Introduction

Most contemporary theoretical approaches to the meaning and use of language tend to take a synchronic, individualistic, and mentalist (or cognitivist) perspective, which delegates diachronic factors and questions of the social and cultural world within which communication takes place to a secondary status. Here, I would like to reopen discussion of these methodological choices that have long been taken for granted, and to sketch an alternative. I will do this mostly in the form of a discussion with some forms of cognitive semantics, which is one of the more influential frameworks at present. Interestingly, among cognitive scientists, there seems to be an increasing awareness of the desirability of a more sophisticated account of culture, and of a more intensive interaction with social science, witness the various contributions to Gibbs & Steen (eds.) 1999 and especially Turner 2002. But whereas those attempts take a starting point in cognitive science, here I would like to start at the opposite end. That is, I will sketch some recent insights from the social sciences and discuss how these may be brought to bear on linguistic and cognitive questions. I will focus on three Cs that are central to the study of both cognition and language use: concepts, culture, and communication. I will link these to three Ps that to me seem essential to a more adequate understanding: respectively, practice, performatives, and power. Recent cognitivist approaches, I will argue, rest on outdated views of the Cs that do not (or not sufficiently) take the Ps into account. I will keep a fourth C as a surprise; it will be revealed in the conclusion.

1. Concepts and Practice

Despite their phenomenology-inspired insistence on 'embodied experience' as the basis of cognition, representatives of cognitive semantics treat metaphor as a primarily conceptual or cognitive notion in the sense that it is, first and foremost, seen as a private mental phenomenon, of which linguistically expressed metaphors are but a derivative externalization. Lakoff (1987) claims a non-metaphorical rock bottom of our cognition in his so-called basic-level concepts like mother and table, which are claimed to be directly meaningful or intrinsically intentional. But basic-level concepts cannot be culture-transcendent (tables are obviously cultural artifacts, and mothers are not simply biological entities but first and foremost actors of specific social roles, witness the extensive anthropological literature on kinship and kinship terms). But if they are
culture-dependent, perhaps less emphasis should be given to strictly cognitive (and allegedly universal) principles of cognition. The crux is that even such allegedly basic-level concepts result from an interaction with a world that is social through and through, and cannot in any sense be given or meaningful prior to such interaction. Gibbs (1999: 162) shows an awareness of this problem, as appears from his remark that cognition arises and is continually re-experienced when the body interacts with the cultural world, but he stops short of its more radical implications. On a more radical review, the task would not merely be to extend the study of conceptual metaphors to the social and cultural world, but to revert the very order of explanation. The patron saint of such an approach is, of course, the later Wittgenstein (what follows is a Guinness Book of Records-style attempt at summarizing, roughly, paragraphs 1 through 202 of the Philosophical Investigations (1953)). The main Wittgensteinian criticism states that private mental images or representations cannot determine or explain our linguistic behavior (para. 139-41); more in general, no rule can determine any specific way of acting. Rather, 'following a rule' (or applying a concept) is in itself a practice. That is, on a Wittgensteinian account, possessing a concept does not consist in entertaining a mental representation, but rather in having a practical skill: the ability to use a linguistic expression correctly.1 At the theoretical level, this ability cannot adequately be captured in representationalist or mentalist terms, but is more fruitfully seen in terms of correct usage, of which truth conditions are but a subset. Now Lakoff’s ravings against any form of truth-conditional (or better model-theoretic) form of semantics are too well known to need restating or refuting again (see Lakoff 1987: ch. 15; Leezenberg 2001: 145-7); but the general point of truth-conditional semantics and the complementary pragmatics, conceived along more or less standard lines, would seem to be the fact that they aim at capturing precisely these eminently practical skills of correctly using language, regarding both propositional content and pragmatic adequacy. Finally, the correct use of language is not just a practical skill, but a pre-eminently social practice. Literal meanings are fixed, and concepts are stabilized, by specific communicative practices, like education in school, and language standardization by state agencies like language academies. A theoretical acknowledgement of such institutional realities may yield interesting revisions in our long-cherished accounts of language and cognition. To assume that concepts, let alone in the shape of highly complex, structured ICMs and the like, are given in isolation from, and indeed in

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1 The expression ’correctly’ masks the important and complex problematic of the essentially normative aspect of language usage, and hence of cognition. This problem is especially pressing for those cognitive and other approaches that tend to depict cognition naturalistically as a quasi-biological process; but I have no space to address this issue here.
advance of, such social practices, is to put the explanatory cart before the horse. Cognition is not a private mental event but a social practice.

