Pergamon

*Language Sciences*, Vol. 19, No. 1, pp. 33–46, 1997

0388–0001/96 $15.00+0.00

0388–0001(95)00025–9

# ORDINARY PEOPLE'S PHILOSOPHY: COMPARING LAY AND PROFESSIONAL METALINGUISTIC KNOWLEDGE

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It is revealing to begin a paper on the contrast between lay and 'professional' metalinguistic knowledge with a comparison of two statements: one from the 'father' of present-day linguistics, the other from a contemporary linguist.

> In the lives of individuals and of societies, language is a factor of greater importance than any other. For the study of language to remain solely the business of a handful of specialists would be a quite unacceptable state of affairs. In practice, the study of language is in some degree or other the concern of everyone. But a paradoxical consequence of this general interest is that no other subject has fostered more absurd notions, more prejudices, more illusions, or more fantasies (Saussure, 1921, pp. 21–22).

> It's a good idea to look from time to time at letters to newspapers about language to see what strange views about language flourish among the population at large. Similarly, it's a good idea to read a book like this [ *The Language Machine* ] every so often to see what strange views about linguistics flourish in odd little corners of academia (Borsley, 1987, p. 362).

Both linguists pay lip-service to the fact that linguistic issues are of concern to all speakers of language; and neither professional is willing to incorporate such lay views within their own respective linguistic theories. But that is as far as the similarities go. Saussure, because he was in pursuit of the creation of linguistics as a 'scientific' discipline was unable to incorporate indeterminate, subjective lay views on language. Such views conflicted with his 'code model'[1] of communication.

However, the situation today is quite different. For one, interdisciplinarity is the 'buzz' word in academe (except perhaps in the most reactionary of linguistics departments). Second, (and even within such departments[2]) the code model of communication is today seen as unable to deliver the promised goods. The second statement by Borsely above thus seems rather puzzling in its total rejection of such lay issues.

The reason linguists are still firmly attached to believing that there is and must remain a major difference between lay and theoretical metadiscursive remarks, is that linguists are still tied to believing in the objectivity of linguistic facts. Trevor Pateman for example, raises some objections to Roy Harris's indeterminacy thesis that

> every linguistic act is integrated into the individual's experience as a new event, which has never occurred before and cannot occur again. . . repetition is only partial replication (Harris, 1981, p. 55).

Pateman objects on the grounds that to actually say that there is no repetition of any word, *cat*, *love*, *word* etc., one necessarily has to use 'overtly or covertly, and not merely mention a type, category or form' *cat*, *love*, *word* which must, in some sense, be psychologically real (Pateman, 1987, p. 3). But Harris's point is *not* that speakers cannot recognise any distinction

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between types and tokens, nor that they may frequently entertain the possibility of saying 'the same word', but rather that this ability, which is a highly sophisticated one facilitated (if not actually initiated) by the availability of writing, printing and standardization, does not yield a 'criterion of demarcation between the linguistic and non-linguistic' (Harris, 1981, p. 55). Although types and tokens are, or may be, 'real' for speakers, it is the speakers themselves who decide on any particular occasion on the identity of the types and token (see below, and Hutton, 1990; Love, 1990).

Thus the metalinguistic game of abstracting an utterance to subject it to any form of analysis (e.g. *love* is a four-letter word) is a highly sophisticated enterprise.

It is only when such metalinguistic games are then taken as identifying constants for the purposes of theorizing about language that they constitute the misleading and erroneous activity condemned by Harris. Such a mistaken, fixed code model of communication has an air of plausibility which stems both from practical metalinguistic talk (see 'the conduit metaphor': Reddy, 1979), and from certain communicational and cultural practices, such as those of legal procedure, which often takes the form of a debate over the meaning of certain words (see Davis, 1992a). The fact that the dictionary alone is unable to settle legal disputes signposts the necessity for a radical break with the idea that language always and only functions in one way—that of encoding and decoding thoughts into linguistic forms[3]. It is only through the normativity of language that language is seen as a form of patterned behaviour[4]. Therefore, incorporating a folk theoretical approach is a necessary amplification of language study. It is by making verbally explicit their own reflexive understandings that lay speakers are able to impose regularities and constraints upon language use.

