The correlation between names and acoustic images, 2. The correlation between objects in the real world and concepts, and (3.–4.) the links between these two ‘concept polarities’ (the object and the acoustic image) and the double-sided linguistic sign itself (the concept J acoustic image, or the signified J signifier). Within a given individual consciousness, all these links will inevitably be set up differently from those in the consciousness of anyone else.

Thus, the two linguistic systems that exist in the consciousness of the speaker and in the consciousness of the listener will only ever be iden-

tical by chance, yet the probability of such a chance occurrence, given the formidable complexity of any linguistic system, is vanishingly small. Each linguistic system has its own developmental history, its own associative patterns, its own semantics and its own pragmatics, at the level of every separate element. Let me give a simple example:

- (1) S: I went to bed at 12 o'clock last night.  
L [S went to bed late (or was it early?)]

The pragmatics (or should one say semantics?) of the element '12 o'clock last night' could connote *early* to S, but *late* to L, or vice versa. What S wanted to say was that s/he went to bed late, but L understood him/her to mean that s/he went to bed early.

- (2) S: I paid 80 roubles for that meat.  
L [S paid a lot (or not much?) for that meat]

The pragmatics (or should one say semantics?) of the element '80 roubles' could connote *cheap* to S, but *dear* to L, or vice versa. L understood S to mean that the meat had cost a lot, or vice versa.

These are both simple examples. The more complex the utterance, the greater the chances of a mismatch between A and A':

- (3) S: Our lot are right to bomb Grozny.  
L: [Here I lose count of the possible variations in S's comprehension of this utterance]. *For instance*: S thinks that we should crack down on terrorism; S thinks that Chechnya should be part of Russia; S thinks that the lives of Russian soldiers should be preserved; S thinks that although we should protect the lives of *our* soldiers, the lives of *Chechens* don't signify. Etc. etc.<sup>1</sup>

In this last case, S and L might start an argument, sometimes quite a vehement one, which would probably focus on what exactly S had in mind and how L understood this, i.e. would attempt to bring into the maximum possible correspondence the semantics and pragmatics, the connotations and associative levels of all the different elements of the utterance in S's consciousness and in L's.

But even in the simplest cases, communication can end up disrupted: the information is either not transmitted, or is transmitted in distorted form. Take this example:

- (4) S: What kind of car do you have?  
L: A dark blue Ford Fiesta.

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<sup>1</sup> There would also be the possibility that a comment of this kind was meant ironically to begin with, i.e. that it was intended to mean exactly the opposite of what it appeared to mean — and that the irony would be missed by someone who didn't already know the speaker's views. Someone who made a comment in left-liberal British circles during the Iraq invasion of 2003–4 about 'our brave boys in Baghdad' would only have been speaking with heavy irony. But on irony see also below. [Editor].

Can S be certain that the colour image that is summoned up in L's consciousness is the one s/he has in mind? S/he can try and clarify the situation using a formula such as 'very dark blue, midnight blue, almost black', or 'navy blue', and so on, but there is no guarantee that the image in his/her consciousness and that of the person being addressed will ever be in full correspondence.

It is still more complicated when S and L belong to different cultures, i.e., have a different pragmatic background, though they are speaking one and the same language:

- (5) S: Would you like to have dinner together this evening?  
 L: \*That's very kind of you (wrong answer). [right answer would be: Yes, that would be great]
- (6) S: I'd like to ask you to dinner this evening.  
 L: That's very kind of you.

If S is an American,<sup>1</sup> then utterance (5) probably means that s/he envisages going out for a meal with L, having a business conversation, and then 'going Dutch'; utterance (6) on the other hand, is likely to mean that s/he is proposing to pay for L's meal. If S is a Russian, on the other hand, then (5) probably means that s/he would like to go out to a restaurant with L, and (6) that s/he is asking L round for a meal at home. If S is an American, then the reaction 'That's very kind of you' on L's part in (5) shows that s/he comes from a different culture from S; in example (6), the response is culture-appropriate.

### III

These insights, of course, have a pedigree. Long ago now, Potebnya wrote that a sound uttered by a speaker *'is received by the listener, and awakens in him a memory of similar sounds he has himself produced, and this memory [...] calls up the idea of the object in his*

<sup>1</sup> The original had 'is a representative of Anglo-American culture', but in fact things are rather different in Britain, bearing out yet one further time the famous comment attributed to Bernard Shaw about 'two countries separated by the same language' (6) could have, in British, either the 'American' or the 'Russian' meaning, though the speaker might be more specific, i.e., 'Why don't we go out for dinner this evening?' [(5) American-style]. 'I'd like to ask you out to dinner...' or 'I'd like to take you out to dinner...' [(5) Russian-style, (6) American-style], or 'I'd like to have you round for dinner...' [(6) Russian-style]. In either US or British culture, too, the interpretation of question (5) would be gender-loaded: even in post-feminist society, there is a reasonable probability that a man asking this question of a woman would be suggesting paying for the meal, though a lot of this would depend on whether he was showing signs of 'chatting up' the addressee. Equally, the Russian original of this essay had 'thanks' as an impossible response, but I have altered this, since you could just about get away with this in American society — you would be interpreted as thanking the person concerned for their offer of company. But reference to 'kindness' would be excessive and produce a panic-struck clarification that S certainly did *not* intend to pay for the meal, and hence possibly offence on the part of a Russian L. [Editor].