2. Culture and Performatives

The mentalist view of cognition prevalent in cognitive semantics leaves unanswered the epistemological problem of how such private mental states or episodes may come to be shared at all; this view faces a serious threat of solipsism that makes anything social or intersubjective, let alone the outside world of things, something of a mystery. But apart from such Wittgensteinian considerations, doubts may also be raised regarding the cognitivists’ notion of culture.

Until recently, the themes of culture and society have received surprisingly little attention in cognitive semantics, despite their obvious relevance to arguments concerning the cultural background of our basic-level concepts. The emphasis on practical skill and embodied experience on the one hand, and on mental representations on the other, leads to a profoundly ambivalent view of culture, at least in Lakoff (1987), and, I would surmise, in many another practitioner of cognitive semantics. In the last few years, an awareness of the need for more attention to cultural factors appears to be on the increase. Even the most recent statements by cognitive semanticists, however, betray a rather na•ve view of culture. Thus, Lakoff (2001) describes ‘islamic culture’ as shared by all muslims, and as involving values different from those of ‘our’ Western culture; Gibbs (1999: 153–4) thinks of cultural models as ‘intersubjectively shared cultural schemas’ that do ‘real work for individuals and collective communities in shaping what people believe’. Both betray the still widespread view of a culture as a collection of concepts, norms and values (or more abstractly, rules) shared in a community. This conception, however, is theoretically outdated and empirically untenable. First, the idea of a homogeneous cultural or linguistic community is an illusion. Talk of an alleged ‘community’ of speakers of, say, Dutch, Hungarian, or English masks a complex reality of widely divergent dialects and sociolects, with various groups actively cultivating a desire to be different. Likewise, ‘Dutch’ or ‘Hungarian’ culture is not a single integrated or coherent whole, but a tension—ridden amalgamation of opposed positions, the variation being deliberately maintained across divides of, among others, class, gender, subculture, and age group.2 Second, viewing culture as shared threatens to reduce it to a domain of social ‘structure’ that lies wholly outside the realm of, and hence is inaccessible to, human agency. Such methodological assumptions make it much harder to account for variation, conflict and change within a culture.

As an alternative, I would recommend a closer attention to the recent social-scientific conception of culture as an arena for competing claims to legitimacy, where cultural facts and cultural differences may be put to strategic uses of various kinds. Indeed, the very appeal to one’s culture as something given, shared, timeless and hence uncontestable, may, and indeed should, be treated as just one strategic move in communication among various others, and especially a move that reflects a claim to the legitimate authority to speak on behalf of a whole group of people.

Culture is not simply an inherited element of structure, but continually produced, and reproduced, by human agency. This view of "culture in the making" (Fox 1984: ch 11), emphasizes the theoretical importance of social practice. This notion, as developed over the past few decades in the social sciences, promises to cut across the age-old structure-agency divide, in that it presumes neither. A further central aspect of social practice is its typically performative character: that is, often one can actually create social realities by merely saying that they exist. The simplest case is, of course, baptizing a child or a ship, or declaring two people legally married; but this notion of performativity has a much wider application, as partly constitutive of, e.g., ethnic, national or sexual identity. The social world is never simply given, but actively constituted and reproduced in the practices of specific social actors, who may create social facts by naming them. Such a reconceptualization of 'culture' as involving the continuous, and partly performative, affirmation of specific social facts will put us in a better position to account for cultural variation, conflict and change than a view of culture as given and shared.