This amplification (or reorientation) of language study demands that we reconceive how we approach metalinguistic and metacommunicative issues since 'language', 'word' and 'meaning' etc. are not super-concepts pre-existing their ordinary uses by 'ordinary' speakers:

> When I talk about language (words, sentences, etc.) I must speak the language of everyday. Is this language somehow too coarse and material for what we want to say? Then how is another to be constructed?—And how strange that we should be able to do anything with the one we have! (Wittgenstein, 1974, p. 77).

Such metalinguistic labels as word, sentence, etc. are no different in kind from our words of everyday use.

Since the concept of the word is central both to linguistic theory and to the vocabulary of a native English speaker (Davis, 1992b), the focus in this paper is on the uses to which English speakers on the one hand, and linguistic theorists, on the other, put the word *word*. The analysis will therefore serve as an example of the more general contrast between how an 'average' person and how a professional linguist treats metalinguistic remarks (see Taylor, 1992).

For an analysis of the term *word*, the method employed (Davis, 1992b) involved asking questions of twenty-one informants all personally known to me.

This type of 'ask-the-speaker' approach is typically avoided in orthodox linguistics. One common objection to soliciting lay judgements has been that they are, more often than not, erroneous, since there is often a contradiction between what speakers say they do and what is actually observed by the linguist (Labov, 1975, p. 41). Within 'mainstream' linguistic description and theory, only two approaches have been considered valid: the linguist either describes the language on the basis of 'objective facts' or explains the language faculty through the study of intuitions (Labov, 1975, p. 6). This has caused a whole dimension of linguistic evidence to be omitted, evidence which has far-reaching theoretical implications (see Love, 1985, p. 15–16).

There are thus many advantages of directly asking the speaker about the term *word*: being essentially familiar to the layperson of Western culture, it is no different in kind from concepts studied in sociological inquiry, and thus the methods of sociological, in particular ethnomethodological, analysis are just as applicable to this metalinguistic term (McGregor, 1982, p. 125 and 1983, p. 276).

## The evidence

Two tests involved asking informants[5] to (a) count the number of words in eleven sentences and (b) to say whether pairs of words in sentences were the instances of the same word or different words (see Appendix A).

Linguists' views on this matter are that the *word* is a universal, context-invariant unit:

> Speakers of English have, on the whole, a fairly good intuition about what a word is, although there are a few marginal cases where intuitions are unclear: . . . it could be pointed out that even preliterate children in our society have a reasonable notion of where words begin and end . . . There is also a certain amount of evidence . . . that non-literate speakers of unwritten languages know where words begin and end in their languages (Bauer, 1988, p. 45).
>
> Indeed, of all the units of linguistic analysis, the word is the most familiar. In fact, its existence is taken for granted by most of us. We rarely have difficulty picking out the words in a stream of speech sounds or deciding where to leave spaces when writing a sentence (O'Grady *et al.*, 1989, p. 90).
>
> It is likely that words can be identified and delimited as grammatical units in all languages, and that this intuitive and ready response to a variety of formal criteria in the speaker's languages, which the linguist in making his abstraction of word units must set out fully and systematically, and which linguistic theory must enable on to formalize and make explicit (Robins, 1989, p. 185).

These linguists would concur with Burgess's statement 'We all know what is meant by the word 'word' (Burgess, 1975, p. 98). Accordingly, psycholinguistic examinations of word recognition have focused on 'lexical decision experiments': 'subjects are presented with strings of letters, such as *blink* or *brast*, and have to decide as quickly as possible whether these strings are words' (Garnham, 1985, p. 44). Investigations have seldom required subjects to count words in a sentence because it is assumed that all 'normal' native speakers of English know, and agree upon, what a word is.

## Word forms

In the empirical work with lay speakers, two adult informants refused to accept anything smaller than two letters as a word[6]:

1: *No I don't*
O: Two
1: Where are the two words? . . .
O: *No* and *don't*
1: What about *I*?
O: It's not a word is it, it's a letter.