consciousness' [Potebnya 1991: 117]. And further: *'The ideas of the speaker and the person trying to understand him are united only by the word itself [...] To quote Humboldt, "no-one ever has the same thing in mind as someone else when using a certain word" [...] The distinction that thus emerges between the sense images of the object [...] is increased to an extent that is heavily dependent on the way that the new image finds [sic!] a different combination of the pre-existing perceptions, and different emotions, and creates new combinations in each [...] The communication of an idea is an utterance that is understood by anyone [...] not in a transferred sense, but in a real sense [...] speech is the mere stimulus for intellectual activity on the part of the person trying to understand it, and this person, in trying to understand, thinks thoughts of his own'* [Potebnya 1991: 118–9]. And Potebnya goes on to give a quotation from Humboldt in which the same thing is said in different words: *'The way people really understand each other, says Humboldt, is not by transferring the signs of objects to one another [...] but by touching on a chain of emotional images and concepts within each other, by pressing on the same key of their spiritual instrument, as a result of which in each person arise corresponding concepts, but not identical ones'* [Potebnya 1991: 119].<sup>1</sup>

Independent of the complexity of an utterance, its significance is always slightly different for S and for L. This is, it would appear, the way in which the *creative function of language* identified by Lotman works (alongside the function of *'textual memory'* [Lotman 1996: 21 ff.]).<sup>2</sup> I imagine that Lotman had something similar in mind when he wrote that natural languages, as opposed to artificial ones, are rather poorly adapted for what is usually considered their basic function — the full and exact transmission of information of some kind from one individual to another. Artificial languages are much better adapted in this respect, which is the result of the fact that *[a]rtificial languages do not model language as such, but only one of its functions — the capacity to pass on information accurately, since, once they achieve perfection in the realisation of this function, semiotic structures lose the capacity to enact other functions assigned to them in the natural consciousness'* [Lotman 1996: 14]. Above all, they lose the

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<sup>1</sup> This seems to be quite a widespread Romantic and pre-Romantic idea too: see e.g. Karl Philipp Moritz's autobiographical *Bildungsroman Anton Reiser* (1785–90): *Brunswick seemed to him long and narrow, with a darker appearance and larger, and he imagined Paris, because of a similar obscure suggestion in the name, mainly as filled with bright white houses. This is, moreover, quite natural: for when one knows only the name of the thing, the soul works to form an image by means of even the remotest resemblances, and if all other means of comparison are lacking, it must have recourse to the thing's arbitrary name, responding to its hard or soft, full or weak, high or deep, dark or bright sounds, and making a kind of comparison, which is sometimes accidentally correct, between these and the visible object* [Moritz 1997: 41]. [Editor].

<sup>2</sup> So far as I am aware, these ideas were first formulated by Lotman in his essay 'K sovremenomu ponyatiyu teksta' (On the Contemporary Understanding of the Text) [Lotman 1988].

creative function: *'Every system that enacts the full range of semiotic possibilities does more than simply pass on ready-made information; it also generates new information'* [Ibid.].

Lotman sees *'the mechanism of meaning generation'*, as he puts it, as lying in tropes — i.e. widely understood rhetorical figures. But, it would appear, this mechanism has relevance not only to complex, metaphor-rich texts such as literary and other artistic compositions, but to *every act of communication*: new meanings emerge in every act of communication, however apparently simple this may be — since any meaning (A') emerging in the consciousness of L when s/he receives a signal (a) from S is *new* compared with the meaning (A) existing in the consciousness of S.

In a later discussion relating to human communication, Lotman adduces the principle of the necessary existence of *two* languages and a universal principle of translation: *'The idea that a single ideal language might be possible as the optimal mechanism for the expression of reality is illusory'* [Lotman 1992: 9]. It would seem that one could understand the two languages referred to here as being those of the speaker and the listener, which are never identical. There is some hint of this in Lotman's phrasing, at any rate: *'An assumption of the primary dissimilarity of the speaker and the listener is built into ordinary human social intercourse, and further, into the normal functioning of the language'* [Ibid.: 14].

Here we once more see an important distinction between human communication and animal communication. As Emile Benveniste puts it, *'...communicative behaviour in honey-bees represents a particular type of symbolism that consists in the decoding of a situation that is objectively identifiable as such, and in turn initiates a form of communication without any variations or transformations. However, in human communication, the symbol does not generally convey exactly the facts of our experience — in the sense that there is no obligatory resemblance between referents in the objective sense and the linguistic form assigned to these'* [Benveniste 1966: 61; emphasis added].<sup>1</sup> That is, the primary identifying feature of human language is the capacity for 'variations and transformations', or to put it differently — the dissimilarity of the linguistic systems of speaker and listener.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *'le conduite qui signifie le message des abeilles dénote un symbolisme particulier qui consiste en un décalque de la situation objective, de la seule situation qui donne lieu à un message, sans variation ni transposition possible. Or, dans le langage humain, le symbole en générale ne configure pas les données de l'expérience, en ce sens qu'il n'y a pas de rapport nécessaire entre la référence objective et la forme linguistique'* [Benveniste 1966: 61].

<sup>2</sup> Compare: *'...it is obvious that the body of language signs do not translate anything, but simply allow the donor to control the process of production of new signs by the recipient'* [Tarasov 1999: 37] — I discovered this paper which conveys similar ideas, although in a much less developed form, when the present article was in press (my gratitude to Konstantin Pozdnyakov, who referred me to this publication).

IV

Are there utterances or elements for which the arguments outlined above do *not* hold? Are there areas of language use where meanings will be more or less identical for two adults of the same gender who are both native speakers of the same language and have received roughly the same education, who are not too different in terms of generation, social status, etc., and who may even have prior experience of communicating with each other? Simple questions of the type, 'Would you like something to eat?' or 'What time is it?', simple commands such as '*Give that here*', '*Let's go*,' basic enquiries (locative ones, say: 'Where is she?' or operative ones — 'Why?'), surely, one might think, ought to belong here? How can there be any differences of semantics and pragmatics at this level?

