Social Constructivism of Language and Meaning

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To systematically answer two questions "how does language work?" and "where does linguistic meaning come from?" this paper argues for Social Constructivism of Language and Meaning (SCLM for short) which consists of six theses: (1) the primary function of language is communication rather than representation, so language is essentially a social phenomenon. (2) Linguistic meaning originates in the causal interaction of humans with the world, and in the social interaction of people with people. (3) Linguistic meaning consists in the correlation of language to the world established by collective intentions of a language community. (4) Linguistic meaning is based on the conventions produced by a language community in their long process of communication. (5) Semantic knowledge is empirical and encyclopedic knowledge distilled and condensed, and the uses of language accepted by a linguistic community. (6) Language and meaning change rapidly or slowly as the communicative practice of a linguistic community does. The crucial point of SCLM is to focus on the triadic relation among language, humans (a linguistic community) and the world, rather than the dyadic relation between language and the world.

What is language? How does language work? What is linguistic meaning? Where does linguistic meaning come from? To these big questions, there are quite different and even opposite approaches in philosophy of language and linguistics in the 20th century. Just as Searle says, "… the standard accounts of language in philosophy of language and linguistics tend to underestimate, and therefore misrepresent, the role of society and of social conventions." (Searle 2007: 17).

In what follows, I will argue for my social constructivism of language and meaning (SCLM), which consists of six theses, abbreviated as P1–P6:

P1.   The primary function of language is communication rather than representation, so language is essentially a social phenomenon.

P2.   Linguistic meaning originates in the causal interaction of humans with the world, and in the social interaction of people with people.

P3.   Linguistic meaning consists in the correlation of language to the world established by collective intentions of a language community.

P4.   Linguistic meaning is based on the conventions produced by a language community in their long process of communication.

P5.   Semantic knowledge is empirical and encyclopedic knowledge distilled and condensed, and is the uses of language accepted by a linguistic community.

P6.   Language and meaning rapidly or slowly change as the communicative practice of a linguistic community does.

The crucial point of SCLM is to focus on the triadic relation among language, humans (a linguistic community) and the world, rather than the dyadic relation between language and the world.

P1. *The primary function of language is communication rather than representation, so language is essentially a social phenomenon.*

Language has at least two functions: public communication and expression of thought. Almost nobody denies this. But about the question "which is the primary function of language?" different scholars have different opinions. For example, Chomsky seriously regards expression of thought as the primary function of language (cf. Chomsky 2013: 645–662); I take communication as the primary function of language. The two different conceptions of language will lead to very different theoretic consequences. Since thinking is firstly and mainly personal business, Chomsky emphasizes that language is the innate competence of individuals with a genetic foundation and other characteristics, such as universality and autonomy. Communication has to be done in a society, and leads to cooperation or coordination, so it is a social phenomenon, controlled by the collective intentionality of a linguistic community. I will emphasize the sociality of language and the publicity of meaning.

I take communication as the primary function of language for the following reasons:

(1)   The emergence of language is due to human beings' need to communicate and cooperate with each other.

Human beings are weaker than some other kinds of animal. In order to defend attack from other animals, and to obtain food, shelter, etc., they have to live together, work together, and so on. So, they need to talk with each other, to express their feelings, to pass on their ideas to their

companion. By means of linguistic communication they can coordinate individuals' behaviors and actions, and transfer the accumulated experience of life to the next generation. Marx and Engels are clearly conscious of the correlation of language, consciousness and communication in the sense of genesis: the need for communication and collaboration impels the emergence of language and consciousness; both language and labor facilitate the final realization of the transition from ape to man (cf. Marx 2000: 183; Engels 1987: 452–464). Malinowski points out, "In its primitive uses, language functions as a link in concerted human activity, as a piece of human behavior. It is a mode of action and not an instrument of reflection." (Malinowski 1989: 312)

(2)   There would be no language without the need of communication with other people.

The well-known fictional character, Robinson Crusoe, drifted to an isolated island. Since he was a member of human society before, he still had his linguistic ability and previous experience of human life. Now consider another guy, called "Robert". He was put onto an isolated island to live alone when he was a baby, never lived with people, and did not have memory of language. Does he think of the possibility of inventing a language just for his own use, e.g. for his thinking and memory? The answer is probably "No", since he has no necessary sapience, knowledge and experience. Though almost every person has inherited physiological basis of language, such as flexible vocal organs and sharp hearing organs, which could be developed into actual linguistic competence, but the real trigger of the competence will not happen without required social surroundings. For example, "feral children", were separated from human life as babies to live together with animals, when found in different countries, cannot speak, even cannot be taught to speak human language. In their childhood, the separation from human life has caused them to lose their linguistic competence (see Newton 2003). Even for an adult, who has grasped his native language, if he leave human society to live alone for a long time, his acquired linguistic ability will gradually lose. There is a true story: in the 1940s, the Japanese army caught a Chinese peasant, Liu Lianren [刘连仁], and sent him to Japan to work in the mine. By trying many times, Liu finally escaped into the Hokkaido mountain, living there alone for 13 years. When he was found, he had forgotten most Chinese words, and couldn't communicate with people in Chinese. However, later his linguistic ability was recovered by keeping practice.[1]

(3)   Language flourishes with expansion of communicative needs, and declines with shrivel of communicative needs.

(a)   A language, when used by increasing population, must satisfy more and more complex needs, and the life world and expe-

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[1] See "刘连仁" [Liu Lianren], http://baike.baidu.com/link?url=bK6y3bpIOQdnSDFwH8I_c QikI84V1qSWKsGW5TnMqDTKPU8T0uyQge62x0z

rience of its users are gradually precipitated to the language, making it extended and enriched in its phonology, lexicon, syntax, semantics, etc., and its means of expression tends to become more and more flexible, various, and vital. English, Chinese, Russian, and French are such kinds of language. F. Palmer points out, "The words of a language often reflect not so much the reality of the world, but the interests of the people who speak it" (Palmer 1981: 21). The degree of fine discrimination of things in a language is proportional to the importance of those things in the ordinary life of the users of that language. For example, for a long time China was a patriarchal clan society controlled by Confucianism. In order to distinguish intimacy, to achieve the respect for seniority and family solidarity, people adhere to their roles and levels in their families or societies with different rights, obligations, and corresponding standards of etiquette. Therefore, the vocabulary of signifying the kinship of a family in Chinese,[2] is much richer than that in other languages, e.g. the Indo European languages.

(b)   If a language gradually loses its dependent population, no longer acts as their communicative means, it will also lose its vitality, and even become dead. The most typical examples include Latin in the western world, and the Manchu language in China. In history, Latin was originally spoken by the *Italic Latins* in *Latium* and *Ancient Rome*, and became the official language of the Republic of Rome in the early fifth Century B.C.. With the expansion of the military and political power of Roman Empire, Latin spread to a broad area as the official language of the Empire. In the middle ages, Latin was an ordinary language for communication in different European countries, and also the academic language used in science, literature, philosophy, theology, etc. Until modern times, understanding Latin was still prerequisite of studying the humanities. But the situation changed with time, because Latin gradually loses ordinary communicative function, and becomes a "dead" language right now.[3] The similar situation happens to the Manchu language. Though Manchu was one of the official languages of Qing Dynasty in China, with the fall of the Qing Dynasty and the continued assimilation of Manchu population with the Han, it almost no longer bears daily communicative function, and is endangered on the verge of extinction.