Attitudes to the representation of hyphenated, solid or open compounds also varied. Only one informant declared *hide and seek* to be one word:

G: *Lets play hide and seek* em that as far as I'm concerned is three
1: Why?
G: Because *hide and seek* is one word

1: What's your definition of a word there?
G: Well *hide and seek* should be hyphenated er because it's it's it's em it's it's a word which is an altogether thing you know what you know like cara- not not *caravan* em I can't think of anything em but *hide and seek* can't be three words surely can't can it, *hide and seek* got to be one word it's a it's a one thing er that's my feeling you know er you don't need to agree but er as far as I'm concerned it's three words *hide and seek* is a word[7]

whereas there was quite a wide discrepancy between the unit *let's*:

1: *Let's play hide and seek*
N: Five
M: Six

From the answers elicited from the other tests, it is clear that word boundaries were not only drawn on the basis of phonetic, phonological, semantic, orthographical criteria or lexicographical practice. Informant G, for example, claimed that *imbloodypossible* in the sentence *No, it is imbloodypossible* was "one of those strange words which can't be analysed in anything else". Informant T, a 20 year old circus entertainer, thought that when spoken the sentence contained either three or five words but when written three: whereas two other informants one highly educated, the other minimally schooled, both claimed that the sentence contained six words. Some thought that the written sentence contained only three words because *imbloodypossible* was not a word:

O: that aint never a word that *imbloodypossible*
1: It's not a word?
O: No *impossible*'s a word but without the *bloody* in it
J: I don't think there's such a word as *imbloodypossible* as one word [sic!]

However, when informant J heard this sentence he provided a different analysis claiming that there were five words—*no it is bloody* and *impossible*. This contrasts with O who said that *bloody* was not a word

O: it's not in the dictionary is it?—it's a swearword innit as far as I'm concerned so it would be *im*—no it's *bloody* I wouldn't count *bloody* as a word it's just slang—it's not a word.

For this informant, as for many of the others, perceived lexicographical practice is a determining factor in identifying a word.

A: I would term it not to be a word or think it not a word if it wasn't in the dictionary

Many denied that *em* Test No. 4, was a word:

P: I wouldn't say *em*'s a real word it's just sort of like something you do, a noise it's more like a noise than a word
O: . . . as you say isn't a word it's just a grunt if you like, I wouldn't have thought it's a word
Q: Nothing, not a word
S: No such word

G, even though he thought that there was a technical term for such a linguistic phenomenon,

still categorically denied it to be a word:

G: there is a special phrase for that which I've forgotten you'll have to supply that. . . no it isn't a word of course not no no

This contrasts with informant E who, after some deliberation, seemed to imply that in certain situations, *em* could be considered a word: 'E: You don't look at a book and start reading *em em* do you—unless you're listening to a Mattesons advert[8]. E's comments contrasts with V's who said: 'it's incorrect. . . you say it when you're not thinking. . . you would say it but never write it' and with T's who said that it was. . . : 'for how you want someone to say it, written in a script'.

For the highly educated informant D, it is clear from his definition that words were conceived as primarily oral:

D: A word is any one of a number of different units used orally by human beings to convey mental ideas to other human beings

This view of the word thus led him to deny *em* the status of a word:

D: Well it's not really a word at all
1: Why?
D: Because it represents a sound—er—yeah it represents a sound and not an object or abstract idea

When asked to state whether instances of underlined words were the 'same' or 'different' (Test No. 2), yet again the responses differ markedly.

Informant A was the only one to volunteer the criteria which he consciously employed:

A: I'm saying that they're the same because they're written the same and I'm saying that they're different because they're written differently but—in the case of —em—er—particularly *pervert* and *pervert* they're different pronunciations and they're still the same word but they mean different things as well

Informant G also considered such words to be 'the same', proferring reasons adduced by historical linguists to support his case:

G: I would say that the word *bank* is em a word which has a very wide semantic range I'm afraid
1: Would you say it was the same word?
G: Yes I would say that it was the same word which has a very wide semantic range

For the instances of *pervert* he said:

G: . . . as a historical linguist I would say one is a noun and the next one is a verb em a but of course they're the same yes
1: Why 'of course' are they the same?
G: . . . well historically they're just the same word that's all

And for the words which were orthographically different he commented:

G: *I am a nurse I was a nurse* yes in spite of the fact that they come from two different roots I still regard that as one word yeah

Although historical criteria are offered here, ascertaining the identity of diachronic units is even more problematic than ascertaining synchronic identities. But informant G above seems to assume that (a) diachronic identity is unproblematic, but (b) even so, he is not consistent, because he treats *am and was* as one word, and he does not allow the different etymological histories of the various words *bank* to count.