But once one starts thinking about it, things aren't so simple here either. Let me give a really straightforward example:

- (7) S: I'm not going.  
 L: Why not?  
 S: Don't feel like it.  
 L: What kind of an answer is that?

The semantics of the element 'why not' may well be the same for S and L — a question meant to establish a causal link. But the *elements* that may be united by this causal link will probably not coincide in the minds of S and of L. Cf. my discussion of Hockett's work on 'markers' below.

- (8) S: Would you like something to eat?  
 L: No, thanks, I'm not hungry.

(Here the answer doesn't have to signify that L really isn't hungry; it could mean that s/he is embarrassed about asking for food, or takes the question as empty politeness, etc.)

- (9) S: Pass the sugar.  
 L: Of course, here you are.

- (10) S: Pass the sugar.  
 L: What did your last servant die of? Get it yourself.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> As a matter of fact, response (10) is very unlikely in Britain or America, except maybe from a sulky teenager, and then probably to another sulky teenager — even though a polite request would probably run, 'Pass the sugar, please', or 'Could you pass me the sugar?' Perhaps a 'bet-ter' (i.e. naturalised) example might run:

S: Mind out!

L: Thanks! [L decides that S is drawing his/her attention to some minor danger]

versus:

S: Mind out!

L: Mind out yourself! [L decides that S is aggressively accusing him or her of being in the way] [Editor].

There's a clear difference between the meanings that L has read into S's utterance in example (9) and in example (10).

(11) S: What time is it?

L: Ten to six.

(12) S: What time is it?

L: High time we left.

In example (11), L assumes that S is interested in the position of the clock-hand on the dial; in (12) L assumes that S is asking how much time is left before some mutually understood deadline (for instance, for leaving the house).

In (11) and (12) L constructs *different hypotheses* about the meaning of the signal received from S. The possibility of such different hypotheses underlines, I think, the fact that the listener does not receive meaning from the speaker ready-made. Otherwise, if such meaning were present, why would hypotheses be necessary?

All the same, though — are there utterances or parts of utterances for which the arguments advanced here do not hold? Is there 'anything sacred' — i.e. anything that *is* transmitted exactly?

It would seem the answer is yes: various *deictic forms* (those relying on observable elements of the communication situation)<sup>1</sup> and *shifters* (linguistic elements that link informational content with elements in the linguistic situation — e.g. 'here', 'then', 'now', 'in front', 'round about', 'later', 'I', 'you', etc). Follow-up questions of the kind 'Where exactly is "here"?' or 'who d'you mean — us?' such as we constantly meet with do not, I think, relate to the semantics of these deictic elements, but are directed towards clarifying the situation in pragmatic terms, that is, to the supplementation of a given element in the given context. Having received the answer that the concept 'we' embraces such-and-such collection of people, an interlocutor needs to ask no further questions: the concept 'we' itself, i.e. the combination of the speaker and at least one other person, like the concept 'here', i.e. alongside the speaker, is clear enough to both S and L.

If one remembers Hockett's three universals,<sup>2</sup> then an obvious question arises: would it not be likely that all three universals, and not just deictics, would be part of the domain common to speaker

<sup>1</sup> It's interesting to note that the system of communication among honey-bees described by Benveniste (following K. von Frisch) is derived entirely from deictic principles: this system transmits the whereabouts of a flower and its distance from a fixed point (the hive), and variables relate to spatial data exclusively [Benveniste 1966: 58–62]. Evidently, here we are dealing with a mechanism shared by humans and animals.

<sup>2</sup> (1) Every language has deictic elements; (2) every language has markers (of the type *and* etc.); (3) every language has proper nouns [Hockett 1963].

and listener? So far as markers are concerned, it really does seem that their semantics, like the semantics of deictic elements, is identical in the linguistic systems of S and L. And in fact, the listener may misunderstand, for instance, a contrast underpinned by the marker ‘but’ (cf. the example with ‘why’ above), but is most unlikely to feel any doubt about the semantic significance of the marker itself.

With proper names, however, things are more complicated. The denotation of the proper name is, it would seem, identical in all individual linguistic systems (excepting cases of synonymous usage, which may well provoke follow-up questions of the kind, ‘But which Ivan?’) — but the *image* of the person called up in the consciousness of the listener by the mention of a particular name (memories of that person, attitudes towards him or her, relationships with him or her) is guaranteed to be different from those evoked by the same image in the consciousness of the speaker. And sentences where one mentions, say, Nicholas II or Stalin may provoke totally different meanings in the mind of the listener from those in the mind of the speaker — even though, let me repeat, the things denoted are the same. In such cases it is complicated and perhaps not even feasible to separate the semantics and pragmatics of the proper noun.

To put it another way: the linguistic system, perhaps, can be divided into a part that exists specifically for ‘the dialogic co-creation of meaning’, and a part that tries to leap the impassable barrier between individual consciousness and individual consciousness independently. I’m not sure the best terms to use for these different halves of grammar: maybe ‘dialogic’ and ‘monologic’ subsystems?<sup>1</sup>

## V

Above, when discussing the (im)possibility of identical understanding between speaker and listener, I set out a series of qualifications to my central argument. ‘Are there areas of language use where meanings will be more or less identical for two adults of the same gender who are both native speakers of the same language and have received roughly the same education and who are not too different in terms of generation, social status, etc., and who may even have prior experience of communicating with each other?’ Each qualification requires a separate commentary in its own right.

