2 words and meaning

Experience, Meaning of Life

2 Words and meaning Colin Yallop 2. 1 Words in language People sometimes play games with words. People may also recite or memorise lists of words, for example when trying to learn the words of another language or to remember technical terms. And they may occasionally leaf through a dictionary looking at words more or less randomly. These are legitimate activities, enjoyable or useful as they may be. But they are not typical uses of words. Typically, human beings use words for their meaning, in context, as part of communicative discourse. As Halliday has made clear (see especially 1. 6 above), vocabulary can be seen as part of lexicogrammar, a lexicogrammar that represents the choices which users of a language make, a lexicogrammar that represents our ability to mean. For, ultimately, language is about meaning. The main function of language - and hence of words used in language - is to mean. This part of the book is particularly concerned with exploring the semantics of words. Section 2. 2 offers some comments on meanings as presented in dictionaries. This is followed by brief discussion of potentially misleading notions about 'original meaning' (2. 3) and 'correct meaning' (2. 4). In 2. 5 we try to explain what we mean by a social perspective on language and meaning, followed by some background on the theorising of Saussure and Firth (2. 6) and Chomsky and cognitive linguists (2. 7). We then look at the implications of our theorising for language and reality (section 2. 8) and, to open up a multilingual perspective, we talk about the diversity of languages in the world (section 2. 9) and about the process of translating from one language to another (2. 10). 2. 2 Words and meaning A dictionary seems the obvious place to find a record of the meanings of words. In many parts of the English-speaking

world, dictionaries 24 COLIN YALLOP have achieved such prestige that people can mention 'the dictionary' as one of their institutional texts, rather in the same way that they might refer to Shakespeare or the Bible. Such status means that a printed dictionary may easily be seen as the model of word-meanings. We may then, uncritically, assume that a dictionary in book form is the appropriate model of words as a component of language or of wordmeanings stored as an inventory in the human brain or mind. In fact a dictionary is a highly abstract construct. To do the job of presenting words more or less individually, in an accessible list, the dictionary takes words away from their common use in their customary settings. While this is in many respects a useful job, the listing of words as a set of isolated items can be highly misleading if used as a basis of theorising about what words and their meanings are. There is of course no such thing as 'the dictionary'. For a language such as English there are many dictionaries, published in various editions in various countries to suit various markets. The definitions or explanations of meaning in a dictionary have been drawn up by particular lexicographers and editors and are consequently subject to a number of limitations. Even with the benefit of access to corpora, to large quantities of text in electronic form, lexicographers cannot know the full usage of most words across a large community, and may tend to bring individual or even idiosyncratic perspectives to their work. In the past, dictionaries were quite often obviously stamped by the perspective of an individual. We have already mentioned Samuel Johnson's definition of excise as 'a hateful tax' (1. 7 above), and, as another example, here is Johnson's definition of patron: patron, one who countenances, supports or protects. Commonly a wretch

who supports with insolence and is paid with flattery. Modern lexicographers generally aim to avoid this kind of tendentiousness. Certainly today's dictionaries tend to be promoted as useful or reliable rather than as personal or provocative. Nevertheless, despite the obvious drawbacks of a dictionary that represents an individual editor's view of the world, it is regrettable that dictionary users are not reminded more often of the extent to which dictionary definitions are distilled from discourse, and often from shifting, contentious discourse. In any event, lexicographers can never claim to give a complete and accurate record of meaning. A team of expert lexicographers may by their very age and experience tend to overlook recent changes in meaning; or they may tend to write definitions which are elegant rather than accurate or simple; or they may follow conventions of definition WORDS AND MEANING 25 which are just that - lexicographical conventions - rather than semantic principles. Dictionaries often tend to favour certain kinds of technical identification, definitions that describe dog as Cam's familiaris, or vinegar as 'dilute and impure acetic acid'. While this kind of information may sometimes be precisely what the dictionary-user is looking for, it is debatable whether it constitutes a realistic account of meaning. Many of us communicate easily and happily about many topics, including domestic animals, food, cooking, and so on, without knowing the zoological classification of animals or the chemical composition of things we keep in the kitchen. Perhaps people ought to know information like the technical names of animals or the chemical composition of things they buy and consume, whether as general knowledge or for their health or safety. But it would be a bold move, and a semantic distortion, to claim that people who don't know