Although those informants who were doctoral candidates at Oxford University often backed up their answers by appealing to meaning and word classes, they did not produce the same responses, or employ their criteria in the same way.

Conversely, a minimally educated informant E produced situational rather than abstract answers:

E: That's different innit
1: Why?
E: 'Cause dogs is more than one. . .If you're a nurse you're a nurse—if you leave the job you was a nurse
1: So is it the same word or different word?
E: Different

According to Walter Ong, situational responses characterize an oral based mode of thought:

> Oral cultures tend to use concepts in situational, operational frames of reference that are minimally abstract in the sense that remain close to the living human life world (Ong, 1982, p. 49).

All these responses give grounds for questioning whether word-identity is as obvious and clear-cut as linguists generally suppose (e.g. see p. 35 above). Moreover, such responses call into question the Saussurean code model of communication which postulates a match between form and meaning, and moreover requires the match to be *exactly* the same for *all* members of a given speech community. According to this model morphemic boundaries have to be drawn by all speakers in the same places; no phoneme can be unaccounted for, every morpheme has to be assigned its characteristic form or forms, and each such form has to be assigned a characteristic meaning. From these informants' responses one can see that this model is doubly defective in that there is little, if any, consensus on the demarcation and interpretation of the 'word' and yet, despite and because of the lack of explicit instruction as to what a word is, all the above informants had strong opinions on the topic. In other words, although all informants were familiar with the term *word* and accept it as part of their language, they appear to understand it differently.

## Word meaning

It is no surprise that the other plane of linguistic units (the concept or meaning) is not uncontentious and just as variable as linguistic form. But yet again this is not something readily conceded by linguists. For example, John Lyons writes:

> I will begin by assuming that everyone knows, in a general sort of way at least, what a language is and how it is used. I will also assume that all languages have words and sentences; that both words and sentences are meaningful; that the meaning of a sentence depends in part, upon the meaning of the words of which it is composed; and that everyone reading this book can identify and interpret the words and sentences of any language, including English, in which he or she is competent (Lyons, 1981, p. 17–18).

The alternative view adhered to by some linguists that speakers know very little about questions of meaning (see Bloomfield, 1935 and Chomsky, 1957 below) is not supported by my informants. Furthermore, what is 'known' by the informants is variable and unpredictable.

> In order to give a scientifically accurate definition of meaning for every form of a language, we should have to have a scientifically accurate knowledge of everything in the speakers' world. The actual extent of human knowledge is very small, compared to this (Bloomfield, 1935, p. 139)

and Chomsky:

> Part of the difficulty with the theory of meaning is that 'meaning' tends to be used as a catch-all term to include every aspect of language that we know very little about. Insofar as this is correct, we can expect various aspects of this theory to be claimed by other approaches to language in the course of their development (Chomsky, 1957, p. 103–110).

Empirical work with these informants concerning semantic identity, concept and function words and the literal/metaphorical distinction yet again shows how misguided and mistaken linguists are in their assumptions. For example, when asked whether the informants felt that words had meanings, the question is interpreted in a wide variety of ways ranging from a straightforward yes or no to a rejection of the question:

I: Do you think that all words must have a meaning?
C: Oh this is where we get into nonsense—can I stop now?

Those who claimed that words do have meanings were asked to state the meaning of the words *to*, *the*, *it*, and *so*, termed by Lyons 'empty word forms'. Lyons claims that the distinctions between these and 'full word-forms'

> emphasize the intuitively evident semantic difference between typical members of one class and typical members of the other. Empty word-forms may not be entirely devoid of meaning (though some of them are in certain contexts). But they generally have less meaning than full word-forms do: they are more easily predictable in the contexts in which they occur. Hence their omission in headlines, telegrams etc...'
>
> Not only do empty word-forms tend to be less meaningful than full word-forms. Their meaning seems to be different from, and more heterogeneous than, that of full word-forms (Lyons, 1981, p. 48).