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<sup>1</sup> In English, both subsystems might in fact be termed ‘dialogic’ in the commonsense use of the term — i.e. both proper to more than one individual. ‘Dialogic’ also risks confusion, among Anglo-American readers, with the rather different understanding of this term as an essential characteristic of the literary text in the later writings of Mikhail Bakhtin, which would also embrace *both* the communicational characteristics here treated separately (i.e. the attempt to leap the ‘comprehension barrier’ and the activity of linguistic co-creation). Nikolai Vakhtin has emphasised to me that he does not intend an implicit reference to Bakhtin’s theories of the dialogic. The distinction appears to lie more in the direction of one that would be named in English as ‘stable’ versus ‘unstable’ or ‘static’ versus ‘dynamic’. [Editor].

Let us look for a moment at some invented situations, ranging between one extreme and the other. All these rapid sketches could be placed under the heading, 'First contacts'.

At one extreme lies the scene, much described in science fiction, where the inhabitants of planet Earth and denizens of some strange planet first make contact with each other, that is, a situation where no signs at all, whether in the form of sounds, gestures, or mime, trigger any meaning within the consciousness of the other side. Communication is totally impossible, since each linguistic system is entirely separate from the other. In order for communication to become possible, even at the most primitive level, it is essential to agree on signifiers and signifieds relating to at least a bare minimum of signs (an upraised hand, a circle on the sand, a hand pressed to the chest, etc.) and operating on the most primitive level, if nothing more: (bad/good, dangerous/safe, etc.).

(It would be interesting to take this same old-fashioned science fiction and work out what, in the authors' view, the conversants have to agree on first. My dim childhood memories of this kind of trash reading suggest that the first step is to identify oneself (i.e., impart a proper name), and then one works out how dangerous the visitor is (enemy/friend); the next issue is to establish where he or she comes from (i.e., a sort of deictic foundation is set in place).

At one point further along the scale lies communication between humans and animals. The dog barks *joyfully* when it sees its owner; the cat purrs *affectionately* and rubs itself round its owner's legs — and a meaning emerges in the consciousness of the owner that is probably not directly relatable to the meaning that made the dog bark or the cat purr; but there is something in common between the two all the same. If contact between a person and a cat or dog is prolonged, then, as everyone knows, a fairly high degree of mutual understanding is possible. The person and cat concerned have 'learned to rub along' with each other, have learned to link together a more or less commonly agreed signified and a signifier that they both know.

At the next point on the scale lies the situation, repeatedly described in travel and anthropological literature, of the first encounter between the European traveller and the 'native'. The European, *obviously infuriated*, shouts something incomprehensible loudly and fast: the speed and pitch of the utterance is a signal for his native listener that the European wants something from him or is displeased about something.<sup>1</sup> The domain of common meanings for the Euro-

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<sup>1</sup> A less confrontational variant of this is imagined by Italo Calvino: *Newly arrived and quite ignorant of the languages of the Levant, Marco Polo could express himself only by drawing objects from his baggage — drums, salt fish, necklaces of wart hogs'*

pean and the native is quite extensive, although they have no shared language: gestures and mime help (though all sorts of widely varying distinctions in terms of assigned meaning are possible, which can lead to significant mistakes in the listener's understanding of what the speaker is putting across).

Or suppose a European traveller has got into difficulties (passport stolen, say) in a strange city, also somewhere in Europe, but somewhere where s/he doesn't know the language. S/he is standing in distress in the middle of the street. Up comes a passer-by, smiling, and says *something comforting* in his or her own, incomprehensible, language, patting the foreigner gently on the shoulder, and indicates by gestures that the foreigner should follow. Now, there is even more shared meaning in common: many gestures, signs, linguistic strategies may well be held in common by the two participants in communication.

Then there is communication with a person who knows a language to one or another level, but is not a fully-fledged native speaker. The speaker may, exploiting one of the countless so-called 'textual precedents', involuntarily invoke an association that is obvious (in his or her view) to anyone speaking the language at native or near-native level, but which in fact escapes the interlocutor, who is not functioning at the same level. So the phrase, *Khorosho sidim!* [literally, we're sitting well, or roughly, 'Isn't this lovely!' 'Great party, eh?'] might be interpreted quite wrongly by the foreigner in question, who would take it to be meant literally, but who, having probably not seen *Autumn Marathon*,<sup>1</sup> would not be aware that the speaker meant the phrase ironically, and probably to signify that s/he, i.e. the foreigner, was boring the pants off the assembled company.<sup>2</sup>

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*teeth — and pointing to them with gestures, leaps, cries of wonder or of horror, imitating the bay of the jackal, the hoot of the owl.*

*The connections between one element of the story and another were not always obvious to the emperor [Kublai Khan]: the objects could have various meanings: a quiver filled with arrows could indicate the approach of war, or an abundance of game, or else an armourer's shop; an hourglass could mean time passing, or time past, or sand, or a place where hourglasses are made.*

*But what enhanced for Kublai every event or piece of news reported by his inarticulate informer was the space that remained around it, a void not filled with words. The description of cities Marco Polo visited had this virtue: you could wander through them in thought, become lost, stop and enjoy the cool air, or run off [Calvino 1979: 32]. [Editor].*

<sup>1</sup> *Autumn Marathon* (Osenii marafon), 1980 film comedy directed by Georgii Daneliya, in which the spineless academic hero fits dealing with his wife and a mistress in between jogging sessions with a visiting Danish professor. The episode alluded to by the author is a vodka drinking session with three participants: the hero, the Dane, and a plumber who is the hero's neighbour. The Dane doesn't drink, the hero is in a hurry to leave but is embarrassed to show it, and the plumber, the only one who is actually enjoying himself, is trying to revive a disastrous situation by repeating this line again and again. [Editor].