such information don't know the meaning of the words they use. In general, it is unwise to assume that meaning is captured in dictionary entries, in the definitions or explanations given against the words. Dictionary definitions can and should be informative and helpful, and, when well written, they provide a paraphrase or explanation of meaning. But the meaning is not necessarily fully contained or exhaustively captured within such a definition. This is not to say that meanings are vague or ethereal. Within the conventions of a particular language, meanings contrast with each other in established and often precise ways. Speakers of the same language can convey meanings to each other with considerable precision. Words do not mean whatever we want them to mean, but are governed by social convention. Nonetheless, we cannot assume, without qualification, that the wording of a dictionary definition is an ideal representation of what a word means. Extending this point, we normally use and respond to meanings in context. As users of language we know that someone's mention of a recent television programme about big cats in Africa implies a different meaning of cat from a reference to the number of stray cats in the city of New York. And if someone talks about 'letting the cat out of the bag' or 'setting the cat among the pigeons', we know that the meaning has to be taken from the whole expression, not from a word-by-word reading of Felis catus jumping out of a bag or chasing Columbidae. Any good dictionary recognises this by such strategies as listing different senses of a word, giving examples of usage, and treating certain combinations of words (such as idioms) as lexical units. But it is important to recognise that this contextualisation of meaning is in the very nature 26 COLIN YALLOP of language and not some unfortunate

deviation from an ideal situation in which every word of the language always makes exactly the same semantic contribution to any utterance or discourse. For reasons such as these, we should be cautious about the view that words have a basic or core meaning, surrounded by peripheral or subsidiary meaning(s). For example, the very ordering of different definitions or senses in a dictionary may imply that the first sense is the most central or important. In fact there are several reasons for the sequence in which different senses are presented. Some dictionaries, especially modern ones intended for learners of the language, may use a corpus to establish which are the most frequent uses of a word in a large quantity of text, and may list senses of a word in order of frequency. Some lexicographers follow a historical order, giving the oldest recorded senses first (even if these are now obsolete and largely unknown). Or a compiler may order the senses in a way that makes the defining easier and more concise (which is probably of help to the reader, even though it intends no claim about the centrality of the first sense listed). For instance, the word season is commonly used in phrases like the football season, the rainy season, the tourist season, the silly season, a season ticket, in season, out of season. These uses taken together probably outnumber what many people may think of as the fundamental meaning of season as 'one of the four seasons, spring, summer, autumn and winter'. But the lexicographer may judge it sensible to begin the entry with the 'four seasons of the year' sense, not only because this is perhaps what most readers expect, but also because the subsequent definitions of season as 'a period of the year marked by certain conditions' or 'a period of the year when a particular activity takes place', and so on, may seem easier to grasp

if preceded by the supposedly basic sense. To take another example, consider the first four senses listed for the noun rose in the Macquarie Concise Dictionary (1998). Some of the definitions have been abbreviated for this example: 1. any of the wild or cultivated, usually prickly-stemmed, showy-flowered shrubs constituting the genus Rosa ... 2. any of various related or similar plants. 3. the flower of any such shrubs ... 4. an ornament shaped like or suggesting a rose ... The sequence of these senses is not random and the entry has been written or edited as a whole. The second sense, using the words 'related' and 'similar', assumes the reader has read the first definition; WORDS AND MEANING 27 the third ('any such shrubs') presupposes the first and second; and so on. The Macquarie Concise entry for rose also demonstrates that dictionaries are obliged to order items at more than one level. There are of course two quite distinct roses, the one we have just been talking about, and the one which is the past tense of rise. The Macquarie numbers these distinct meanings, as many dictionaries do, with a superscriptl and2, giving all the senses of the flower or bush (and the rose-like objects) under the first rose, and then simply indicating that the second rose is the past tense of rise. Probably most dictionary users find this the sensible order. Perhaps nouns seem more important, especially ones which have several different senses. Perhaps the second rose seems as though it is here accidentally - it really belongs under rise. Evidence from corpora suggests that the verb form rose (as in 'the sea level rose by 120 metres' or 'exports rose 2 per cent' or 'the evil genie rose from the jar') is used far more frequently than the noun; but this greater frequency does not seem to give priority to the verb in the minds of dictionary compilers and users. It

sometimes seems to be mere convention to list certain meanings first. Definitions of the word have often begin with the sense of 'possess' or 'own', and many people may indeed think of this as the fundamental or ordinary meaning of the word. In fact, corpus evidence indicates that the uses of have as an auxiliary verb (as in 'they have shown little interest') and in combinations like have to (as in 'we have to do better next time') are more frequent than uses like 'they have two cars' or 'we have a small house'. Notions of what is a basic or central meaning of a word may thus be encouraged and perpetuated in a variety of ways, including common beliefs about words (which may or may not match actual usage) as well as lexicographical tradition. Sometimes such notions may be given formal recognition. For example, it is common to distinguish denotation from connotation. If taken as a serious semantic or philosophical claim, the distinction tends to separate what a word refers to from the associations that the word conjures up in the mind. More popularly, and sometimes simplistically, the distinction becomes a way of separating a core meaning from peripheral or variable aspects of meaning. But the distinction is by no means straightforward. It is complicated by the fact that what a word refers to in a particular context (as when talking to you I mention 'your cat') is not what is usually intended by denotation (which is more like 'any cat' or 'the class of cats'). The notion of denotation also runs the risk of identifying meaning with a class of objects or some idealised version thereof, as if meaning can be 28 COLIN YALLOP anchored in a world of concrete objects. This is clearly not very helpful in the case of many words, such as abstract nouns in general or verbs like believe, dream, think, worry or epithets like