The above discussion illustrates that communication is the most basic and important function of language; other functions of language, say,

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[2] See "Chinese family kinship system and appellation", http://wenku.baidu.com/view/6d3dcd661ed9ad51f01df209.html

[3] See "Latin", http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Latin

as the instrument of thought and the means of expressing feelings and conveying ideas, are secondary to communicative function. If a language loses its communicative function, it cannot serve as the instrument of thought. From the claim "communication is the primary function of language", we can infer that language is a social phenomenon in its intrinsic nature. This corollary not only implies the following assertions: language is mostly used in a social environment; we use it to communicate with other people; when learning language we have to rely on other people; we often borrow expressions and usages from one another; language also helps us perform a variety of social functions, and even plays essential roles in social and institutionalized reality, such as money and marriage. But the corollary also implies: the meanings of linguistic expressions are conferred by the community of language users; if separated from the intention, custom, tradition, and life world of language user, the connection between language and meaning will become a mystery being not-understandable by us.

In the writings of his different periods, Chomsky always contests the idea that the function of language is communication, called it "virtual dogma", and maintains that language is an instrument of thought. In his paper (2013), he clarifies these viewpoints once again, and develops quite systematic arguments for them. He claims:

> [I]nvestigation of the design of language gives good reason to take seriously a traditional conception of language as essentially an instrument of thought. … It follows that processing is a peripheral aspect of language, and that particular uses of language that depend on externalization, among them communication, are even more peripheral, contrary to virtual dogma that has no serious support. It would also follow that the extensive speculation about language evolution in recent years is on the wrong track, with its focus on communication. (Chomsky 2013: 654–655)

It seems to me that Chomsky gives three reasons to support his position.

First, Chomsky points out that the following typical formulation of the "virtual dogma" is obviously wrong.

> It is important that in a community of language users that words be used with the same meaning. If this condition is met it facilitates the chief end of language which is communication. If one fails to use words with the meaning that most people attach to them, one will fail to communicate effectively with others. Thus one would defeat the main purpose of language. (Chomsky 2013: 655)

Chomsky makes two criticisms of this formulation: (i) it is odd to think that language has an end or purpose, because "[l]anguages are not tools that humans design, but biological objects, like the visual or immune or digestive systems. Such organs are sometimes said to have functions, to be for some purpose. But that notion too is far from clear" (Chomsky 2013: 655). I reply: in some sense this criticism is reasonable, but not substantial, since "the purpose of language" can be replaced by "the primary function of language" to escape the criticism. (ii) "…even insofar

as language is used for communication, there is no need for meanings to be shared (or sounds, or structures). Communication is not a yes-or-no but rather a more-or-less affair. If similarities are not sufficient, communication fails to some degree, as in normal life" (Chomsky 2013: 655). I will reply this criticism below.

Secondly, Chomsky mentions biological or genetic evidence to support his position:

> There is, then, persuasive and quite far-reaching evidence that if language is optimally designed, it will provide structures appropriate for semantic interpretation but that yield difficulties for perception and language processing (hence communication).
>
> Again, where ease of processing and communicative efficiency conflict with computational efficiency in language design, in every known case the former are sacrificed. That lends further support to the view of language as an instrument of thought, in interesting respects perfectly designed, with externalization an ancillary process, hence a fortiori communication and other uses of externalized language. (Chomsky 2013: 660)

That is to say, according to Chomsky, language is optionally designed for thought, not for communication. Before his (2013), he has expressed and argued for this viewpoint many times, e.g. in his co-authored *Science* paper (2002). When replying to the *Science* paper, Pinker and Jackendoff (2005) argue that, supposing language is designed for thought or for communication, it is very difficult for us to explain why language has to map meaning onto sound, and also tough to explain why language can be learned only in social settings. They claim that innate language faculty makes humans able to learn language in a social environment, and that in order to express meaning, language permits redundancy and complexity in using phrase-structure, liner order, case, etc. They reject the idea that language is not an adaptation, namely that it is "perfect", non-redundant, unusable in any partial form, and badly designed for communication, and argue for their own hypothesis that language is a complex adaptation for communication which evolved piecemeal.[4] Some cognitive linguists also hold that linguistic system is a highly complicated cluster of conventional units in which there is a lot of redundancy and complexity when representing linguistic structures.

Thirdly, Chomsky argues that his own linguistic theories can support the conception of language as an instrument of thought quite well:

> The interesting cases are those in which there is a direct conflict between computational and communicative efficiency. In every known case, the former prevails; ease of communication is sacrificed. (Chomsky 2013: 659)

However, Chomsky acknowledges that his theories have some counter-examples and exceptions. But he emphasizes that since Galileo, "Willingness to be puzzled [by anti-examples, phenomena, and com-

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[4] There are four-turn exchanges between Pinker, etc. and Chomsky, etc., see http://itre.cis.upenn.edu/~myl/languagelog/archives/002422.html.

mon sense] is a valuable trait to cultivate, from childhood to advanced inquiry." (Chomsky 2013: 651)

The discussion above has shown that, Chomsky has not given strong enough support to his claim that language is in the first place an instrument of thought, has not yet given a destructive criticism to the popular idea that communication is the primary function of language, and some scholars have challenged Chomsky`s reasons and evidence in his arguments. At least, we can say that there are still debates and controversies about the correctness of Chomsky's theories.[5]

P2. *Linguistic meaning originates in the causal interaction of human bodies with the external world and in the social interaction of people with people.*

Only our body, not our mind or soul, can causally interact with the external world. Here, "body" refers not simply to our isolated brain and flesh, but to the body in interaction with physical and social environment. According to experientialist philosophy developed by Lakoff and others, our mind, cognition, language, and meaning are all embodied: we use our bodies as the base to understand the world around us, to establish significant correlation of language with the world, to construct our system of knowledge about the world. "Embodiment is the property of our engagement with the world that allows us to make it meaningful." Dourish also says, "Embodied Interaction is the creation, manipulation, and sharing of meaning through engaged interaction with artifacts" (Dourish 2001: 126).

As far as language is concerned, meaning comes from the interaction of our bodies with their environment. Meaning is based on human perception; human perception is based on the structure of our body; cognitive structure and perceptive mechanism are closely related. Insofar as our bodily structure, human beings use special methods to perceive external objects, to understand complicated relation among external objects, so concepts and meanings are some kinds of mental phenomena based on our embodied experience, so they will inevitably have the prints of human beings and their bodies. Consideration of language and meaning must be human-oriented, and even human-bodies-oriented; we should "attempt to characterize meaning in terms of *the nature and experience of the organisms doing the thinking*. Not just the nature and experience of individuals, but the nature and experience of the species and of communities" (Lakoff 1987: 266).