<sup>2</sup> The British equivalent to this, not so sophisticated alas, is to say, 'How absolutely fascinating!' at suspiciously frequent intervals when the said foreigner is struggling to explain something not very interesting about their views of British politics or some detail of life back home. [Editor].

Or take a sign hung in an American fruit and juice store reading *OJ Today!* To get the point, one needs to know that OJ is an accepted abbreviation for orange juice. But that's only the start. In the winter of 1993, when this advertisement actually appeared in a shop window somewhere in New York, the famous trial of O. J. Simpson for murder (ending in an acquittal of the accused on grounds of insufficient evidence, thanks to the talents of his lawyers and the pull of big bucks) was in progress. The meaning that the author of this sign intended and the meaning read into it by a foreigner who didn't know much about the US were likely to be at considerable variance.

Equally, if a person speaking the same language as the listener, but belonging to a different social stratum, or from a different region, or who has spent a long time living overseas utters a phrase, an image of the meaning of the phrase may rise up in the consciousness of the listener which is fairly close to the meaning that the speaker intended to place in the phrase. But mistakes and misunderstandings are possible here too. Take the situation frequently described in twentieth-century Russian memoirs, when a prisoner arrives in a prison cell, and finds him- or herself in the company of people from a totally different background.<sup>1</sup> Or let me cite an instance from my own experience: a woman of 37 whose native language is Russian, but who has been living in the US since she was ten, drops a sentence into a general conversation about fines for drunk driving. *'They've started being strict round here about that now.'* I take her to mean that *started being* means after some particularly awful accident, or after a new law was passed; what she means, though, is that *they've started being* like that over Christmas, because at that time of year everyone drives round half-cut. In other words, I thought the change was recent, but permanent; she, on the other hand, had in mind a change that occurred at predictable intervals, a periodic occurrence. Was my reaction typically 'Russian' (change is always once and for all, and always for the worse), while hers was 'Anglo-Saxon' (the change was cyclic, and after a periodic alteration, perfectly explicable in rational terms, things would get easier again)? Whichever way, her utterance was grammatically accurate and idiomatically correct, but my sphere of meanings and hers happened not to coincide at this particular

<sup>1</sup> There is a nice example of this in Evgeniya Ginzburg's memoirs of imprisonment during the Great Terror of 1937–8. Ginzburg's neighbour in her first prison cell described herself as a *Kazhevedinka*, i.e. a Soviet Russian who had spent time working on the 'Chinese Far Eastern Railway', a term that had to be explained to Ginzburg. Later, in Butyrki prison, she encountered 'dozens of people who described themselves by this exotic word'. Ginzburg, on the other hand, found that 'with all my training as a teacher I could not explain to this child of another world what exactly I was being accused of. All our talk of "lack of vigilance", "appeasement", "rotten liberalism" was so much Chinese to her, or rather, it was abracadabra, for she knew quite a lot of Chinese' [Ginzburg 1989: 48–9]. [Editor].

point. I didn't understand what she was saying, or more accurately, I did, but according to my own lights.<sup>1</sup>

Then there is the issue of the communication between two people from the same 'social set' who have known each other a long time. Here the domain of meaning coincidence will be very large — among other things because interlocutors from this group have had enough time to bring their conceptual systems into correspondence with each other. But even here there will, of course, not be complete coincidence between any two systems. Data from associative word-tables indicates that two native speakers of a given language will have statistically similar associations relating to a particular word, but the patterns will still not be identical. And therefore the associations linked with an entire utterance will necessarily be different, i.e. the 'receiving' end of the process will be characterised by a meaning that is distinct from the one assumed at the 'sending' end. All of us will have encountered the situation when a person giving an academic paper talks about his or her particular interests, but everyone in the audience reacts to what is familiar to them, picking up on individual words and phrases, nurturing their own associations, and commenting in their remarks not so much on what was said in the paper, as on their own thoughts about what was said.

The channel of communication between a husband and wife who have spent many years living together can sometimes exist independently of any voiced signifier at all — they understand each other without words, and the coincidence between assumed meanings is more or less complete. All the same, the gender differences discussed in sociolinguistic literature can (and, one should add, not only can, but do — and how!) lead to misunderstandings. For example, in Deborah Tannen's well-known essay on the effects of gender and ethnos on communication [Tannen 1982: 224–5], the survey respondents were asked to interpret the following short dialogue:

*Wife: John's having a party. Wanna go?*

*Husband: OK.*

*Wife: I'll call and tell them we're coming.*

They were then asked, based on this conversation only, to put a check next to the statement which they thought best explained what the husband really meant when he answered 'OK'. The options were:

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<sup>1</sup> This particular misunderstanding is hard to capture in English, since British English would distinguish the two meanings by tense: 'They're being strict about that now' (temporary) versus 'They've started being strict about that now' (permanent), while American would achieve the same effect by adverb: 'They're being strict about that right now' versus 'They're being strict about that now'. But one can imagine a comparable situation arising with a question such as, 'Is he working now?', where L might understand S to mean 'right at this moment', while S in fact meant that the subject now had a job, as opposed to being unemployed. [Editor].

1. *My wife wants to go to the party, since she asked. I'll go to make her happy.*

2. *My wife is asking if I want to go to the party. I feel like going, so I'll say yes.*

The results showed that 36 per cent of American females, but only 27 per cent of American males checked the first option. Tannen concluded that American women were more likely than American men to look for hidden meanings in what their interlocutors said.