good, kind, mysterious, poor. And even where a denotation can be satisfactorily identified, it is not self-evident that this is an appropriate way of characterising meaning. The term connotation tends to slip awkwardly between something like 'peripheral meaning' and 'emotive meaning' and 'personal associations'. The notion of peripheral meaning simply raises the question of what is central or core meaning and why it should be so. It is clear from examples already given that the most frequently used sense of a word is not always the one that strikes most people as the core meaning. And it is equally clear that the older senses of a word are often neither the most frequent in current usage, nor the most basic by any other conceivable criterion. Even 'emotive meaning', which might seem a good candidate for the margins of meaning, cannot always be considered peripheral. If I say to you 'Did you hear what happened to poor Sid?', the semantic contribution of poor must surely be 'emotive': the word says nothing about Sid's lack of wealth, but seeks to establish and elicit sympathy towards Sid. And this is hardly peripheral, since my question to you is most probably intended to introduce, and engage your interest in, a story of Sid's misfortune. Similar things can be said about the use of adjectives like lucky and unfashionable, which commonly serve to signal the speaker's attitude, and even about the verb think when used in utterances like 'I think the meeting starts at noon' (in which the words 'I think' serve to make the message less authoritative or dogmatic) or 'I think these are your keys' (as a polite way of telling someone they are about to leave their keys behind). Thus what might be termed 'emotive meaning' or 'attitudinal' meaning may sometimes be an integral part of discourse. On the other hand, if 'associations' really are personal or

idiosyncratic, then they hardly qualify as meaning at all, since they cannot contribute to regular meaningful exchanges. Suppose, for example, I have a fondness for a particular kind of flower, say, carnations, perhaps because of some valued childhood memory of them or other such personal experience. This may well have some consequences in my behaviour, including my discourse: I may often buy carnations, whereas you never do, I may mention carnations more than you do, and so on. But does it follow from any of this that you and I have a different meaning of the word carnation? Both of us, if we speak English, understand what is meant when someone says 'carnations are beautiful flowers', 'carnations are good value for money' and 'most people like WORDS AND MEANING 29 carnations', whether we agree with the truth of these claims or not. Indeed, to disagree with these statements requires an understanding of what they mean, just as much as agreeing with them does. Of course to the extent that an association is shared throughout a community, it does contribute to discourse and becomes part of meaning. If a name like Hitler or Stalin is not only widely known but widely associated with certain kinds of evil behaviour, then it becomes possible for people to say things like 'what a tragedy the country is being run by such a Hitler' or 'the new boss is a real Stalin'. And if people do say things like this, the names are on their way to becoming meaningful words of the language, along a similar path to that followed by words like boycott and sandwich, which had their origins in names of people associated with particular events or objects. (Note how boycott and sandwich are now written with initial lower-case letters rather than the capitals which would mark them as names. We might similarly expect to see the forms hitler and stalin appearing in

print, if these names were to become genuine lexical items describing kinds of people.) There may also be differences of experience and associations within a community which have systematic linguistic consequences. If, for example, some speakers of English love domestic cats while others detest them, this may well remain marginal to linguistic systems. But there may be small but regular linguistic differences between the speakers: for example some people may always refer to a cat as 'he' or 'she' while for others a cat is always 'it', and some people may use cat as the actor of processes like tell and think (as in 'my cat tells me when it's time for bed' or 'the cat thinks this is the best room in the flat') whereas others would never use this kind of construction. To that extent we may have (slightly) different linguistic systems, say one in which a cat is quasi-human in contrast to one in which a cat is firmly non-human. In that case, it is legitimate to recognise two somewhat different meanings of cat and two minor variants of English lexicogrammar. For meaning is ultimately shaped and determined by communal usage. A dictionary definition of a word's meaning has authority only in so far as it reflects the way in which those who speak and write the language use that word in genuine communication. In this sense, meaning has a social quality, and while it is sometimes convenient to think of the meaning of a word as a concept, as 'something stored in the human mind', this is legitimate only to the extent that the concept is seen as an abstraction out of observable social behaviour. An overview of issues to do with word meaning, and references to classic discussions such as Lyons (1977), can be found in the first two 30 COLIN YALLOP sections of Chapter 3 of Jackson and Ze Amvela (1999). We will return to the issues in the following