Basic words of a language are directly related to space and our bodily experience, and are the results of perceiving the world by our body, and of our conceptualizing the world. For example, the spatial words "before", "after", "left", and "right" take the place of a speaker or a personi-

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[5] For a new debate about the correctness of Chomsky's linguistics, see Bartlett 2012.

fied object as the point of reference, and reflect the speaker's experience and understanding of the relative spatial relation between himself and the environment around him. "Buy" and "sell" describe the same behavior; the difference is only that the speaker's standpoint is on this side of the transaction or the other. Many words are not neutral descriptive words, but a hybrid of speaker's position, attitude and emotion. For instance, Dummett talks of a pejorative term, "Boche", popular in France during the First World War, a rude name for Germans, assumed to be barbarous and more prone to cruelty than other Europeans (1973: 454). He states:

> More characteristic are the differences between 'dead' and 'deceased', 'woman' and 'lady', '*vous*' and '*tu*' in French, 'rabbit' and 'bunny', 'womb' and 'uterus', 'enemy' and 'foe', 'meal' and 'repast', 'politician' and 'statesman'. The choice between such twins serves to convey, and sometimes also to evoke, an attitude to the subject or, more particularly, to the hearers. …These complex social aspects of linguistic interchange are signaled by our choice of words; and, in so far as it is capable of serving to give such a signal, that capacity is part of the meaning of a word. (Dummett 1991: 122)

Lakoff thinks, in a language, complicated and abstract words are usually derived from basic words through the mechanism of metaphorical mapping. He asserts that "Abstract concepts are largely metaphorical" (Lakoff & Johnson 1999: 5).

In my view, it is reasonable to say that linguistic structures reflect experience of our body to some extent. Consider the following pair of sentences:

(1a) The roof slopes gently downwards.
(1b) The roof slopes gently upwards.

If we equate the meaning of a sentence with its truth condition, then the truth conditions of (1a) and (1b) are the same. But the difference in the meanings of (1a) and (1b) is obviously detectable, that is, the speakers' "perspectives" are different: in (1a) the speaker looks down from top, but in (1b) the speaker looks up from the lower part.

Consider the following set of sentences:

(2a) Someone stole the diamonds from the princess.
(2b) Someone robbed the princess of the diamonds.
(2c) The diamonds were stolen from the princess.
(2d) The princess was robbed of her diamonds.

So to speak, (2a)–(2d) describe the same phenomenon, and their truth conditions are almost identical. However, they expose different "focuses of discourse", that is to say, the speakers of (2a)–(2d) give different degrees of importance to "someone", "diamonds", and "the princess", and arrange the three items in different orders; they are eager to convey to his hearers "special" information about the items.

Concerning the social character of linguistic meaning, I will appeal to Burge's famous thought-experiment, i.e. his arthritis argument. He asks us to consider an actual situation in which one person, say Paul,

uses the word "arthritis" to express a number of thoughts about pain in his joints. One day, he declares "I have arthritis in my thigh". Since the community to which Paul belongs only applies the word to inflammation of the joints, what Paul says is false. Burge then asks us to conceive a counterfactual situation, which is entirely identical to the actual one except that the community to which Paul belongs applies "arthritis" to both inflammations of the joints and other rheumatoid ailments. In the latter situation, there is no change in Paul's physical history or non-intentionally characterized experiences, but the statement he makes there is true, not false. Burge concludes that meaning of the word "arthritis" on Paul's lips is different in each of these situations because of the different linguistic communities to which he belongs, and that the truth-value of what Paul says differs in the two situations since something different is meant in each context. By this argument Burge wants to show that the meanings of someone's words are identified not only by facts about the individual but also partly by facts about the uses of words in a bigger community. So, the meanings of the words in a person's language do not just depend on that person, but essentially on the linguistic practice of other people around him. Burge asserts:

> The dependence on others for access to examples grows as one's linguistic and cognitive resources widen. In some cases we depend heavily on the perceptual experience of others (as with 'tiger', 'penguin', and 'rain', for those of us in California). In other cases we depend on theoretical background knowledge ('gene', 'cancer') or on more ordinary expertise ('arthritis', 'carburetor'). In many such cases, we intentionally take over the applications that others have made. We rely on their experience to supplement our own. And we accept corrections of our explications from them because they have better access to the examples which partly determine the nature of our concepts. Although the function of explication varies significantly in these various cases, the main points of the argument for social dependence apply equally, indeed even more obviously, to terms that are less closely associated with direct perception. (Burge 2007: 287–288)

In my judgment, Burge's argument and conclusions are by and large right. Facts about the meaning of words supervene not only on facts about our use of the words, but also on facts about other people's usage. Inasmuch as social factors are constitutive of meaning and hence of language, both language and meaning are social phenomena. I myself endorse a much stronger claim: "the social meanings of the expressions of a language are indeed determined from their individual meanings, i.e., the meanings the expressions have for the individuals, together with the structure of linguistic power that exists in the community" (Gärdenfors 1999: 27–28). The distribution of power in a society certainly have effects to the meaning-conferring and the popular degree of linguistic expressions, since it is much easier to popularize the words, utterances, meanings, and even speech styles used by political leaders and other public figures than to popularize those used by ordinary people.

P3. *Linguistic meaning consists in the correlation of language to the world established by the collective intentions of a language community.*

It is necessary briefly to clarify the concepts of intentionality and collective intentionality. Intentionality could be roughly explained as "aboutness": some things are *about*, or are *directed to*, or *represent*, other things, e.g. the belief that dogs are animals is about dogs, as is the fear of dogs, the desire to have a pet dog, and seeing that many dogs are fighting each other. This phenomenon of "aboutness" is called "*intentionality*". Collective intentionality denotes the intentional state of a group, an organization, or a society, e.g. desiring, intending, believing, or acknowledging. Collective intentionality is used to explain the coordinative or cooperative behaviors of social groups, and also to explain social rules or norms, and social facts.

Searle claims that the intentional content of an intentional state determines satisfaction conditions for the state. An intentional state is linked to its object through its intentional content. The state can be said to "represent" the state of affairs satisfying these conditions. Each state also has a psychological mode determining the direction of fit: mind to world, or world to mind. For example, we get truth when the mind matches the world; in a successful desire the world must come to match the mind. Then, Searle distinguishes four relations between intentional states and reality: language to object, intentional state to object, intentional state to psychological infrastructure, and intentional state to neurological infrastructure. Here, I will focus on his view of the relation of language to objects.

Searle thinks that language depends on human mind; it relates to reality because speakers relate it to reality in their speech acts. Speakers *use* names to refer the individuals they intends to refer, *use* sentences to represent the state of affair they wish to represent, or *use* sentences to express the meaning they want to express. So, our understanding of linguistic meaning depends on our analysis of mental intentional states, and the relation of language to reality can be reduced to a special case of the relation of mind to the world. It is from the perspective of intentionality that Searle explores the relation of language to reality: by means of the concepts such as "Background", "Network" and "Intentional contents", he develops his theory of *intentional* reference of proper names: "objects are not given to us prior to our system of representation"; our representations must intervene between name and referent (Searle 1983: 231).