3. Communication and Power

Finally, I will address a pervasive assumption in theorizing about language in the Anglo-Saxon tradition from which cognitive semantics has sprung. Most if not all such theorizing appears to involve a largely tacit folk theory, a cultural model, an Idealized Cognitive Model, or language ideology, which highlights specific aspects of communication at the expense of others. According to this ideology, language is a kind of social contract. This becomes clear from several aspects of such a view.

First, language is, almost by definition, treated as a form of cooperative social action; conflict, uncooperative behavior, and the assertion or arrogation of power are all seen as abuses, or at best as exploitations, of the means of communication. Second, this
cooperation is held to be a matter of pure self-interest: speaking the same language is often considered simply a prerequisite for adequate mutual understanding, and by extension for the effective pursuit of (communicative and other) individual goals. Third, the actors entering in a social contract are assumed to be free, autonomous, and equal, if not in actual communicative situations, then at least as a ’regulative ideal’ that informs all genuine communication Thus, the social-contract view of language is not simply a form of methodological individualism; it also delegates questions of power to a secondary status of marginal or anomalous phenomena (for a more detailed argument concerning the language-as-social-contract view, cf. Leezenberg 2002).

Now the main objection to this view of language can be stated quite simply: power relations are not only intrinsic to all empirically real situations of communication; they are also constitutive of both language and its users. That is, there are neither autonomous, power-free actors to enter into any contract, nor language systems that are as consensual as they are presented.

I would like to emphasize the methodological character of this claim. Ever since Saussure, the considerable success of the theoretical language sciences has in large part resulted from the methodological choice of precisely abstracting away from social factors; but now, the question is precisely how to bring such factors back in. I would like to argue for their recuperation, not as independent variables that may or may not interact with language, but as something internal to, indeed constitutive of, both the language system and the language user. Lack of space precludes a detailed argumentation of this claim (for which see Leezenberg 2002), but it is readily entailed by the two claims that language is a social practice, and that all social practice involves power. This may sound like a radical claim, but even so liberal a theoretician as John Searle acknowledges that "power .. permeates every nook and cranny of our social lives" (1995: 94). But whereas Searle treats power as arising from a collectively agreed upon imposition of a specific social status, and therefore as legitimate by definition, in actual social life things are a good deal more complicated. Performatives may typically function in virtue of a legitimate and acknowledged authority (such as the civil servant declaring two people legally married), but they may also involve the arrogation of specific, and often symbolic, forms of power. This becomes clearest in performatives of a patently political, and therefore contentious, character:

(1) I hereby proclaim the independence of the state of A.
(2) B is not a dialect of D, but a distinct language.

The felicitous utterance of these sentences crucially depends on who has, or successfully arrogates, the authority to execute such a performative: in (1), the
authority would seem to be primarily political, in (2) it is rather of an academic, that is, broadly symbolic character; if the speaker’s authority is recognized, the truth of her utterance of (2) will be more readily acknowledged, with all the possible social and political implications for the speakers of dialect/language B.4

That is, communication may often if not always involve relations (and possibly conflicts) of power, but this power need not be of a purely political and visible character. Indeed, it may well be that all apparently cooperative communication involves what Bourdieu (1991: ch. 7) has called ‘symbolic power’, which is the power to constitute the meanings of expressions, and thus the beliefs expressed by them; or the power to constitute the common-sense categories with which we think and perceive the social world surrounding us. This power is articulated through institutions of mass communication, education, language standardization, and the like, which thus reproduce specific ways of speaking and thinking as most legitimate, i.e., most authoritative and prestigious. According to Bourdieu, symbolic power is not normally recognized as such, and it is indeed a precondition of its successful functioning that it is mistaken for cooperative and power-free action.

Bourdieu’s own main interests appear to lie mainly with the explanation of the remarkable stability of social institutions that in themselves are inherently arbitrary entities, and sites of contention, competition and contest. This emphasis on stability makes problematic the question of how to account for change; but I believe that Bourdieu at least provides some of the tools necessary for such an account.