sections of this chapter, both to elaborate our own views of language as social behaviour and of meaning as a social phenomenon, and to contrast our views with others. 2. 3 Etymology In this section we look briefly at the relevance of historical development. Changes in language - specifically changes in meaning - are inevitable, but they are sometimes decried, as if language ought to be fixed at some period in time. In fact, attempts to fix meanings or to tie words to their 'original' meanings deny the social reality of linguistic usage. (In the following section, 2. 4, we will look more generally at attempts to prescribe and regulate meaning.) Warburg tells the story of a lawyer who disputed a witness's use of the word hysterical (Warburg 1968, pp. 351-2). The witness had described a young man's condition as 'hysterical'. But, the lawyer pointed out, this word was derived from the Greek hystera, meaning 'uterus' or 'womb'. The young man didn't have a uterus, so he couldn't possibly be 'hysterical'. Would a good lawyer really expect to score a point by this kind of appeal to etymology? Few of us are likely to be persuaded to change our view of the current meaning of the word hysterical It is true that the word is based on the Greek for 'uterus' (and the Greek element appears in that sense in English medical terms such as hysterectomy and hysteroscopy). But it is also true that words may change their meaning and that the modern meaning of hysterical has more to do with uncontrolled emotional behaviour, by men or women, than with the uterus as a bodily organ. Sometimes an older sense of a word survives in limited contexts, while the most frequent meaning has changed. The word meat, for example, now has the common meaning of 'animal flesh used as food', but its Old English antecedent was a word that had the more general

meaning of 'food'. Traces of the older more general meaning can be seen in phrases and sayings like meat and drink (i. e. 'food and drink') and one man's meat is another man's poison (i. e. 'one man's food is another man's poison'). The word sweetmeat also demonstrates the older sense. Other than in these restricted contexts, the older meaning of the word has become not only obsolete but irrelevant to modern usage. If you ask today whether a certain supermarket sells meat, or talk about the amount of meat consumed in Western Europe, or have an argument about what kind of meat is in a meat pie, no WORDS AND MEANING 31 one who speaks English pauses to wonder whether you really intend meat to mean 'food in general' rather than 'animal flesh'. Indeed, older meanings become lost from view, and phrases and sayings may even be reinterpreted to suit the new meaning. The word silly had an older sense of 'happy' (compare German selig, 'blessed') but this sense has been ousted by the current meaning of 'foolish' or 'absurd'. A phrase sometimes applied to the county of Suffolk in eastern England, silly Suffolk, dates from the days when Suffolk was one of the wealthier counties, and therefore 'happy' or 'fortunate'. But if the saying is quoted at all these days, either it has to be explained, as we have just done here, or it is taken to be an allegation of foolishness or backwardness. The word prove once had the sense of 'try' or 'test' but the most common modern meanings are of course 'show beyond doubt' (as in 'we all suspect him of corruption but no one has been able to prove it') and 'turn out' (as in 'the book proved to have lots of useful information in it'). The saying that the exception proves the rule shows the older sense - an exception indeed 'tests' whether a rule is really valid or needs to be reformulated. But the saying is often

reinterpreted, with prove taken in its modern sense, to mean that an odd exception actually confirms a rule. This is clearly not true - an exception doesn't support a rule, it challenges it - but such is the power of current meaning to efface the old. There is a long history of interest in etymology, in 'where words have come from', and many large dictionaries of English include etymological information (see McArthur 1992, pp. 384-6, Landau 1989, pp. 98-104, Green 1996, esp. pp. 337-48). Unfortunately, until the development of methodical historical linguistics in the nineteenth century, much etymology was highly speculative and often erroneous. Misguided guesswork about the origins of words can be found in ancient Europe, for example in the work of Varro, a Roman grammarian active in the first century BC (Green 1996, p. 41), and the practice of trying to relate as many words as possible to a relatively small number of allegedly simple or basic words was common until the mid-nineteenth century. Green cites a classic example from the late eighteenth century, in which a whole array of English words were claimed to be derived from or based on the word bar: thus a bar is a kind of defence or strengthening, and a barn is a covered enclosure to protect or defend what is stored in it, a barge is a strong boat, the bark of a tree is its protection, the bark of a dog is its defence, and so on (Green 1996, p. 353). In fact, careful historical research indicates that the word bar, as in the bars in a fence or across a window, came into English 32 COLIN YALLOP from Old French, while barn is from an Old English compound meaning 'barley store', barge is related to an Old French word for a kind of boat, the bark of a tree is a word of Scandinavian origin, and the bark of a dog goes back to the Old English verb beorcan, 'to bark', which is not related to the