Finally, one comes to communication between twins. As one of my students said after she heard me give a paper that addressed much the same issues as those considered here, she and her twin sister went through phases when they didn't talk to each other at all — why should they? Everything was clear enough in any case. If twins socialise only with each other or mostly with each other, then the sense of understanding without words can reach a stage when speech development slows down. A. P. Luriya has described a case like this too [2001: 87–8]. Yura and Lyosha, identical twin boys, did not speak at all until they were two years old. At home, they spent most of their time playing together; no-one read to them or made any attempt to stimulate them in an intellectual sense. At two and a half, they could utter only two words, 'mama', and 'papa', At four, when playing together, they would let out certain individual sounds, but did not use these systematically to refer to objects or actions, or at least, their mother could not perceive any precise system behind what they were doing. By five, the children could manage a few common words when they were talking to adults, but when they were playing with each other, practically did without speech. Yet, despite what looked like abnormal speech development, they appeared to be (and, it seems probable, actually were) quite normal in terms of their intellectual capacities.

At the far end from the inter-planetary dialogues we began with lies auto-communication: thoughts and reflections aloud, inner dialogues and monologues, in which the speaker and the listener are certain to have one and the same system of meanings.<sup>1</sup> Yet even these inner dialogues are carried on for a reason, which might in turn signify, one would think, that by dividing his or her consciousness in two, into two interlocutors, as it were, and forcing these interlocutors to air their views, a person was elucidating, explaining a given idea, 'kicking' it backwards and forwards. In other words, shouldn't this person be seen as exploiting the 'creative function of language', using language as an instrument of creativity, as a way of giving birth to a new idea?

<sup>1</sup> Unless one's talking about 'multiple personality disorder' or a schizophrenic's 'voices', where conflict is a widespread phenomenon: but of course, one of the reasons why this kind of inner discourse is interpreted as pathological is precisely because the 'normal' expectation of being able to understand *one's own* meaning is disrupted. [Editor].

Here I seem to be getting close to the well-known ‘*theory of lacunae*’ formulated by Yu. A. Sorokin in order to describe a central problem in translation [see Sorokin 2003; Sorokin, Morkovina 1983]. This is a theory that explains and describes translation deficiency through postulating certain inherent incompatibilities (differences) between the semantic scopes of words that dictionaries treat as having ‘the same’ meanings in both languages. For example, from the point of view of a dictionary, ‘pereulok’ and ‘lane’ seem to have the same meaning, but in real-life usage they do not, due to the endless associations and connotations attached to each in its respective language system. So, Penny Lane could, from one point of view, be correctly translated as Groshovyi Pereulok — however, from another, no translation would ever be completely accurate.<sup>1</sup> But a specific feature of the situation here is that lacunae don’t just arise when one language is translated into another, but within the framework of communication in a single language; and they arise constantly; the process is inevitable. The act of creation, of constructing new information goes on all the time. And the greater the domain of coincidence between two participants in an act of communication between linguistic systems, between ‘worlds of meaning’, the ‘lower the degree’ of creativity, the less significant the communication concerned is. A dialogue with someone from your own culture is less productive than a dialogue with someone from another one. Let me pass over conversations between husbands and wives in silence... The greater the distinction between systems, the richer the possibilities of communication, since the creative capacities of communication make themselves felt more clearly.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Because Groshovyi pereulok would sound, to a native speaker of Russian, like a back street somewhere in an old area of Moscow, such as Zamoskvorechye or the Arbat, and certainly not like anywhere in a foreign city such as Liverpool. A more everyday example would be the word *tambur*, which is used for the platform between carriages on trains. This space is not usually named in English (cf. the wordy paraphrase just given — train guards refer to it as a ‘vestibule’, but this usage is not familiar to laypeople). And it does not have the same cultural significance, essentially being used only for overspill at times of dire need (when trains are crowded during the rush hour, in the pre-Christmas week, etc.), rather than for illicit drinking, smoking, and other nefarious activities, as is the *tambur*. Such examples can be proliferated endlessly: they apply also to ethical and emotional terms (*tsinizm* in Russian, for instance, signifies moral cynicism only, and never the sort of slightly embittered irony also meant by the term in English), to politeness formulae (the direct translation of *delaite kak khotite* would be ‘do as you like’, but to get the tone of courteous non-control one would need to say ‘do what you feel like’, or ‘as you wish’, while the curt edge on the English phrase would make the appropriate translation *postupaite, kak ponimaete* (literally, ‘act as you understand’, with the implication that the understanding did not amount to very much). [Editor].

<sup>2</sup> Cf. the pay-off of the sessions between Marco Polo and Kublai Khan that Calvino imagined. Once words have started to be used, ‘you would have said communication between them was less happy than in the past: to be sure, words were more useful than objects and gestures in listing the most important things of every province and city — monuments, markets, costumes, fauna and flora — and yet when Polo began to talk about how life must be in those places, day after day, evening after evening, words failed him, and little by little, he went back to relying on gestures, grimaces, glances’ (Calvino. *Invisible Cities*. P. 32). [Editor].

## VI

I think that the answer to the question, ‘Do communication situations exist in which the meanings assumed by the speaker and the listener are completely identical?’ has to be in the negative, among other things because

*Communication between two completely identical semantic systems has no purpose.*

In order to illustrate this, it is interesting to consider exactly what communication of this kind would represent: what would, in practical terms, be meant by communication between two identical systems?