Searle strongly criticizes so-called semantic "externalism", i.e. the view that meaning is just a matter of causal relations between the utterances of words and objects in the world. For instance, the word "water" means what it does to me not because I have some mental content associated with the word, but rather because there is a causal chain connecting

me to various actual examples of water in the world. Externalism has led to an extensive research project of trying to describe the nature of the causal relations that give rise to meaning. He comments that:

> The problem with this research project is that nobody has ever been able to explain, with any plausibility whatever, the nature of these causal chains. The idea that meanings are something external to the mind is widely accepted, but no one has ever been able to give a coherent account of meaning in these terms… What we require in order to resolve the dispute between internalists and externalists is a more sophisticated notion of how the mental contents in speakers' heads serve to relate language in particular, and human agents in general, to the real world of objects and states of affairs. (Searle 2008: 18)

I am with Searle's side on this point. Language is not an automatic system correlating itself to the external world. More specifically, names do not designate external objects by themselves, and sentences do not describe external states of affairs or facts by themselves. It is human beings, who use a language, that build the bridge connecting a language and the world, and that create the referring (or predicating) relation of names (or sentences) to the corresponding objects (or states of affairs). The referential relation of a name to an object depends on our intention in using the name, our understanding of the name, and what state the object has in the world; the truth-value of a sentence depends on at least two elements: our ways of speaking, and the states that things have in the world. It is not the case that semantics takes no account of speakers; on the contrary, it must at least consider a language community. Any talk about meaning and reference of an expression is relative to the community. At this point, objectivist semantics mentioned above is wrong, especially when applied to natural languages. I think, it is an illusion to regard language as an autonomous and self-sufficient system, and it goes astray to investigate the relation of language to the world without considering a linguistic community.[6]

By following C. S. Peirce, Charles Morris divided semiotics into three branches in his (1971): syntax, semantics, and pragmatics. Here, syntax is concerned with the structural relations among symbols, semantics the relations between symbols and the objects to which they

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[6] I assume that "SHARING" is the most important characteristic of a language community. The members of the community have a roughly common understanding of their language, so they can communicate with each other smoothly and successfully. A language community could be large or small. For instance, some netizens use special symbols, figures, and pictures to communicate successfully, then they form a linguistic community. Of course, a nation, that uses its native language, such as English, Chinese, Japanese, Tibetan, is typically a language community. Moreover, different nations in the world, although using different languages, still can communicate and even understand each other; this fact shows that there are common elements in their languages, which make the translation between languages possible. So, we even can regard different nations in the world as a generalized language community, e.g. a bilingual or multi-lingual one. Obviously, the concept "a language community" is quite fuzzy and vague, and its borderline is not clear, but "SHARING" can be taken as its essential characteristic.

refer, and pragmatics the triadic relation among the symbols, the users of symbols, and the objects to which symbols refer. Since a language is a system of special symbols, studies of language correspondingly have three dimensions: syntax, semantics, and pragmatics. Such a saying seems to be accepted widely, but I think it is debatable. The crucial point is how we consider the relation between semantic and pragmatics. As I said above, semantics must at least consider a language community. Except considering a language community, pragmatics pays much more attention to individual users of language, who speaks with particular intention in a particular context so that his utterance will have a special significance, we call it "conversational implicature" or "pragmatic meaning". So, in my understanding, both semantics and pragmatics must investigate the relation among language, humans and the world, the difference is only that semantic mainly considers a language community, but pragmatics must considers individual users of language. Perhaps conscious of this fact, Brandom makes an important assertion: "semantics is answerable to pragmatics" (1994: 83).

I should point out that, most of time, collective intentionality in the use of language does not appear in the form of contract, protocol, and agreement, but embodies natural convergence or unconscious choice of language uses made by a linguistic community. I think the following cases show different levels of how collective intentionality effects language and meaning.

(a)   Common words, depending on natural convergence or unconscious choice of their uses by the majority of ordinary people. In a contemporary society, ordinary people connect with each other by means of Internet: they have freedom to express themselves in cyberspace, to invent new words and new styles of expression, to endue old words with new meanings, and so on. Some words and phrases they invent gradually disappear in public linguistic practice; other words and expressions are warmly welcomed and widely used by people, gradually become some kinds of public choice, even enter into dictionaries, encyclopedias, and handbooks. It is reported that *Xiandai Hanyu Cidian* (《现代汉语词典》, *Modern Chinese Dictionary*, 6th edition, 2012) adds more than 600 Chinese characters, more than 3000 new words and phrases, including "雷人" (shocked, awesome), "给力" (helpful, giving a push to), and other network hot words, such as "北漂" (*beipiao*, north drift, referring to young people who live and work in Beijing without Beijing registered residence, and change their rented rooms from time to time and from place to place), "草根" (*caogen*, grass roots, referring to ordinary people without political power or sufficient money), "达人" (*daren*, master, referring to young people with special talents or styles in fashion), "愤青" (*fenqing*, literally meaning angry young men, a Chinese slang term for young nationalists and young cynics), "名嘴" (*mingzui*,

popular TV presenters; the word literally translates as "famous mouths", a catch word for those well-acclaimed television anchorpersons), "蚁族"(*yizu*, antizen or ant tribe, referring to young persons who have graduated from universities or colleges, but are drifting in Beijing with unstable jobs and low income, crowded at night in small rooms locating at the boundaries of urban and rural areas). The dictionary also adds new abbreviations or foreign words, such as ECFA (cross-strait economic cooperation framework agreement), PM2.5 (inhalable particles with diameter less than 2.5 micron floating in the air), and supplements new meanings to old expressions, for instance, a new meaning to the old word "宅": "a new verb, stay at home for a long time, do not like to go out of room", so "宅" has its new derivative words, such as "宅男宅女" (*zhainan zhainv*, indoorsmen and indoorswomen, referring to young people much addicted to the Internet, playing electronic games and other indoor activities). The dictionary deletes some old words that are no longer used. Clearly, it is the collective intentionality embodied in contemporary Chinese practice which results in the change and revision of *Modern Chinese Dictionary*.

(b)   Scientific vocabulary, underwriting which is the community of scientists with special status. Ordinary people are busy with creating material wealth, so the task of investigating complicated and intensive learning has to be done by a small number of elites, who challenge common sense, explore unknown fields, conceive new possibilities, and create novel and strange vocabulary and expression-style being too profound to be understood by ordinary people. Liberal scholars and natural scientists separately form their own circles, and have their own academic rules and occupational morals, and also have the rules, methods, and procedures about acceptance of research results. Special terms and expressions of natural science, arts and humanities, when winning some kind of respect in their own circles, begin to spread to civil society. On these issues, ordinary people transfer their intellectual sovereignty to liberal scholars and natural scientists, accept their research results and interpretations. Just as Putnam's "hypothesis of universality of the division of linguistic labor" asserts:

> Every linguistic community exemplifies the sort of division of linguistic labor just described, that is, possesses at least some terms whose associated 'criteria' are known only to a subset of the speakers who acquire the terms, and whose use by the other speakers depends upon a structured cooperation between them and the speakers in the relevant subsets. (Putnam 1975: 146)

So, in scientific vocabulary and expressions, at least we will find the collective intentionality of scientist's community.

