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Lewis's Synthesis

1. Lewis on Languages and Language

You will recall that Lewis seeks to effect a synthesis between the picture of languages as formal constructions (functions from types of linguistic expression to set theoretic objects) and the picture of language as a rational, cooperative, communicative activity ('part of the natural history of human beings') by appeal to the notion of a convention –specifically, he claimed we spoke a particular language in virtue of conventions of truthfulness and trust in that language that operate in our community.

As Lewis conceives them (1983, p.164-5), a convention prevails among a population P if and only if there is a regularity (R) in the actions and beliefs P that satisfies the following six conditions:

1. Everyone conforms to R.
2. Everyone believes that the others conform to R.
3. The belief that the others conform to R gives everyone a *good and decisive* reason to conform to R (p.165, my emphasis).
4. There is a preference for universal conformity to R over slightly less than universal conformity.
5. There is at least one other such regularity R' that might meet conditions (3) and (4) *and such that no one can simultaneously conform to both R and R'* (This presence of alternatives to the

regularities we exhibit is intended to capture the arbitrariness of conventions).

6. It is common knowledge that conditions 1 to 5 obtain.

According to Lewis, a community uses a language L when a convention of truthfulness-in-L and trust-in-L prevails in the community. To be truthful-in-L is never knowingly to utter sentences of L that are not true in L. To be trusting-in-L is to impute truthfulness-in-L to others and so to come to believe that a sentence of L is true, if someone utters it.

John Hawthorne (1990) argues that there can be no purely conventional account of what it is for a population to use a particular language, say English, because condition 5 cannot be satisfied by would be conventions of truthfulness and trust in English. Hawthorne reminds us that there are infinitely many sentences in English and most of these are much too long for anyone to actually use. Hence we will never use them except to tell the truth: so-called truthfulness by silence. But for this truthfulness *in the very long sentences fragment of English* to be conventional, there must be an alternative regularity R' we could conform to but don't. But our silence is de facto conformity to every possible alternative regularity R'. There is no regularity we don't conform to. Hence our conformity to the fragment of our language too big for us to use is not conventional. Since our conformity to English is conventional only if our conformity to every part of it is, it follows that our conformity to English is not conventional.

Hawthorne pushes the point about trust in English too, and although Lewis doesn't accept his argument, he accepts the conclusion that we don't have a convention of trust in the unused portion of English. To trust in these sentences we'd have to take their truthful utterance as more likely than their false utterance, but this is not the case for the unused sentences, since their utterance would be so bizarre we'd suspect they were being uttered for an exceptional reason (such as to win a bet) rather than to state a truth (Lewis 1992, p.108).

Hawthorne closes with an argument that convention alone will never explain why we use one language rather than another. For every language we might speak, there is another language that differs from it only regarding the unused sentences no one would ever use. There could therefore never be a convention of using one of these because one's interest in communication would be just as well served by speaking the other. Hence the third condition on conventions would not be satisfied: the belief that others use R wouldn't give one a reason for using R as well.

2. Extrapolation

Lewis concedes that conventions of truthfulness and trust alone won't distinguish between languages that differ only as to the unused portions, but thinks there's a ready solution. The language we use is the one that can be extrapolated from the rules implicit in the language fragment we do use (1992, p.109). The possibility Hawthorne envisages of distinct languages that differ only with respect to their unused portions is not a serious one, since the rival

languages are not on equal terms. We are directed to take a firm line in distinguishing straight grammars from bent or 'gruesome' ones, that is, between such grammars as 'any linguist would actually propose' (1992, p.109) and contrived and unnatural ones that might contain bizarre 'grue'-like rules. According to Lewis, we can be reasonably sure that all straight grammars that agree on the used part of language will agree everywhere. The language used by a population is thus determined by a two stage procedure: first consider the fragment of language over which conventions of truthfulness and trust obtain and then extrapolate on the basis of the straight grammatical rules implicitly contained in that fragment.