Many of my informants, instead of supporting Lyons's opinions on such words, claimed that such words were either semantically useful or grammatical essential:

N: ...it's a very useful word really, many sentences wouldn't make any sense at all without it [*to*]
G: ...words like [*to*]...are grammatically essential in order to em construct sentences and so they must in a sense have a meaning

Others claimed that such function words, instead of having a precise meaning in themselves, merely accentuated other words in the sentence:

J: ...well using the word *to* it actually accentuates the word *eat*...[in the sentence *I want to eat*]

or were used to identify their place in a sentence or to show their relation to other words:

I: And *the* has it got a meaning?
P: Well it's got a meaning in a sense, it has got a meaning, it's like at the beginning of a sentence or something
H: *The*—I guess you usually use *the* in front of the sentence or something
I: ...*the* does that have a meaning?
F: Yes—em normally beginning a sentence it's found sometimes firstly but then I suppose it's like *that*
I: What about the word *the*—what does that mean?
E: The beginning

1: The beginning?
E: The beginning—it's always the beginning of a sentence innit?

It seems that both linguists and lay speakers are both guilty of a lack of 'surview'[9] over our ordinary use of language. Further support for this occurred when informants were asked to state the meaning of such 'concept' words as *number*. Although we may think that words such as *to* function analogously to the word *chair* and *number*, such conceptions are misleading: we can give an 'ostensive' definition of the meaning of *chair*, and we can give a grammatical description of 'empty word forms', but we can not explain number in the same way. And although we can show the meaning of *number* by giving examples of particular numbers, this method of explanation is considered inferior:

1: What about the word *number*?—does that have a meaning?
D: Er yes—yes it does
1: What does it mean?
D: It means em—*number* means the sum of—er—any number—the sum of any er—collection of individual objects or ideas that's being considered
1: What about when you say *one two three go*
D: Em—yes—those are numbers—the ideas that were being referred to I would have thought were seconds—therefore you're talking about a number of seconds

The distinction between literal and metaphorical language is a distinction that linguists feel the need to draw upon, again to provide support for their linguistic theory. However, this distinction is hardly used in the empirical work conducted, even when informants were pushed fairly hard on the use of certain words in sentences such as *John is a pig* and *Are those glasses dead*.

O: Exactly what it means John is a pig he's an animal—er
1: Actually he's an animal?
O: John is an animal yeah...presumably the man eats spaghetti bolognaise like I do...*are those glasses dead?* empty glasses in a pub
1: Why d'you call them *dead*?
O: Well they're empty they've got to be washed up before they can be used again
E: *John is a pig*—that's an insult
1: Yeah what does it mean?
E: That he's a pig
1: That he's a pig?
E: Yeah
1: Okay—*are those glasses dead*?
E: Means they aint got no life in 'em—beer's been drunk
1: Is it used in the same way as pig?
E: No
1: Why?
E: 'Cause it aint

Other informants, although they were able to paraphrase the sentences, nevertheless said they were 'impossible' but 'meaningful'; others said that they were 'silly' or 'stupid':

B: Well it's an insult—em—implies he isn't a very pleasant person—could imply he eats a lot—it's very unfair on the animal they're rather nice things—nothing like as dirty

as people make them out to be—*are those glasses dead*?—that's a really funny one I always laugh even when I say it myself—at myself—implies sort of you know glasses lying around with bullet holes in them or something—em meaning em—have they been finished?...

1: Can you see any similarities between *John is a pig* and *Are those glasses dead?*
B: Yeah they're both silly

...

1: Why?
B: Well because as I say how can you call a human being a pig for a start because a pig is a—as I said it's an animal and it's being remarkably unkind to the animal because you're implying that the pig's an absolute shithouse and in fact the pig isn't.

The variation within such comments on the sentences under investigation—that for example, 'they make sense' but are 'impossible', 'incorrect' or 'common'—show that such metalinguistic metaphorical games are of the same kind as all questions concerning word meaning(s), such as *nappy* means 'diaper', *cheval* means 'horse' or *wicked* means 'good' in youth culture. In all such 'games' participants are being asked to show their understanding, by means of a reformulation, of the relevance of the words used in a given communication situation. Moreover, the interpretation of such sentences does not depend on the concept of 'literal' or 'original' meaning *pace* Grice (1975) as formulated by Lyons:

> The speaker/writer cannot mean that literally [*John is a tiger*] ... He must ... believe (if he is being cooperative) that I can work out the non-literal meaning for myself—presumably on the basis of the literal meaning (of the whole utterance-inscription or of one or more of its constituent expressions) (Lyons, 1981, p. 215).