(c)   Legal language, whose authority comes from people's granting authorization to legislature. In modern democratic society, members of legislature are elected; although the ways of election vary, even have significant differences, but it is undeniable that the members have got sort of public support. In the legislative process, relevant personnel have to do extensive poll and careful research, to repeat discussion and negotiation, finally to pass statutory procedures for approval by parliament. We can say that the laws passed embody public opinion to a large extent, and that there is collective intentionality in the laws and regulations. The meaning and reference of legal language is stipulated by legislature: all matters, such as what a word or a provision of a law exactly means, which legal cases a law applies, depend on the regulation and interpretation by legal institutions, and also depend on judicial officials' and enforcement personnel's understanding. Evidentially, legal language has no direct relation to its society; it is legal people, who regulate and implement laws, which make legal language connect with its society.

(d)   Government documents, whose authority comes from legal authorization. Governmental agencies are established on the base of the Constitution and other laws; their organizational forms, responsibilities, operational procedures, and rules, are set up by legal provisions. Their authority has two sources: one is the authorization from state law system; another is the fact that they bear social management functions, such as money issue, marriage registration, crime punishment, traffic control, economic development, national defense, etc., all of which have to be done in any era, nation, and society. So, when implementing the functions of social management, governmental agencies obtain legal authorization directly, and get people's mandate indirectly; thus, there is collective intentionality in governmental documents. It is collective intentionality which makes the governmental documents play special roles.

P4. *Linguistic meaning is based on the conventions produced by a language community in their long process of communication*

I think the collective intentions of a language community normally appear in the form of conventions of language use. So, we can say that language and meaning are *conventional*: a word may be used as the name of one object or another; a sentence may express one state of affairs or another. The fact that a language has become what it looks like now has no *a priori* or necessary logic, but is the result of unconscious choices and conventions by a linguistic community.

In his publications (1969, 1975), Lewis develops his general account of convention and particular argument for the conventionality of language. He defines *languages* as abstracts objects, i.e. sets of ordered pairs of sentences and meanings: a language is a function from sentences to sentence meanings. A sentence's meaning is a function from possible worlds to truth-values, i.e. a set of possible worlds in which it is true. It is conventions which make an abstract language become an actual language used by a linguistic community. Lewis asserts that a language L is a language used by a population P if and only if there prevails in P a convention of truthfulness and trust in L sustained by interest in communication. He interprets: (i) Speaker x is truthful in language L if and only if x utters a sentence of L only if x believes that sentence to be true; (ii) Speaker x is trusting in language L if and only if x imputes truthfulness in L to others and thus tends to respond to another's utterances of L by coming to believe that the uttered sentences are true in L; (iii) What sustains such a convention is our interest in communicating: we intend to produce certain responses in part by getting others to recognize our intentions, and so on.

Based on his general account of convention, Lewis gives a two-step argument for his explanation of the conventionality of a language L. I have to set his argument aside in this paper.

In what follows, I myself will argue for the conventionality of language and meaning directly.

(1)   Linguistic communication will not happen without the convention of truthfulness and trust; even if it did, it will not proceed smoothly and endure for a long time.

In order to make linguistic communication successful, before talk a speaker has to predict what response he will get from his hearer to his words; based on his understanding of the speaker's words, the hearer replies to the speaker, and predicts what response he will get from him. If both sides receive what they predicted before, they have well understood each other to some extent. In this way, they may continue their dialogue. Otherwise, they have to readjust their speech acts. The basic condition of making dialogue smooth and successful is that there are regularities in the speech acts of the participants. One regularity is that a speaker says what he himself thinks is true, and the hearer regards what the speaker says as true, so both sides will understand their words literally, and don't need to make great effort to guess the real meanings of their respective words. Another kind of regularities is that a speaker is not honest, and is accustomed to lie all the time; or that the hearer is always suspicious of what the speaker says. Even in such a situation, the dialogue can still proceed smoothly. If the speaker knows that his hearer tends to understand his words from the reverse side, in order to convey the truth to the hearer he can say false things systematically; if the hearer knows that the speaker tends to lie systematically, he can understand his words from the opposite side, and

then he will grasp the truth. In the two kinds of situation above, the convention of truthfulness and trust still function in communication, only in *special* ways. What makes a dialogue really impossible is that there is no regularity in the talking-modes of dialogue participants. That is to say, not following any order and rule, the speaker arbitrarily jumps from the true to the false and vice versa, so the hearer feels very difficult to distinguish what the speaker said as true or as false; when understanding the speaker's utterance, the hearer just decides on a sudden whim, he freely takes the speaker's saying as true or as false. In so doing, all participants in a dialogue will not know what and how they say in the next turn; it is very difficult for them to achieve mutual understanding. Since the dialogue is too expensive, all participants have no interest to continue. Then, the dialogue stops.

The need inherent in the convention of truthfulness and trust put forward by Lewis is that the participants of a dialogue must cooperate with each other. Grice expresses such kind of needs in "the Cooperative Principle": "Make your contribution such as it is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged" (Lewis 1989: 26). Then, he distinguishes four categories: Quantity, Quality, Relation, and Manner, under each of which fall certain more specific maxims and submaxims.

Some scholars challenge the convention of truthfulness and trust in this way: in actual communication, there are situations contrary to the convention, e.g. speakers intends to lie or to cheat, or they speak by means of irony, exaggeration, humor, ridicule, or in the forms of telling story, playing game, talking rubbish things, or malapropisms. In such a situation, the hearer still can understand what the speaker does mean, although he does not trust him. I think, all these phenomena are not really opposite to the convention of truthfulness and trust. Only if a speaker says the true most of time, will we care about why he occasionally says something false, and try to figure out what he really means by his false words. Only if the hearer has some kind of regularity in his understanding our speeches, e.g. trusting or not-trusting, will we accept him as our companion of dialogue; and once he speaks out queer and even wild words, makes not-understandable responses, we will follow Grice's principle of cooperation to judge that he is still cooperating with us, and then try our best to figure out what he really means by guessing that he has special or hidden reasons to say so. Anomaly and heterodoxy are just apparent violation of rules or conventions, we still have to appeal to rules or conventions to interpret them.

(2)   The literal or dictionary meanings of linguistic expressions come from natural convergence of linguistic uses among language users, and from unconscious choice made by a language community.