This optimistic response is uncharacteristically jejune. After all, the problem concerns the theoretical identification of the unique language used by a community, not what a linguist would actually produce in practice. Granted, Lewis has a principled story to tell about how straight/bent rules may be differentiated (see Lewis, 1984),¹ but even if the straight/bent distinction does indeed do the work Lewis asks of it, the assumption that the fragment of language actually used is sufficiently uniform and stable for there to be agreement among straight grammars is unwarranted. It's not the second stage of the procedure I object to but the first. There is too much diversity in language qua rational, cooperative, communicative activity, to discern regularities of truthfulness and trust in particular languages (in the model-theoretic sense).

3. Empirical Linguistics turns State's Evidence

¹ Though this has been challenged. See JRG Williams (2007).

Any grammar a linguist would *actually* construct for a language would be at best incomplete. Even when linguists are above the standard philosopher's device of leaving out complications like tense, aspect etc., additional inclusiveness is likely to lead away from isolation of a unique language (in the model-theoretic sense) spoken by a population as more varieties of expression are included. If the linguist's actual best efforts are incomplete, then extrapolation beyond the used fragment cannot identify a unique language used by a population and thus Hawthorne's objection to condition 3 applies: others' using L wouldn't give one a decisive reason to use L as well, since one's interests in communication are just as well served by using L' which differs from L only regarding unused expressions and expressions not covered by the linguist's grammar.

So let's think about 'any grammar ... a linguist would actually propose' and ask if there's much ground for confidence there won't be too much diversity. To begin with, consider the steps a linguist might have to take before and in order to produce a grammar for a language and whether there might be multiple empirically adequate (non-equivalent) grammars. The two-stage strategy relies on taking a finite sample of sentences to provide a basis for extrapolation. These sentences have to be taken as grammatically well-formed. If a sentence in the sample is not well-formed, then a grammar that generates the sentences in the sample is nevertheless not the grammar of the language spoken by the population. In keeping with this constraint on the sentences in the sample group, we must recognize the distinction between competence and performance. Speakers do not always successfully conform to

the norms governing the languages they speak. We'd have to purge the sample of coughs, stutters, hums and hahs, slips of the tongue, spoonerism and malapropism etc. And the incidence of these slips increases as grammatical complexity increases (which correlates more or less well with sentence length). Enforcing the distinction between performance and competence requires that we make a decision about the grammaticality of an utterance. The awkward thing about these decisions is it seems they have to display the sort of 'reflective equilibrium' or practical evidential circularity that makes it likely there will be multiple empirically adequate grammars of the same data. The grammar is called upon to adjudicate grammaticality in the process of its own construction.

There are plenty of examples of when native speaker intuitions (of the linguist or their informants) need to be corrected by theoretical considerations. It takes theoretical tuition to see that garden path sentences like 'the horse raced past the barn fell' are grammatical. They don't feel right. And other sentences feel fine, but don't mean what they feel. For example, Wason and Shuli's 'fake' sentence 'no head injury is too trivial to be ignored' (Wason and Shuli, 1979) ² And sometimes intuition just doesn't know what to think, as in Lewis Carroll's Duchess's sentence (1973, p.120),

² Consider how that nice short sentence connects with Lewis's convention of trust-in-L. Most people think this means, 'No head injury should be ignored: no matter how trivial it may be,' yet it means just the opposite. Given this mistake, they clearly do not trust the sentence. Note that some sentences of this form are readily taken to mean what they mean, e.g. No weather forecast is too plausible to be mistrusted.

Never imagine yourself not to be otherwise than what it might appear to others that what you were or might have been was not otherwise than what you had been would have appeared to them to be otherwise.

As a native speaker of English, I honestly don't know whether this sentence is grammatical or not. I cannot understand the sentence, though it is not even very long, only 38 words. Lewis Carroll can parse it and has the duchess say it means 'be what you would seem to be.'