other bark. These various words are of different origins, there is no evidence that they are all based on bar, and the idea that they are all clustered around the notion of defence is pure speculation. Occasionally, an erroneous origin has become enshrined in the language by a process of 'folk etymology', in which the pronunciation or spelling of a word is modified on a false analogy. The word bridegroom, for example, has no historical connection with the groom employed to tend horses. The Old English antecedent of bridegroom is brydguma, where guma is a word for 'man'. The word ought to have become bridegoom in modern English, but as the word guma fell out of use, the form goom was popularly reinterpreted (with a change in pronunciation and spelling) as groom. A similar process of trying to make the odd seem familiar sometimes applies to words adapted from other languages. The woodchuck, or 'ground hog', has a name taken from a North American Algonquian word which, in its nearest anglicised pronunciation, might be something like otchek or odjik. The word has nothing to do with either wood or chuck, but was adapted to seem as if it did. There is nothing wrong with being interested in where a word has come from, and many people who use modern dictionaries expect historical or etymological information to be included. For much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, most dictionaries gave considerable prominence to historical information. The first complete edition of what is now commonly referred to as the 'Oxford dictionary' was entitled A New English Dictionary on Historical Principles, and it set out to record the history of words, not just their current meanings (see 1. 5 above; but not all subsequent Oxford dictionaries, including various abridged editions and dictionaries for learners, have had

the same historical priority). It hardly needs to be said that modern professional lexicographers try to avoid speculation and guesswork and to give only information based on good research. It is indeed often interesting to know something of a word's history and its cognates in other languages, and many (though not all) modern dictionaries still include etymological information. English happens to share with most European languages a reasonably welldocumented Indo-European heritage. Languages like Greek, Latin and Sanskrit, as well as a 'proto-Germanic' language ancestral to WORDS AND MEANING 33 modern English, German and other Germanic languages, can be shown to be historically related within an Indo-European 'family' of languages. The entry for bear (in the sense of 'carry') in the New Shorter Oxford, as cited earlier in 1. 2, illustrates the way in which some dictionaries list cognates: the etymology includes not only forms considered to be ancestral to the modern English, in this case Old English beran, but also forms from other Germanic languages which are parallel to Old English rather than ancestral to it, such as Old Norse bera and Gothic bairan. The Oxfordalso lists forms that are parallel to Germanic, including Sanskrit bharati, Greek pherein and Latin ferre. As the Oxford entry implies, linguists hypothesise that there was an Indo-European form from which the Sanskrit, Greek, Latin and Proto-Germanic forms were separately derived. Sometimes there have been intriguing changes of meaning. The word town, for example, can be traced back to an Old English form tun (with a long vowel, pronounced something like modern English oo in soon). We can connect this form with related words in other modern Germanic languages, notably tuin in Dutch and Zaun in German. There are regular patterns of sound change

which (partly) explain how the forms have become different: modern English out, house, mouse, all pronounced with the same diphthong as in town, can be related to Old English ut, hus, mus (all with a long u) as well as to Dutch uit, huis, muis and German aus, Haus, Maus. But in the case of the forms related to town, Dutch tuin means not 'town' but 'garden' and German Zaun means neither 'town' nor 'garden' but 'fence'. There was also a similar word in Celtic languages, namely dun, meaning something like 'citadel' or 'fortified town'. This element is evident in some Roman place names incorporating Celtic elements, like Lugdunum, modern Lyons, and in names such as Dunedin, an old Celtic name now generally replaced in Scotland by the anglicised form Edinburgh, but still the name of a city in New Zealand. Thus the word must once have referred to fortified settlements. By modern times the English word town has generalised in meaning to refer to any substantial urban centre (between a village and a city in size and importance) while the Dutch word tuin has come to mean 'enclosed cultivated land', that is 'a garden', rather than an enclosed town, and the German Zaun has narrowed to the enclosure itself, or 'fence'. Such information is not only interesting to many readers, it is often valuable as an accompaniment to historical and cultural research. Moreover, modern European languages not only have a certain shared heritage, they have continued to draw on it in various ways. Latin words can still be found in uses as diverse as the English translation of Freud 34 COLIN YALLOP (the ego and the id) and the mottoes of army regiments (such as Ubique 'everywhere', the motto of the British Royal Artillery). Some Latin phrases are indeed everywhere, even if no longer fully understood. Notable examples are etc., the abbreviated form of et cetera,