As I argued above, semantics not only concerns the relation between language and the world, but pays more attention to the relation among

language, human beings (a linguistic community), and the world. At semantic level, when talking about meaning and reference of a linguistic expression, we usually talk about its meaning and reference acknowledged by our community, which constitute the literal or dictionary meaning of that expression. In stressing the conventionality of language and meaning, I emphasize that the literal or dictionary meanings of all linguistic expressions are *conventional*. Except their conventional meanings, linguistic expressions have no other kind of semantic meaning. The special significance of a particular expression used by a particular speaker with a particular intention in a particular context, seems to be deviation or divergence of its literal meaning. If such kinds of deviation or divergence become very popular among language users, they might be accepted as a part of their dictionary meanings. Take for example the Chinese word "囧" popularized in Chinese net-culture in recent years. "囧" is a derivative word from ancient Chinese character "冏". "冏" is symbolic character, literally meaning that the window of a room is transparent and bright, symbolizing "light" and "bright", commonly used in ancient Chinese, but rarely and sparsely today. In recent years, some Chinese netizens have dug "囧" up, used it to symbolize the mood of sadness, helplessness, distress, or extremely awkwardness, for if we regard "囧" as a human face, then "八" is the two drooping eyebrows of the guy showing his sadness and depression, "口" is his mouth agape and with tongue-tied. When the guy says "我很囧" (I am embarrassed), you could imagine his face completely like "囧". Moreover, the pronunciation of "囧" is very close to that of another Chinese phrase "窘迫" (distress, embarrassment). So, "囧" is warmly welcomed by Chinese netizens: it has become a hot word in the Chinese net-culture, and is widely used by mass media, even appeared in the titles of some popular Chinese movies, e.g. 《人在囧途》 (*Lost on Journey*) and 《泰囧》 (*Lost in Thailand*). Right now, "囧" seems to be in the process of becoming a common Chinese character.

I think many kinds of dictionaries, encyclopedias, and handbooks reflect consensus about names, words, phrases, and other sides of a language shared by a linguistic community, obviously embody the conventionality of language and meaning. The editing process of dictionaries or encyclopedias is roughly like this: collecting data, i.e. building the database about used words; choosing and deciding entries by experts; writing and revising interpretation of the entries by experts; editing those manuscripts by editors, and finally publishing by presses. As Quine says:

> The lexicographer is an empirical scientist, whose business is the recording of antecedent facts; and if he glosses 'bachelor' as 'unmarried man' it is because of his belief that there is a relation of synonymy between these forms, implicit in general or preferred usage prior to his own work. The notion of synonymy presupposed here has still to be clarified, presumably in terms relating to linguistic behavior. *Certainly the 'definition' which is the lexicog-*

rapher's report of an observed synonymy cannot be taken as the ground of the synonymy. (Quine 1961: 24; italic added)

(3)   Public language is prior to different idiolects.

As I argued above, not a particular language user, but a linguistic community, is the subject to confer meaning on language. Only by means of the acceptance of a community, can the meaning-conferring activity of a particular person be transformed into public meaning-conferring activity; otherwise, it will fail. Here, someone may ask a further question: whether the meaning-conferring activity of a particular person is prior to that of a language community or vice versa?

In my view, when challenging the necessity of sociality and conventionality of language for linguistic communication and understanding in the context of radical interpretation, Davidson supposes the priority of idiolects to public language. In terms of the fact that we can understand some person's abnormal words, he asserts that "convention is not a condition of language. …The truth rather is that language is a condition of having a convention" (Davidson 1984: 280). He takes a famous example: in Sheridan's play, Mrs. Malaprop uttered "There's a nice derangement of epitaphs" to mean "There's a nice arrangement of epithets". We can understand what Mrs. Malaprop means, but do not necessarily share her conventions and uses of her words.

I think, such kind of examples is not enough to challenge the necessity of public convention and shared meaning for communication and understanding, and also not enough to shake the priority of public language to idiolects. If a single speaker does not start from public convention, rather he confers completely new meanings on every word, and arranges the words in a totally novel syntactical way, he will speak a "foreign" language never heard before, and nobody will understand what he says. For example, suppose Mrs. Maraprop speaks in this way: "Epitaphs a nice there derangement of is", any person whose native language is English cannot understand what she means by her words. The actual situation is that by basically following public syntactical rules and semantic conventions of language, individual speakers may occasionally make small deviations and changes from public uses. In this sense, public language is prior to idiolects. But at the same time we have to acknowledge that there is a mutual interaction: on the one hand, the meaning-conferring activity of each individual speaker; on the other hand, the selection, refinement, and acceptance of a language community. Without the former, public language and shared meaning will lose their source, disintegrating into arbitrary regulation of a small number of people; without the latter, linguistic communication will lose a public stage so that people are very difficult to achieve mutual understanding.

Here, it is necessary to reply two objections to public language and shared meaning.

One comes from Chomsky (2013). He argues that linguistic communication is risky and success is never guaranteed, and that since an unsuccessful communication is still using a language, it raises a challenge to the view that communication is the primary function of language.

I reply as follows: (i) although there are many cases of unsuccessful communication, e.g. complete misunderstanding or being quite at a loss, most linguistic communications function quite well. That's why our social life can proceed smoothly and social affairs can be done normally. (ii) What makes communication unsuccessful is exactly the lack of common convention about language and meaning, so that the participants of communication have no bridge to connect them together and to understand each other. (iii) When an unsuccessful communication happened, if absolutely necessary, we will try our best to re-define the crucial words or concepts in our discourse, to choose the sentences more easily understandable, to clarify background knowledge, to make the logic of our discourse clearer, etc. All these efforts aim at building a common stage so that the both sides of communication become close in their uses of language, and share the rules, conventions, and meanings of linguistic expressions, and finally achieve successful communication and understanding.

Another objection is that linguistic conventionalism appears to be unable to account for the creativity of language: that is, it cannot explain why people have the ability of understanding potentially infinity-many long and novel sentences on the base of quite limited linguistic sources. I think this charge is not fair to conventionalism. It is not the patent of the dyadic approach of language to account for the unlimited generative proficiency of language; even behaviorists like Quine can do this job. Quine distinguishes two stages of language learning: ostension and analogical synthesis, sometimes calls the latter "extrapolation". By means of ostension, i.e. by pointing to an object at its presence, children learn many nouns, such as "mama", "eye", "face", "finger", "foot", and learn many simple sentences, such as "My finger hurts". Then, by means of analogy or extrapolation, naturally they can say "My foot hurts" (cf. Quine 1960: 108–110). This is not a very difficult leap for children.

Those like myself who maintain the triadic approach of language, would like to argue further: in public linguistic practice, we learn many words, and also many linguistic structures, especially syntactical structures. It is these structures which tell us how to generate more complicated and novel structures, especially long and novel sentences never heard before, from those linguistic materials already learnt. If the linguistic materials we have learnt are based on public conventions, the more complicated long-and-novel combinations generated from the primitives will get derivative conventionality.

P5. *Semantic knowledge is empirical and encyclopedic knowledge condensed, and the uses of language accepted by a linguistic community.*

So far, it can be naturally concluded that semantic knowledge is empirical knowledge distilled and condensed, and the uses of linguistic expressions approved by our language community; and that there is no clear boundary between semantic knowledge and empirical ones.

The above conclusions are close to those from cognitive linguists. Taken for example, Langacker states a basic tenet of cognitive grammar:

> Lexical meanings cannot be sharply distinguished from general knowledge of the entities referred to. Our knowledge of a given type of entity is often vast and multifaceted, involving many realms of experience and conceptions with varying degree of salience, specificity and complexity. …A lexical item is not thought of as incorporating a fixed, limited, uniquely linguistic semantic representation, but rather as providing access to indefinitely many conceptions and conceptual systems, which it evokes in a flexible, open-ended, context-dependent manner. (Langacker 1999: 4)

He points out that our knowledge of trees, for instance, subsumes physical properties (e.g. shape, height, color), biological characteristics (e.g. growth rate, root system, reproduction, photosynthesis, dropping of leaves), utility (wood, shade, food source), and numerous other specifications (forests, habitant for animals, how to cut one down). In principle, each of these specifications figures to some extent in the meaning of *tree*.