The idea of the language system itself as free from power relations, and language usage as inherently if not essentially cooperative, is predominant in contemporary linguistic theory, if not in everyday communication. But it really is no more than an unreflected, and indeed ‘ideological’ assumption that may be criticized once it is made explicit. It is not cross-culturally shared either. To mention but one counterexample, the famous doctrine of the ‘rectification of names’ in ancient China, according to which a prime task of government is to ensure that words like king, father and son have, and retain, their ‘correct’ (one is tempted to say ‘literal’) meaning, shows that the earliest Chinese ideology of language was of a non-contractarian character. In Confucius and other ancient Chinese philosophers, the linguistic action of the rectification of names is intimately linked to the practice of government: rather than treating categorization as biologically given, this emphasizes classification as a distinctly social practice. The correct naming of human and other beings is believed to performatively create the obligations belonging to their social status, and thus to the creation and maintenance of social stability. Likewise, languages are seen as the result of a continuous application

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4 As I argue in Leezenberg (2002), Searle (1995) acknowledges such cases of power struggle in the social world, but has considerable difficulty accounting for them.
of the power to name things, and linguistic communication is treated as prototypically involving participants unequal in power and social status. The topic of the rectification of names also suggests that power relations may actually be productive of meanings, and hence should not be conceived of as just negative matters of domination or repression (cf. Leezenberg 2001b for a more elaborate discussion).

4. Conclusion
The above three strands of thinking that inform cognitive approaches to communication (concepts as private mental representations; cultures as shared sets of rules and norms and values; and communication as a kind of social contract) are not arbitrary or unrelated. They form part of an integrated, though largely implicit, view of social action, the main features of which are an assumption of methodological individualism, which takes the individual as an autonomous actor, and a consensus view of culture, which treats language usage, ritual behavior, and other forms of social action as functionally geared towards social, cultural and conceptual integration. These two broad assumptions may be traced to respectively, Max Weber and Emile Durkheim. More recent research in the social sciences, however, suggests that neither of them is at all unproblematic.

In opposition to such a consensus view social action as inherently or essentially cooperative and directed towards social integration, I would like to propose (and this is the fourth C promised in the introduction) a conflict view of communication. This takes its inspiration from social scientists like Fox (1984), Foucault (1983), and Bourdieu (1991), and emphasizes the fact that all social action (including communication) involves relations of power, the legitimacy of which may be challenged. On a conflict view, no ’shared culture’ is required for successful communication; and in so far as there is something like a shared culture involved, this is the result of a prolonged and continuing process of socialization that is the result of power relations as much as of active consent.

This does not imply, of course, that all communication necessarily involves conflict, or that all power is illegitimate. Rather, it merely involves the explicit and systematic incorporation of power as an independent variable,- a power, the legitimacy of which cannot be assumed in advance. A closer attention to the potential for challenge and conflict will put us in a better position to account for variation and change. Political and cultural communities are constituted less by a quasi-contractual consent than by the assertion or arrogation of legitimate authority, that is, by and exercise of or claim to power. They may even be formed by the threat or use of violence.
Although a detailed substantiation of this claim would take us too far afield here, violence may be seen as an extreme means of forming and maintaining an ethnic group or nation, i.e., a group alleged to share cultural material like a language.

A reconceptualization of cognitive approaches to language among lines that are more informed by the social sciences has two advantages. First, it seems empirically more adequate in accounting for the complexities of actual social life. Second, as a methodological choice, it may bring phenomena to the fore that had hitherto been delegated to secondary status as anomalous or marginal. It calls for more attention to phenomena like diachronic language change (whether or not involving a metaphorical change of meaning) and substandard varieties of language as an integral part of the dynamics of the social and communicative world.

**Literature**

M. Leezenberg 2001a *Contexts of Metaphor*. Oxford: Elsevier Science