'and the rest'; e. g., short for exempli gratia, 'for (the sake of) example'; and a. m. and p. m. (ante meridiem, post meridiem). Latin has been regularly used in anatomical description (levator labii superior, the 'upper lip raiser' muscle, or corpus callosum, the 'callous (hard) body' in the brain), and in botany and zoology (quercus 'oak' for a genus of trees, orfelis'cat' for the genus of animals that includes domestic cats and some closely related species). Latin phrases such as de facto, in camera, sine die, sub judice and ultra vires are known in legal contexts, and some of them have a wider currency (such as the Australian use, even outside legal contexts, of the phrase 'a de facto' to mean 'a common-law spouse'). Greek and Latin have also provided a rich source of modern coinage. Words like altimeter, electroencephalogram, hydrophone and telespectroscope are obviously not themselves classical words: they have been built from Latin and Greek elements to deal with relatively recent technological innovation. Indeed, it has become so customary to use such elements as building blocks, that Latin and Greek are often combined in hybrid forms, as in Greek tele- with Latin vision, or Latin appendicwith Greek -itis. But it is by no means just new items of technology, like cardiographs and synthesisers, that attract classical naming. Greek and Latin elements are integral to our standardised systems of calculating and measuring (centigrade, centimetre, kilogram, millisecond, quadrillion). Concepts like social security, multimedia, globalisation and privatisation, though essentially twentieth-century concepts, are conceived in classical forms. A classical heritage similarly underlies terms like interdisciplinarity (which I heard used at Macquarie University in discussions about creating links among different academic 'disciplines' or areas of

learning) and interdiscursivity (which I have seen on a whiteboard in a university lecture theatre but not yet understood). And terms formed with Greek and Latin elements like intra, non, post, pseudo, ultra are used as much in administration or business or politics as in science or technology (intrastate, noncompliance, postdated, pseudo-solution, ultraconservative] . Nevertheless, as we have already argued, the history of a word is not the determinant of its current meaning, and the greatest persisting drawback of etymological studies is that they may be misused to support assertions about what words 'ought' to mean. No modern dictionary (including Oxford's New English Dictionary) seriously misuses WORDS AND MEANING 35 historical information in this way. And, for the greater part of English vocabulary, no one seriously proposes that an older meaning of a word is the only correct meaning. But where a shift in meaning is relatively recent, and particularly where a newer sense of a word is evidently competing with an older sense, some people may deplore the change and attempt to resist it. Thus in the seventeenth century, the English word decimate was used to mean something like 'take or remove one tenth from', as in 'tithing', that is taxing people one-tenth of their income or property, or in the sense of killing one in ten. (Executing one in ten of a group of soldiers was a punishment sometimes used in the ancient Roman empire.) Nowadays the word is most commonly used to mean 'destroy most of, as if the 'decimation' now means reducing to one-tenth, rather than reducing to nine-tenths. Some people, especially those who have had a classical education and are aware of the ancient Roman punishment, condemn the modern usage as loose and unwarranted. Whatever our feelings about respecting tradition or preserving

history, it has to be said that such attempts to resist changes in general usage are rarely if ever successful. What usually happens is that by the time a shift is in progress, a majority accepts or doesn't notice the change, and only a minority condemns or resists the change. At this point, the minority may claim that their usage is educated or correct, and that the majority usage is careless or mistaken. But the minority usage is at risk of seeming unduly conservative and pedantic, and the situation is usually resolved by the disappearance of the minority usage. Over the years, people have deplored the changes in meaning of words like arrive, deprecate and obnoxious and have been able to argue that the older meaning was more faithful to the etymology. Thus arrive used to mean 'to reach a shore' rather than to reach anywhere (and the older meaning could be justified by appeal to the French rive 'shore, riverbank'); deprecate once meant 'to pray against, pray for deliverance from' rather than the modern 'to disapprove of, criticise' (and this too could be justified etymologically, given the Latin deprecatus 'prayed against'); and obnoxious meant 'liable to criticism or punishment' (Latin obnoxius 'exposed to harm') whereas the modern meaning is 'unpleasant, offensive'. Needless to say, the older meanings are now virtually unknown - except to those who find them in dictionaries and other records of the past. Finally, we should note the need to be cautious about the idea of 'original meaning'. Sometimes we can identify the origin of a word - as for instance with the word boycott, which is believed to have come from the name of a land agent in nineteenth-century Ireland, who was 36 COLIN YALLOP 'boycotted' by tenants. But in many cases, there is no justification for calling an earlier meaning 'original'. The most common current meaning

of nice - pleasant or enjoyable - has probably come from an earlier meaning, something like 'delicate' or 'dainty'. But this meaning can scarcely be called original. It probably came from earlier use of the word to mean 'finely differentiated' or 'requiring care and discrimination' (compare a traditional legal phrase 'a nice point'), which must in turn have come from the Latin nescius 'ignorant'. But even the Latin word and its meaning are only original relative to modern English. Latin is also a language with a history. It descended from something spoken previously, just as much as modern Italian came from Latin or modern English from old English. In short, however interesting and instructive the past may be, not all of it is accessible to us and not all of it is relevant. The past is not the present, nor is the history of a word its meaning. 2. 4 Prescription The idea which we have been looking at in the previous section, that a word ought to mean what it used to mean, is just one instance of what can be called a prescriptive approach to language. More generally, there have been many and various attempts to prescribe how language ought to be - prescriptions about pronunciation, for example, or rules about correct grammar, as well as claims about the proper meanings of words. Many of these attempts have been misguided if not perverse, and it became axiomatic in twentieth-century linguistics to reject prescriptivism. A common slogan of linguists was that 'linguistics is descriptive, not prescriptive'. As a commitment to scientific method and ethical research, the slogan is exemplary. Whether investigating the physiology of speech production, recording what people say to each other in specific situations or examining the frequencies of words in printed texts, linguists, like all scholars and researchers, are under obligation to describe what they find.