Native linguistic intuition is fallible, so the decision as to the grammaticality of a sentence is not completely innocent of theory. And because the decisions must be made piece-meal as the data presents itself, the decisions will be shaped by what grammar we take to be true of the language of a population. So there is reason to think linguists working on what's nominally the same language will produce different grammars. I predict different grammars of English will offer different verdicts on whether the Duchess's sentence is grammatical, for example. And that they will offer different accounts of what's wrong with it, if it's not. On the other hand, if it is grammatical, then like Wason and Shuli's fake above, it would seem to be another short sentence people generally don't trust (in Lewis's sense).³

It may seem that this is a weak criticism. I am arguing no more than that the appropriate base for extrapolation is relative to a grammar/theory. This does

³ Of course, Lewis recognizes that there will be different grammars (1983, p175ff. and 1992, p.110), but he believes it won't affect the two-step extrapolation procedure. He says we can expect all grammars that agree on the used fragment to agree everywhere (1992, p.110). I think this misses the point because what undermines the extrapolation step is the plurality of straight grammars that don't agree on the sample.

not show there *really could be* more than one way to extrapolate, unless more than one grammar could be correct. I concede this point. However, given the enormous variety of model theoretic languages out there, there are bound to be many grammars each of which is intended to describe the language we speak and which describes some possible language and which would be correct if we spoke that language. So, while it might just be a brute fact that everybody speaks one of these constructions rather than any another, it's hard to see how the evidence available to linguists (intuition, speech behaviour etc.) supports this, that is gives us reason to believe there is one language we all speak and correct description it, rather than taking different grammars to describe different languages spoken by different (groups of) individuals. ⁴ This suggests a more damaging source of trouble for Lewis's synthetic project: dialectical variation.

It can be easy to find oneself uttering sentences one would reject as ungrammatical. But there are also cases where it is not clear they are ungrammatical as opposed to a dialectical difference. For example, was George W Bush's immortal question a mistake, or a regionalism: 'Rarely is the question asked, "Is our children learning?"' (said at Florence S.C. Jan 11, 2000 as recorded online by Slate Magazine). Or consider the examples

⁴ It may seem that general commitment to realism militates in favour of taking one theory to be correct at the expense of the others rather than allowing that many theories may each be correct of their own slightly different subject matters. But this is not so in the present case. We know in advance that there are many different actual languages and different grammars are true of them, surely our advance commitment to realism should not rule out this fact. Therefore it does not rule out the corresponding attitude to different grammars when the linguistic differences are not as great. And similarly the idea that the one true grammar is hard wired into our heads doesn't offset these problems because we're talking about existent diversity (more below).

of so-called black English vernacular speech recorded by William Labov, such as 'It don't all be her fault' meaning 'It isn't always her fault' (Labov 1972, p. 11). Or consider the dialect of Hawick in the Scottish Borders that permits double modal constructions like 'You should can do it' (i.e. You ought to be able to do it) and 'Rose would could visit Archie if she went to Melrose' (i.e. Rose would be able to visit Archie if...) (O'Grady et al. 1997, p. 569). All these examples would be ruled ungrammatical in a grammar of my dialect although they are admissible sentences of these others.

Dialectal differences are certainly linguistic differences in a certain sense because the correct grammars for different dialects would describe different model-theoretic structures. But they raise a problem for Lewis's synthetic project because they are for the most part mutually intelligible varieties. They would seem to show that different speakers do not need to speak the same language in the model-theoretic sense to engage in the joint cooperative communicative activity we call language in the other sense. And it is not possible to take *groups of dialectics* to be the same 'language' for the purposes of synthesising the two approaches (in other words, take speakers to understand each other because of conventions of truthfulness and trust in groups of several languages in the model-theoretic sense), because of the existence of dialect chains. The family of Germanic languages stretches from Switzerland and Austria to the Netherlands. There are similar chains among the Romance languages. At any two adjacent points in this chain, speakers can understand the speech of the people in the next village, regardless of political borders, but the dialects of speakers in distant parts of the series are mutually incomprehensible, even within the same country (O'Grady et al. 1997, p. 565).