But if speakers can readily make sense of 'metaphorical' expressions, then it would seem that they are obviously not enterpreting such expressions on the basis of the 'literal', context-free, meanings of the individual words[10]. Moreover some informants did not appear to be treating the word *pig* in the sentence *John is a pig* any differently from its use in referring to the farmyard animal. If this is the case, the understanding of metaphors is, no less than the understanding of individual words, culture- and context-dependent, as is especially highlighted in the sentence involving *dead glasses*.

Identity of meaning or interpretation, therefore, is not a necessary condition or interpretation, therefore, is not a necessary condition for successful communication. In addition, any attempts at securing an 'identical uptake', would be a fruitless endeavour.

## Conclusion

There is much diversity as to what native English speakers of English understand by the word *word*. It would appear that the use of this is varied and depends, among other things, on the 'literacy' level of the individual. The very variability of the judgements highlighted both the indeterminacy involved in everyday communicative acts and also the failings of modern linguistics in its attempts to formulate a 'correct' *theory* of language[11]. However, these results also suggest that there is no 'right' or 'wrong' about the question of wordhood. Any understanding of metalinguistic terms, and there can only be a particular individual's understanding since such terms do not pre-date or pre-exist speakers, will be based upon contexts and the speakers' educational backgrounds etc. The views of orthodox linguists being just as much a product of literacy as the informants' judgements add to the continuum of diversity rather than to any conflict of evidence.

The problems that linguists get themselves into over the definition of the 'word' stem in part from their attempt to generalize from a culture-specific term, and from their strict imposition of a bi-planar format on a multi-faceted and open-ended concept. A sign is a sign only by virtue of its communicational context, and anything in context can acquire linguistic relevance. One cannot delimit in advance the features that will turn out to be communicationally significant[12].

Instead, deliberately asking speakers questions about wordhood provides 'a means whereby necessary forms of social and communicative knowledge (imagined, stereotypical or real), can be brought to the surface and articulated in a form that becomes researchable' (McGregor, 1990, p. 107). Such knowledge 'could only have been deduced or based on guesses from necessary forms of social and linguistic knowledge, whether this knowledge was based on real or imagined interactional experience' McGregor (1990, p. 108). The experience relevant to the discussion here is that of participation in a literate society since it has been argued by Olson and Torrance (1991), among others, that a literature society is characterized in part by the metalanguage it employs to refer to linguistic activities.

The metalinguistic repertoire used by the informants was very open-ended and unpredictable. In addition, the results seemed to bear out Hamilton and Barton's (1983) findings that those informants with a high level of literacy often referred to the spoken functions of the word *word*, while those with a low level of literacy frequently referred to the written aspect of this unit (see in particular p. 37 above). These authors conclude that the use of the metalinguistic term *word* was frequently idiosyncratic and that 'people gave the impression that they had picked up isolated pieces of information and terminology as they progressed through school' (Hamilton and Barton, 1983, p. 590).

In fact many informants referred to schooling as the source of their metalinguistic judgements 'that's how I was taught'. And not surprisingly, in opposition to linguists views on this matter, the concepts 'right', 'incorrect' and 'wrong' played a large role in informants' metalinguistic judgements: e.g. B's comments on the distinction between my husband and me/I (Test No. 4) 'Well number seven's right and number six is rubbish', 'I think in many ways a lot of people get it rather wrong'.

In some interviews the less literate informants did not have any strong or definite views about the questions but were just producing answers they thought I wished to hear: e.g. 'E: I'm just trying to be clever here and it don't work'. This contrasted with G's comments which were possibly determined, in part, by his sense of what it is to be a professional linguist 'I don't use those terms—incorrect...Because as a linguist...I'm not allowed to use that sort of statement'. Such comments in no way misrepresent or falsify what native speakers of English think about the nature of the word or language. On the contrary, the responses actually foreground the bases on which such judgements are made.

Thus this research has highlighted the different possibilities of interpretation open in any communicational situation. These possibilities being influenced by, among other things, the varying social, psychological and interactional histories of informants (McGregor, 1986). Since what people think language is and how it works informs linguistic behaviour, this research has highlighted the relevance that words (or rather words about words) have for the language-users themselves. This involves looking at, not an abstract, invariant, concept 'meaning', but rather what is (metalinguistically) 'meaningful' for individual language-users in particular situations.