Even allowing that complete objectivity is unattainable, and that there will always be controversy about what exactly constitutes 'describing what you find', there is an indisputable obligation to aim to describe what is there, rather than to describe what you would like to be there or what you think ought to be there. The slogan also represents a justifiable reaction to some of the prescriptivism of the past. In seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe, for example, some scholars and writers believed that it was necessary to regulate language and to set up academies for this purWORDS AND MEANING 37 pose, such as the Academic Francaise, founded in 1634 and charged with compiling a French dictionary and with ruling on matters of grammar, vocabulary and usage. Though no academy was ever set up in Britain, there were certainly calls to refine and reform the English language. To some extent, these ambitions were motivated by a desire for regularity and consistency. Since it is important both to understand the weakness of prescriptive approaches to language and to recognise the genuine normativity inherent in language, we will consider two examples in some detail, first the history of comparative forms like (more) bigger, and second the proposal that prepositions shouldn't end sentences. In English grammar, by the seventeenth century, the old pattern of forming comparative and superlative adjectives by endings (as in big, bigger, biggest or tall, taller, tallest} had begun to blend with a newer pattern using the words more and most (as in evil, more evil, most evil or corrupt, more corrupt, most corrupt}. In Shakespeare's writings, for example, we can find the two patterns combined, as in more better, more corrupter, most unkindest, most coldest. But eighteenth-century grammarians began to criticise this practice,

apparently on the grounds that only one of the two devices (either the ending or the more/most} is logically necessary to convey the meaning. Modern English usage has been partly influenced by these grammatical strictures. People nowadays quite often say things like more kinder or most earliest, but they tend to avoid them in writing, and editors are likely to delete the more or most. Written usage is still not exactly regular, however, since the tendency is to use the endings on monosyllabic words (colder, coldest, higher, highest, later, latest} and to use more and most with polysyllabic words (more difficult, more interesting, most intelligent, most troublesome}. But this is only a generalisation: some monosyllabic words do take more (more tired, for instance) and for some words of two syllables it seems perfectly acceptable to go either way (shallower or more shallow, commonest or most common}. There are also the 'irregular' forms better, best, worse, worst. (For an overview of usage see Biber et al. 1999, pp. 521-5, and for details of past as well as more modern usage, see Fries 1940, pp. 96-101.) Despite some variation in usage, forms such as more bigger and most highest are usually disapproved of by editors and teachers. While there may be a superficial appeal in simplifying such phrases to the single words bigger and highest, there are two difficulties to be noted. The first is that users of language will rarely if ever be bound by the dictates of individuals and academies, however educated or well informed those authorities may be. Many speakers of English continue to say things 38 COLIN YALLOP like more kinder and most earliest, even after they have been told not to. And imagine the reaction (or indifference) of the community at large if linguists or teachers were to recommend that we regularise the language by saying

gooder and goodest rather than better or best, or badder and baddest rather than worse and worst. Whatever arguments might be put forward, that forms like gooder are simpler, more regular or more logical than what we actually say, most people would continue to follow their customary practice and would consider the recommendation absurd. With few exceptions, language does not change because of regulation, it changes according to its own communal patterns. The second problem in making language more logical or regular is that it is not at all self-evident what constitutes logic or regularity in linguistic matters. It is somewhat clearer, and rather more carefully discussed, what logic means in thinking and reasoning, or what regularity means in the study of natural phenomena. But linguistic systems generate their own logics and regularities. Is it really illogical to say more kinder"? If it is the redundancy that is illogical, then by similar argument, we might claim, for example, that plural forms are redundant and illogical after numerals. A numeral already signals that the noun must be understood as plural, and we could therefore write five dollar, a hundred student, a thousand spectator. (And some languages, such as Welsh, do indeed use the singular form of a noun after a numeral.) In fact if we look dispassionately at the patterns of languages, we find a variety of ways of organising the lexicogrammar to express meaning, and it is not at all obvious why any of them should be regarded as more or less logical than others. Is it more logical for adjectives to precede nouns (as they mostly do in English, German or Japanese) or to follow nouns (as they mostly do in French, Italian or Indonesian)? Is there any reason why we should express contrasting verb meanings by suffixes (as English does with, say, walk, walked, chase, chased) rather than by auxiliary