If mutual comprehensibility is the criterion for grouping dialects into languages, we have a problem: the mutual comprehensibility of adjacent varieties suggests they are the same language and the mutual incomprehensibility of distant varieties suggests they are different languages. But this is not possible since identity is a transitive relation (as is 'x is the same language as y'). On the other hand if mutual comprehensibility doesn't determine the language it seems the synthesis cannot come off, because we might get speakers of the same language who don't understand each other, and speakers of distinct languages who do. Either way it is not a convention in a common language (construed as a group of dialects) that accounts for the understanding.

4. Parts of Languages

In the 'objections and replies' section of 'Languages and Language' Lewis seems to address criticisms similar to the ones developed here. Let me say why they do not suffice.

First Lewis acknowledges that the model-theoretic conception of languages with which he begins his paper is overly simplistic because it ignores prominent features of natural languages such as mood, ambiguity, and indexicality and so on. He briefly sketches how languages qua model-theoretic constructions can be extended to accommodate these features. I have no quarrel with his sketches, but reiterate my earlier point that the more precision we introduce into the formal model, the more admissible ways there will be to extrapolate from actual linguistic data.

Lewis also addresses (1983, p. 185f.) an attempted *reductio*: if there are conventions of truthfulness and trust in a language, then there are conventions of truthfulness and trust in a proper fragment of the language, for there is a convention of truthfulness and trust in a language if and only if there are conventions of truthfulness and trust in every sentence of it, and hence in every sentence of a proper fragment of it. Lewis denies that this consequence is absurd, and indeed believes it can be put to use to explain how different groups in society can be said to share the same language. The elite and the masses have the same language, though they differ in their respective vocabularies, because the language they have in common is a proper subset of the language each group speaks. The groups are each in effect bilingual; speaking both their own form and the (simplified) form constituted by the intersection of the two varieties. If this move is adequate, Lewis should also make it to deal with the phenomenon of dialectical variation. Why not say for example that the Germans and the Dutch are all massively multilingual speaking the, as it were, lowest common denominator of German and Dutch respectively, together with their own regional varieties and their more local and personal varieties. Those on the border also speak a blend without a ready name spoken by others in a similar situation.

This move has certain attractions, but it doesn't fit well with the two-step procedure put in place to answer Hawthorne. Remember we need to discern rules implicit in the fragment of language that is used that will through extrapolation suffice to identify which language people are using. But in the envisaged case there are many *natural* ways the sample can be extrapolated

(precisely because they exist as the more specific forms people actually speak!). Consider the case of English. The body of sentences and rules that constitutes the 'lowest common denominator' variety of English understood by all speakers of English must be sheared of all the peculiarities of Hiberno-English, Ulster Scots, Lallans, Doric, Strine, Newziln, Yorkshire English, Mancunian, black English vernacular, and so on. Of course some such model theoretic structure exists, but precisely because of the regional diversity just adduced, there is a plurality of natural ways of extrapolating the used part of this structure to the unused cases. It is thus the case that existing linguistic diversity shows condition 3 fails for these proper language fragment type cases. This conclusion can be extended. If condition 3 fails for the proper fragments of a language, then it fails for languages themselves at a time, since the entire corpus of a language up to a certain moment in time is a proper fragment of the entire corpus of a language up to some succeeding moment.

Conclusion

The conclusion is that Lewis's response to Hawthorne is inadequate. I haven't denied that language is conventional. This is a platitude that 'only a philosopher would deny' (Lewis 1983, p.166). I haven't disputed Lewis's analysis of convention.⁵ But if language is conventional, there is a question of how to specify the relevant regularity. I have argued that it cannot be a

⁵ The second condition, that (almost) all speakers believe (almost) everyone conforms to the regularity, looks like it needs clarification or defence. In particular, something should be said to accommodate the fact that virtually everyone accepts they make grammatical errors themselves and believe that everyone else does too. Even if this belief stems from a misguided linguistic prescriptivism, it stands in the way of people believing that all conform to the rules of the language.

regularity of truthfulness and trust in a language in the model-theoretic sense, and thus my final claim is that Lewis has not provided a compelling synthesis between the depiction of languages as formal, abstract set theoretic entities and language as communicative, cooperative behaviour. ⁶

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⁶ Thanks are owed to Chris Mole for helpful discussion

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