Asking lay speakers allows for the development of hypotheses about the kind of social assumptions that speakers have made in order to interpret and evaluate interview questions but

does not require, and in fact rejects, any systematic accounting for such assumptions. And the fact that there may be a regress of interpretations[13] 'is not merely a feature of engaging in linguistic analysis of any kind, but is actually the necessary and sufficient condition defining any attempt to construct a theory of language' (McGregor, 1983, p. 302). Just as McGregor (1983) finds that the neglect of the hearer's interpretation of an utterance perpetuates the language 'myth', so too does the disregard of the lay view of linguistic matters. This negligence leads to the omission of culture-specific data which could assist in avoiding the assumption that the various metalinguistic labels such as *word, sentence*, etc. refer to universal linguistic entities. And this is why, in contrast to linguists, lay speakers are in the position of knowing all there is to know about language (Harris, 1980, p. 4).

## NOTES

[1]This Saussurean model sees communication merely as a matter of encoding and decoding thoughts into words.

[2]See Borsely, 1992 'Harris's and Love's objection [in *Redefining Linguistics*] to the code model seems to be that it requires speaker and hearer to have exactly the same linguistic system. Clearly, they often do not, but communication occurs, so this is a valid criticism...the main point they make is that languages, in the ordinary, everyday sense are not fixed codes. Since languages in this sense are the product of the linguistic behaviour of large and ever-changing groups of speakers, this is clearly true' (p. 69).

[3]It is hard to see how linguists can accept the criticism of the code model of communication and yet still endorse Chomsky's concern with I-languages (the individual cognitive systems that underlie ordinary use of language).

> There is every reason to think that these are largly fixed after a certain age...We learn new words...and we use particular constructions more or less frequently, but otherwise things remain much the same. This would seem to justify talk of a fixed code, or, in Chomsky's terms, a steady state of the language faculty' (Borsely, 1992, p. 69).

[4][The] constant moral focus which is placed on our verbal behaviour is what brings us into the semblance of linguistic conformity that every speech community exhibits. That is, it, makes us (mostly) all call *this* a 'tree' and *that* a 'bush' and say 'John ran' rather than 'John rans' or 'ran Johns'. To view such social conformity as having its source in underlying social objects or in natural determinism is to blind oneself to the everyday normative and political pressures by which we all...create and police that conformity ourselves (Taylor, 1990, p. 137).

[5]A selection of informant profiles are attached in Appendix A.

[6]David Barton sees these as 'child errors', pointing 'to a qualitative difference between adults and children in the awareness of units' (Barton, 1985, p. 193).

[7]Again it is illuminating to recall Barton's discussion of 'typical errors' in particular 'treating phrases with a unitary meaning, such as *more or less* as one word' (Barton, 1985, p. 191). These errors he attributes to adults with a low level of literacy. The informant here was a historical linguist and Reader in Middle English at London University.

[8]This was a popular television commercial which used the phrase *Mmm Mattesons* and the phrase was subsequently printed on the products.

[9]'Surview' used as a translation of the German *Ubersicht* is used to mean roughly 'to command a clear view': 'A surview enables us to grasp the structure of our mode of representation, or whichever segment of it is relevant to a given philosophical problem' (Hacker, 1986, p. 151).

[10]A recognition that the literal/metaphorical distinction applies primarily to *uses* of sentences, not to sentence-*forms*, would forestall the misguided search for 'metaphorical meanings' of words or sentences as well as the investigation of the putative mechanisms by which such meanings are derived from the components and structures of sentences expressing metaphors (Baker and Hacker, 1984, p. 185).

[11]A theory which accounts for the 'view of language as a set of *a priori* grammatical structures consisting of fixed categories, rules and units, associated with fixed semantic correlates: fixed, that is, in advance of the speaker's use of them in discourse' (Hopper, 1990, p. 149).

[12]For example, it is extremely significant to Borsely as a defence of his criticism of Harris (p. 1 above) that there is no mention of Chomsky, a 'most influential figure', in Harris's writings. I would be so presumptuous to hazard a guess that this 'lacuna' is deliberate on Harris's part and therefore is communicationally significant for diametrically opposed reasons.