It is evident that we cannot observe such communication directly: it does not exist in the natural world. But we can observe *elements* of such communication every day: in the association between individuals who have known each other for a long time and who are very close, the motif ‘I’d never have guessed!’<sup>1</sup> comes up again and again. Husbands and wives who have learned over the years to communicate almost without words have the intuitive sense that words are in many situations — with each successive year in more and more situations — simply superfluous, since the other side ‘understands everything in any case’. Words come to seem unnecessary, and if they still get articulated in situations where they are not needed, then the effect is often irritation.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Meant sardonically: cf. ‘So what’s new?’ ‘You don’t say?’ or more rudely, ‘Does the bear shit in the woods?’ ‘Is the Pope a Catholic?’ and so on over the range of other possible comments when someone states the obvious. [Editor].

<sup>2</sup> Here I wonder whether the author’s argument might not have taken him too far in an evaluative direction — towards something approaching the distinction in Formalist literary theory between the creative use of language on the one hand and ‘automatisation’ on the other (cf. Yury Tynyanov’s model of literary evolution in *Archaists and Innovators* (1929), where literary change is presented as the result of writers’ recognition that particular literary strategies and devices have been done to death by their contemporaries: they may then kill these off by means of parody, or try something new — where the technique of ‘serious parody’, or floating a novel device in a spirit of half-irony to see how it works, comes in). While extremely pertinent to post-Romantic artistic strategies, the understanding of novelty as the centre of intellectual striving might run the risk of imposing too narrow a teleology on communication. After all, if language is not just about exchange of information (as argued by Nikolai Vakhtin above), then presumably linguistic exchanges have a function that is not just about the transmission of information. Hence communication at some level might continue even if ‘redundant’ in informational terms. Quite a lot of successful communication, one might argue, has to do with the sociability that evolutionary biologists have identified as a central element in the consciousness of humans and other primates (explaining the need for their disproportionately large brains) [Humphrey 1984]. A lot depends on precisely what one understands by the ‘information’ that might be passed from person to person. For instance, reiteration of the obvious might carry a communicational load — it might be a way of reassuring the other person that his or her obsessive themes *are* in fact interesting (i.e. that they are in fact loved and wanted). Obviously, familiarity might result in comfortable silence, or (seen negatively) the feeling that one knows exactly what x will say about y subject, and therefore irritation when they ‘put on the record’ yet again. But there are also situations, one would suppose, where

Another type of incessant communication is represented by the oral interchanges of schoolchildren and teachers. Association of this kind takes place every day, the domain of themes that it embraces is limited, and the teacher needs a great deal of inventiveness in order to avoid stating the obvious, to avoid launching into the same speeches in similar situations and in order to avoid provoking repulsion and total ‘channel blocking’ on the part of his or her pupils. ‘What, am I supposed not to know that already? Why does s/he keep banging on about the same thing?’ That is, when both participants in an interaction are fully aware of the content of the information being transmitted, then communication ceases automatically: it simply becomes totally pointless.

And if one still tries to imagine communication between two absolutely identical systems of meaning, then, clearly, one will have to admit that the features of redundant communication as just listed — irritation on the part of those participating in the act on account of the pointlessness of it all, the blocking of the reception channel when completely identical material is received, the automatic cessation of communication — will also reach the absolute maximum in any such act of communication.<sup>1</sup> In other words, such communication is senseless and impossible, and it will come to an end even before it has begun. If the probability that meaning will coincide equals one, then the information being passed on must equal nought.

## VII

The distinctions between meaning (the semantic, pragmatic, associative level) of one word in the consciousness of a speaker and of

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people would actually welcome reiteration of the familiar — whether out of psychological insecurity, or because repetition would in effect make the known start to slide into the unknown (as in certain kinds of incantatory or other ritual text: members of the Hesychast sect, who prayed by repeating the name of Jesus hundreds of times, would thus be seeking to place themselves at a distance from the ordinary meaning of the name, though always also remaining in touch with its customary associations). [Editor].

<sup>1</sup> However, it is possible that the emphasis on *novelty* in communication as an element of creative interest is also culturally conditioned, as also might be the precise level of reaction to what are seen as statements of the obvious or articulation of sentiments assumed anyway to be obvious to both parties. Certainly, conversations among intimates in Russian seem to make more widespread use of formulae along the lines of *ty zhe znaesh', chto* (‘But you know that...’ — as followed by *mne eto ne nravitsya* [that I don’t like that], *chto ya tebya lyublyu* [that I love you], and so on. Saying ‘You know perfectly well’ in such contexts in English would sound extremely aggressive and also *de haut en bas*: ‘You know perfectly well you should leave the cat alone’ is possible, and indeed very likely from an irritated parent to a child, but ‘You know perfectly well that I love you’ would sound bizarre or even comical. At the same time, the recognition of the possibility of ‘communication beyond words’ does exist in British English too — cf. the famous sketch from the *Round the Horne* 1960s radio comedy series, in which a couple were overheard talking to each other along the following lines: ‘*I know, Charles.*’ ‘*I know, Fiona.*’ ‘*I know that you know, Charles.*’ ‘*I know that you know that I know, Fiona,*’ and so on till about a dozen ‘*I know that...*’ blocks were stuck together in succession [Editor].

a listener begin proliferating in geometric progression once the numbers of words being transmitted rise. Every word being transmitted allows the listener to discover a responding meaning in his or her consciousness — and every such meaning will be slightly different from the meaning that exists in the consciousness of the speaker. The hiatus spreads, widens, difficulties snowball, and reach a considerable size once the end of the line of signals is reached. But on the other hand, so it would seem, there is also some kind of compensatory mechanism in existence: the increasing diversity of meanings which S receives is corrected, in longer stretches of text, by the possibility of constant verification of compatibility: given that reception of language is not a linear process, meanings conveyed at some later stage of the communication process are capable of correcting meanings and clusters of meanings received earlier on. This is, it would seem, also true of long-term communication involving the same set of speakers and listeners; this may explain the phenomenon of gradual assimilation to the meanings of a regular interlocutor that I described above.