In my view, Langacker's assertions above get strong support from many linguistic materials. I cite the interpretation of Chinese word "牛" (niú, ox) by an authoritative Chinese dictionary:

1. *noun.* mammals, ruminant; having a large body, and the ends of four limbs with hoof, a head with a pair of horns, a tail with long hair; having a strong energy, used for labor and service; raised for milk or for both milk and meat; its skin, hair, bones are all useful. In China, 牛 (ox) usually includes cattle, buffalo, yak, etc.
2. *adj.* obstinate or pride: 牛脾气 (cattle temperament) |牛气 (arrogant).
3. [slang] *adj.* having powerful skills and special strength : 牛人 (a guy who is really something)
4. *noun.* One of the lunar Mansions.
5. *noun.* One of Family name in China: 牛 (Niú).[7]

This entry lists five uses of the Chinese word "牛" in modern Chinese. Interpretation 1 explains 牛 as animal: "mammals, ruminant" describes ox's genus and species; "having a large body, and the ends of four limbs

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[7] *Xiandai Hanyu Cidian* (《现代汉语词典》: Modern Chinese Dictionary), 6th edition, Beijing: The Commercial Press, 2012, p. 953.

with hoof, a head with a pair of horns, a tail with long hair" describes its shape and appearance; "having a strong energy" describes one characteristic of 牛 (ox), "used for labor and service; raised for milk or for both milk and meat" describes the uses to which we put oxen; "In China, 牛 (ox) usually includes cattle, buffalo, yak, etc." describes the distribution and kind of 牛 in China. All of these are empirical knowledge about ox, and become semantic knowledge about the Chinese word "牛" (ox) when appeared in an authoritative dictionary. This kind of phenomena is quite general, so we can say that semantic knowledge comes from empirical knowledge, and that the former is the induction and summarization of humans' linguistic practice.

By carefully examining the evolutional history of the concepts from "protein" to "DNA" and "RNA", Haack (2009) wants to show that empirical knowledge gradually enters into our dictionary or encyclopedia and becomes semantic knowledge so that there is no clear boundary between empirical knowledge and semantic ones.

> This history… suggests something of the processes by which scientists adjust and readjust their terminology and shift and adapt the meanings of existing words to work out a vocabulary that better represents real kinds of stuff. The word "protein" has lost any suggestion of prime importance; it has ceased to be analytic that nucleic acids are found exclusively in the nuclei of cells; the old word "nuclein" has eventually been replaced, in several steps, by "DNA"; and "DNA" itself has acquired new, complex connotations, and produced new, elaborate terminological offspring; and so on. The dictionary definition of "DNA" confirms that, *by a kind of sedimentation of knowledge into its meaning, this term has indeed "acquired information,' as Peirce puts it, 'in use and experience;"*…(Haack 2009: 15–16; italic added)

It might be objected that the dictionary definition conflates the meaning of "DNA" with what is known about DNA; and that to take it at face value as simply giving the meaning of the term is to misrepresent important biological discoveries—that DNA is the genetic material, that it has this double-helical structure, etc.—as merely analytic truths. Haack replies:

> Of course I don't deny that these were major biological discoveries; nor that, at the time they were made, it was not part of the meaning of "DNA" that it is the genetic material, that it is a double helix, etc. Nevertheless, the objection misfires. For my thesis is in part that *meaning grows as our knowledge grows*; and this implies both that the supposed distinction between "the meaning of 'X'" and "our presumed knowledge of X" is an artificial one, and that "analytic" is best understood as elliptical for "analytic given the meaning of the words *at time t*." (Haack 2009: 16; italic added)

I agree with Haack's argument and conclusion. Actually, external Objects have complicated relations with each other, and have multi-aspects and different qualities. So, we have to characterize the meanings of the words by describing these objects. Lakoff presents "idealized cognitive model" (ICM), a complicated and compound gestalt based on many cognitive models (CM). He points out that besides those CMs

characterizing *mother* as a human female, we have to consider at least five CMs for any adequate understanding of the word (cf. Lakoff 1987: 74–76):

(a)   Birth CM: a female who gives birth to the child;
(b)   Genetic CM: a female who contributes genetic material to a child;
(c)   Nurturance CM: a female adult who nurtures and raises a child;
(d)   Genealogical CM: the closest female ancestor;
(e)   Marital CM: the wife of the father.

Later, Taylor uses "cognitive domain" (CD) to replace "cognitive model", and thinks that to understand *mother* fully, we have to make corresponding analysis of *father*. In terms of the typical convention of traditional society, he analyzes *father* into five CDs (cf. Taylor 1995: 86–87):

(a′)   Genetic CD: a male who contributes genetic material to a child;
(b′)   Responsibility CD: financially responsible for the well-being of the mother and the child;
(c′)   Authority CD: a figure of authority, responsible for the discipline of the child;
(d′)   Genealogical CD: the closest male ancestor;
(e′)   Marital CD: The father is the husband of the mother.

The five CMs of *mother* or the five CDs of *father* constitute the cluster of ICMs separately for *mother* and for *father*, which is more fundamental than any single CM or CD. If deleting or revising some model of ICM of *mother*, we will get the non-proto-members of mother, such as:

(a″)   *Stepmother*: fits the Nurturance and Marital models but none of the others;
(b″)   *Foster mother*: fits the Nurturance model but none of the others;
(c″)   *Birth mother*: fits the Birth model but none, or not all, of the others;
(d″)   *Genetic mother*: fits the Genetic model but not all of the others;
(e″)   *Unwed mother*: fits (probably) all but the Marital model [etc.]

Such kind of ICMs has quite strong interpretative force. Obviously, all of them come from the empirical research of the objects to which relevant terms refer.

We can conclude that semantic knowledge is originated from empirical or encyclopedic knowledge, and that there is no obvious distinction between them. If our conclusion holds, the traditionally entrenched distinction of analytic and synthetic propositions will completely lose its foundation, and will become totally relative: relative to some dictionary or encyclopedia, or relative to our linguistic knowledge in some periods.

P6. *Language and meaning rapidly or slowly change as the communicative practice of a language community does.*

If we set dead languages aside, any language, including its phonemes, lexicon, syntax and semantics, changes. Because the world changes, our cognition of the world also changes. Our linguistic community adjusts language and its meaning to the needs of our cognition and practice. As a result, language and its meaning are always in the process of change and growth. More specifically, some old expressions die or are abandoned, and even a whole language may become "dead"; some new expressions spring up, and the scope of old expressions may also be extended or narrowed. Such changes may not be perceived in a short period, but in the long run they are evident and obvious. For instance, we could tell the changes by contrasting old English to modern English, or ancient Chinese to modern Chinese.

I explain the reasons why language and meaning change as follows.