[13]One may object that a linguist providing his or her interpretations of informants' interpretations of the purpose etc.

of an experiment, would not lead anywhere. But as McGregor points out, not only is such a 'regress' necessarily part of any kind of linguistic analysis (empirical or not) but also, as Gumperz demonstrates, can lay bare 'the communicative processes that underlie categorization, intergroup stereotyping, evaluation societies' (Gumperz, 1982, p. vii).

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## Appendix A

The method employed for an analysis of the *word*, involved taped interviews with twenty-one informants. These interviews were personally conducted and transcribed over a year (1986–7). All the informants were personally known to me. This presumably eliminated inhibitions of the kind that many informants have when being taped by a stranger. The questionnaire was used as a guideline which could be elaborated upon, as informants would often spontaneously volunteer information on the topic. Some informants who knew each other well were recorded together, as the pilot study had indicated that productive discussions frequently developed in those circumstances. Informants were not always given specific instructions concerning what to comment on. Each test began with the underlined question on the questionnaire. The informants were told that they were welcome to make any comments at any time, and that they could expand on their answers as they wished.

In some instances informants may have offered comments simply to 'fulfill the informant role in which they have been placed' (McGregor, 1986, p. 158). But this hazard, if it is one, is intrinsic to asking questions. In everyday interaction, communicators are placed in similar question–answer situations—gallup polls, teacher–pupil interactions etc.—where it is impossible to determine with certainty whether the question asked would otherwise never have been consciously formulated, let alone articulated.

TEST NUMBER ONE
*How many words are in these sentences?*

(1) Do you want to go windsurfing?
(2) No I don't
(3) I've got to go to London
(4) The Queen of England's palace is there
(5) John's got a new car
(6) I have a new washing-machine
(7) Have you got a colour TV?
(8) Let's play hide and seek
(9) 1,2,3,go!
(10) Do you know your ABC?
(11) No, it is imbloodypossible

This test was conducted in two parts: these sentences were first read aloud by the investigator, then later, when all the tests had been completed, the same question was asked when the subjects had the written sentences in front of them. The aim of this experiment was to investigate a lay person's criteria for detecting word-boundaries and to ascertain whether different criteria are employed in writing and in speech.

TEST NUMBER TWO
*Are the underlined words the same words or different words?*

(1a) He cashed a cheque at the *bank*
(1b) He slipped on the *bank* and fell in the river
(1c) I work in a blood *bank*

(2a) The word *nothing* is a noun
(2b) *Nothing* is cheaper than Brand X washing-powder

(3a) My neighbour is a *pervert*
(3b) Don't *pervert* the idea

(4a) That *man* works in a bank

(4b) *Man* is a human being

(5a) A *dog* has four legs
(5b) *Dogs* have four legs

. . .

(11a) I *am* a nurse
(11b) I *was* a nurse

TEST NUMBER FOUR
*Comment on how the underlined words are used in these sentences*

*(1) John is a pig*

. . .

(3) Are those glasses *dead*?

. . .

(8) It's *em* a nice colour
(11) My husband and *me*/My husband and *I*

*Informant Profiles*

Informant A: British male age 35, a landlord of a public house. Educated to an HND in electronic engineering. Formerly a staff Sergeant in the army.

Informant B: British male age 32, production engineer with 6 O'levels, 2 CSE's and 2 A'levels.

Informant D: Northern Irish male age 22. A postgraduate in classics (doctoral status) at Oxford University.

Informant E: British male age 22. Unemployed and rarely attended school as a child.

Informant F: Scottish female age 30. Sometimes works in a public house owned by her male partner (not informant A above).

Informant G: British male age 50. Dialectologist, historical linguist and Senior lecturer in English language at London University.

Informant H: American male age 23. Law student at an American University. Holds a BBA in finance and public administration.

Informant J: British male age 65. Works as a manager in a leather-goods shop. Left school at 14.

Informant M: British female age 19. Sales assistant with 4 O'levels.

Informant N: British female age 21. Secretary with 7 O'levels.

Informant O: British male age 35, no formal education. Works in a garage owned by his father.

Informant P: British female age 20 with 2 CSEs. Currently doing casual temporary work.

Informant Q: British male age 22, postgraduate in linguistics (doctoral status) as Oxford University.

Informant S: British male 25, financial consultant who failed his Bsc in Biochemistry at London University.