But still, the systems of meanings characterising two people are never identical. After all, beyond simple diversity of meaning lies the conscious striving for multivalency, poeticism, metaphoricisation. Even a simple phrase such as ‘Shut the door’ can be interpreted as meaning that, for instance, the speaker is angry; what, then, should one say about utterances like ‘...it’s far too late, too late to make sense of the clutter/of false trails and reversed horse-shoe tracks/and the aniseed we took it in turn to dig/across each other’s scents, when only a fish is colder and dumber’.<sup>1</sup>

If we add regional, social, age- and gender-related, generational peculiarities in the system of meanings within the boundaries ‘of one and the same language’, it turns out that the participants in the act of communication are in a constant situation of mutual misunderstanding, of painfully deciphering what others wanted to say. And what is more, all these mechanisms are assimilated by children — which is to say that children, alongside the continuous, daily, and insistent process of overcoming straightforward non-comprehension, form their own conceptual system, create their own associative series. This is recorded by Sergei Aksakov, one of the most acute observers of childhood in Russian culture, in his famous memoirs about growing up in the early nineteenth century:

*This time, just as had happened many other times when I had not understood certain answers to my questions, I did not leave them*

<sup>1</sup> Paul Muldoon, ‘Incantata’ [Muldoon 1994: 25]. This quotation replaces a line from Joseph Brodsky in the original, which translates roughly as, ‘in the dark like a mad mirror repeating your features with my whole body’. [Editor].

*hanging in the air unexplained, but explained things in my own way. Explanations of this kind long remain in children's minds, and often afterwards, when I called an object by its real name, one running the whole gamut of meaning, I would find that I did not understand this. Life, of course, provides an explanation of everything, and recognising a mistake is often very entertaining, but can sometimes also be extremely distressing [Aksakov 1966: 291–2].<sup>1</sup>*

So how is communication in fact possible? Evidently, language has to have a range of different mechanisms in play that allow these proliferating differences to be smoothed over: mechanisms of inverse connection between the speaker and the listener, methods of follow-up questioning and information verification; and there have also to be purely linguistic methods of compensation, of reducing differences and attaining understanding. I cannot of course offer a full list of such mechanisms — just a brief sketch of the most obvious.

It would seem that the basic area where these mechanisms should be searched for is linguistic *redundancy*, which may be realised in a variety of different ways. The first thing that comes to mind is various types of *synonym*, when the speaker employs in his or her speech several synonymous names for a single process, emotion, or phenomenon, or several synonymous methods of expressing one and the same idea, in the hope that at least some of the variants will call up closely-linked meanings in the mind of the listener, which will in turn open up a field of closely-allied significances, lying as close as possible to what the speaker had in mind. An allied strategy is *repetition* — with the minimum differentiation in the elements that comprise the formulations, which may indeed be identical — which by the very fact of multiple efforts to ‘get through’ to the consciousness of the listener increase the likelihood of understanding. (‘Leave the cat alone! Leave — the cat — in PEACE, I tell you!’) One could mention here the repetitions that lecturers engage in: one and the same idea will be repeated twice or three times, using different words and with different examples — with, of course, the associated risk

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Marina Tsvetaeva's early poem 'Kurlyk', from *Vechernii al'bum* [Evening Album] (1910), in which she describes how this unknown word set her imagination going: *Sobranie sochinenii v 7 tomakh*. Moscow, 1994. Vol. 1. P. 103. It is interesting in this context to reflect once again on Piaget and Vygotsky's observations about children's failure to understand figurative language, which might derive less from the 'primal' (non-abstract, mythic) character of the juvenile psyche, than from the fact that young children have not yet acquired the conditioned responses that facilitate adult communication. I recall myself being utterly bewildered on first encountering as a child the phrases 'you can't have your cake and eat it', 'she's no better than she should be', and 'there's more fish in the sea than ever came out of it'. In all three cases one is dealing with formulations that are strictly speaking meaningless (in the first case, the original and more logical formulation was 'thou canst not eat thy cake and have it'), and it is only the anaesthesia brought by usage that allows one to recognise the accepted meanings, 'you can't have it both ways', 'she's a woman of low reputation', and 'there are plenty of other choices of sexual partner'. [Editor].

of boredom (cf. the observations on communication as stating the obvious above).

We should maybe also assign *follow-up questions* to this category, since they turn communication from a monologue into a dialogue. The participants in such an act of communication are composing a text together. *Citations* and *allusions* might also belong here — that is, the reliance on a third system, a system of ‘textual precedents’, which, as the speaker hopes, will turn into an ancillary instrument for the levelling of the threshold of meaning between the speaker and the listener.

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The central feature of brilliant ideas is that the implications one may derive from them are endless. Saussure’s idea about the binary nature of the linguistic sign, Jakobson’s idea about the structure of the communicative act, and Lotman’s idea about the creative function of language have, it seems to me, the implications that I have set out above, which, so far as I know, have not been the subject of anyone’s attention so far. The implications that I have drawn from these three ideas may seem strange, but I have not been able to find a way of disproving them. Perhaps I have made some elementary error in the logic of my argumentation. Well, if so, and if any of my readers is able to point this out, I will simply heave a huge sigh of relief, since in that case the linguistic landscape that I am used to can be left undisturbed.<sup>1</sup>

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