(1)   The external world which language characterizes is in the process of change.

As mentioned above, in order to reflect changes of contemporary social life, *Modern Chinese Dictionary* (the 6th edition) introduces many new words and new meanings, and also deletes some old words and old meanings. In what follows, I take the English word "Oxford" for another example, which evolves from a proper name to a family of names. The evolution of "oxford" indirectly reflects the change and development of the actual world.

Oxford was originally a ford for oxen to cross River Thames. It is situated in the center of England, becoming a focus of the routes that followed the Thames east to London and the Cherwell Valley to the Midlands and North. Around this place people gradually settled down and established the original town, called "Oxnaforda" by *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles* in 912. Teaching existed at Oxford in some form as early as 1096, and developed rapidly from 1167, when Henry II banned English students from attending the University of Paris. Those English students went back to Oxford and continued their study. By the end of the 12th century a university was well established, modeled on the University of Paris, initially with faculties of theology, law, medicine, and liberal arts. In 1221, Robert Grosseteste (c.1168–1253) became the first chancellor of the University. As the University became more and more famous in Europe, the population at Oxford also became larger and larger. There were conflicts between townsmen and students. In 1209 the townsmen expelled the students, one of whom had accidentally slain a townswoman. Some teachers and students went to Cambridge, where they helped to establish a university, now known as University of Cambridge. As University of Oxford became one of the most

celebrated universities in the world, many kinds of things have come to be called "Oxford-…", for example, "Oxford bag", "Oxford blue", "Oxford clay", "Oxford corner", "Oxford dash", "Oxford down", "*Oxford English Dictionary*", "Oxford frame", "Oxford gray", "Oxford grouper", "Oxford hollow", "Oxfordism", "Oxford movement", "Oxford shoe", "Oxford unit", "Oxford University Press", "Oxford weed", and *et al.*[8] Nowadays, the original town has become the City of Oxford, and the county in which the city is located is called "Oxfordshire".[9]

So far, "Oxford" has become a family of names, with the city or the university at its center. However, there is some kind of historical continuity among these oxford-words, that is, they have a common origin and core meaning. By knowing the use history of "oxford", we know the meanings of the word. Apart from what the history of Oxford conveys, what we can expect for the semantic meanings of the word "oxford"?

(2)   Our cognition of the world, which language reflects indirectly, is in the process of change.

Here, I take the evolution of the concept "atom" as an example. In ancient Greece, to explain what constitute material bodies, Democritus invented the concept "atom", which means the smallest and indivisible unit of matter. At that time, the concept "atom", as the result of speculation, is a pre-scientific concept. From 17th century to early 19th century, due to the contributions of Robert Boyle, Antoine Lavoisier, John Dalton and many others, atoms were regarded as the basic elements of matter, the smallest unit of chemical change, and became a scientific concept, though its meaning "indivisible" was preserved. Later on, scientists found that an atom is not indivisible, but has a complex internal structure: it consists of the electrons, protons, neutrons; that protons and neutrons are further composed of quarks; and that protons and neutrons constitute the nucleus, while the electrons rotate around the nucleus. To explain the interaction of the elements within an atom, scientists have proposed a variety of models, such as Dalton's atomic model, Thomson's plum pudding model, Rutherford's planetary model, Boyle's atomic model, modern model of quantum mechanics, and so on.[10] Clearly, there is a continuous history of the word "atom" from ancient Greek to modern sciences. The meaning of "atom" changes with advance of science. Its current meaning is the summarization and concentration of humans' previous cognitive achievements. In order to completely understand the meaning of "atom", it is absolutely necessary to trace back the whole history of its use.

(3)   In a language, the change of some elements will lead to many linked changes.

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[8] About these entries, see *Oxford English Dictionary*, Second edition on CD-Room (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 2009.

[9] See "Oxford", http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oxford.

[10] See "Atom", http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Atom.

A language is a whole; there are connections not only among its modules, such as phonemes, lexicon, syntax and semantics, but also inside each module. Small changes in some places can lead to a series of change. For instance, in the Indo European language family, there are common roots for many different words; if there appear changes in the forms and meanings of root-words, the changes might produce corresponding changes in their derivative words. Take "justify" as an example. It is a verb, having many derivative words, say, "justified" as its past particle, "justifying" as its present particle, "justified", "justifiable", and "justificative" as adjectives, "justification" and "justifier" as nouns, etc. The change of each word might lead to the changes of other relevant words, plus changes of other words combined with them. In arguing for indeterminacy of translation, Quine makes a famous thought experiment: linguists visit a native tribe about whose language they know nothing. When separately learning and translating the tribe language, those linguists may choose different and even conflicting translations in the basis of the same behavioral evidence, e.g. translating a native word "gavagai" into "rabbit", "undetached part of a rabbit", "temporary section of rabbit", and even "rabbithood", *as far as they make sufficient compensational adjustment in translation of other parts of the tribe language*. Quine also mentions, when translating French construction "ne…rein" into English, we may choose to translate "rein" as "anything" or "nothing", only if we make a necessary compensational adjustment in the translation of "ne": in the former case, "ne" will be translated as a redundant construction; in the latter case, it will be translated into "not" (cf. Quine 1969: 33–34).

In semantics, many linguists try to account for the inter-connection of lexical meanings and the additional effects of the meaning-change of words. By introducing his theory of lexical or semantic fields in the 1930s, Jost Trier tried to emphasize: (i) Some words of a language are related with each other in their meanings, and constitute a complete system of lexicon-semantic field, i.e. a set of words (or lexemes) grouped by meaning referring to a specific subject. A semantic field has its hierarchy: it subsumes sub-fields, and sub-sub-fields…. For example, the semantic field "food" is consisted of semantic sub-fields such as "fruit", "meat", "vegetable", "grain", etc.; the semantic sub-field "grain" subsumes semantic sub-sub-fields such as "rice", "wheat", "corn", etc. (ii) Semantic fields are not stable, but always in the process of change: old words disappear, new words come forth, finally resulting in the re-adjustment of meaning relation of vocabulary. Most of time, if the meaning of one word becomes narrower, that of some other words will become wider. (iii) Only by considering the meaning relation of one word to others of the same semantic field, can we make clear the exact meaning of that word. For instance, the word "week" constitutes a semantic field, whose members include *Monday*, *Tuesday*, *Wednesday*, *Thursday*, *Friday*, *Saturday*, and *Sunday*. If we ignore other elements of the semantic field, we cannot really understand the exact meaning

of a single word of that field. (iv) We should not focus on the semantic change of a single word one by one, rather should treat the lexicon of a language as a complete system, and combine the static transverse association of words with others in a dictionary and dynamic longitudinal correlation of words in our language practice. The main methodological defect of traditional diachronic semantics consists in separately tracing historical evolution of single word's meaning (see Trier 1931, 1934).

(P1)–(P6) argued above constitute my own philosophy of language, i.e. Social Constructivism of Language and Meaning (SCLM). If it is correct, how is SCLM applied to linguistics and philosophy of language? What can it achieve? What changes does it bring about in philosophy of language and linguistics? All these questions are left to further investigation.[11]

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