verbs (as English does with, say, will walk, might walk, will chase, might chase) ? Is it neater or more regular to signal meanings like 'for', 'in' and 'on' by separate words preceding a noun (as English and most European languages do) or by suffixes on the noun (as languages as diverse as Finnish, Turkish and Australian Aboriginal languages mostly do)? What is logical and regular is the way in which each language underlies the linguistic behaviour of its speakers, the way in which each language builds a system out of its systems. The positioning of adjectives, the mechanics of the verb system, the use of prepositions or noun suffixes are not just trivial and isolated features of a language but are woven together in a complex, coherent and powerful lexicogrammar. WORDS AND MEANING 39 To return to the point about attempts to reform English, our second example is a rule sometimes imposed on English that sentences should not end with prepositions. According to the severest version of this rule, prepositions belong before a noun or pronoun, as in for Uncle Leo, for me, in Singapore, in the afternoon, on Fridays, on the table. A sentence in which a preposition appears other than before a noun or pronoun, like 'that's the book which I've been looking for', should be rephrased as 'that's the book for which I've been looking'; and a question like 'what is she looking at?' should be rephrased as 'at what is she looking?' This rule seems to have been invented by Dryden in the seventeenth century (Strang 1970, p. 143) and since then it has been often promoted, possibly beyond Dryden's intentions, and widely ignored or ridiculed. In modern grammars, a preposition such as the 'for' in 'what are you looking for' is sometimes said to be 'stranded' (see e. g. Biber el al 1999, pp. 105-8). The reasons for wanting to avoid 'stranded' prepositions probably

include the fact that prepositions do not occur at the end of sentences in Latin (and Latin has often been held up as a model which other languages should conform to) and the very name preposition, which might seem, etymologically, to imply that these words should always be 'pre-posed' before another word. But Latin grammar is not the same as modern English grammar, and the etymology of the name preposition does not impose any requirement on well-established English usage (any more than premises must mean '(things) sent beforehand' or prevent must mean 'come before'). While many writers, having been schooled in Dryden's rule, may now prefer to avoid sentence-final prepositions in formal English, most of us continue to ask questions like what were you looking for1? and who did you give it to?, and find the rephrased versions awkward or pompous. Indeed, the strength of communal resistance to arbitrary regulation is seen in the way in which the rule is mocked by pronouncements such as 'a preposition is a bad word to end a sentence with' or the witticism ascribed to Winston Churchill 'this is a form of pedantry up with which I will not put'. While it may sometimes seem desirable to make language more logical or consistent, the fundamental challenge to regulators is that the patterns of language emerge as a matter of social convention. Regularity and consistency are important factors in this process, but not the only ones or the pre-eminent ones. As we have already suggested, the complexity of language and its processes of acquisition and change are such that it is not always clear what exactly logic and consistency mean in linguistic practice. If most coldest ought to be simplified or regularised, should it be to coldest or to most cold"? And if this reform is important, why 40 COLIN YALLOP is it not equally important to get

rid of redundant plural forms after numerals or to tidy up the English verb system? Why not get rid of the irregular and redundant word am, and simplify I am to / are, on the analogy of you are and we are? (We already say aren't I? rather than amn't I? which takes us some of the way towards this regularisation.) Why not make all verbs regular, replacing ran with runned, wrote with writed, and so on? The absurdity of trying to impose some externally conceived general notion of logic and simplicity on language puts a harsh spotlight on the odd details that are on reformist agendas. Indeed, many people have tried to reform or regularise a language or to stop it from changing, but few have had much success. In general, languages change as societies and cultures do: as we differ from our grandparents, whether radically or not, in our beliefs, our perspectives, our social behaviour, our hobbies, our dress, so we differ from them, significantly or trivially, in our accent, in our idiom, in the words we use and the meanings we exploit. Changes in language do not happen uniformly across the world, and perhaps not even at a constant rate - there may be periods of rapid change and periods of relative stability. But change is observable, everywhere where the history of languages can be studied. We should nevertheless be clear that an argument against regulation and prescription is not an argument against normativity in principle. The social nature of language brings a normativity of its own. As children we learn our linguistic patterns in the community in which we function, from our peers and from the adults with whom we interact. We learn the conventions of the written language which our community has inherited. And the patterns and conventions that underlie linguistic behaviour around us exert a strong pressure to conform: as human

beings we are powerfully motivated, not only to understand and be understood, but to belong. As we enter places of formal education and employment, we may be subject to specific linguistic norms, the kinds of norms that govern the writing of university essays or press releases or product information or government reports. Here we may well be in relatively circumscribed domains, where norms may be imposed more directly and more authoritatively. Thus a commercial company may have rules about the structure and wording of the memorandums written by its employees, a journal may have requirements about the style and presentation of papers which it is prepared to publish, a government department may follow conventional guidelines about the format and style of its documentation, and so on. (For more discussion of 'controlled' language, especially nomenclatures, see 2. 8 below.) WORDS AND MEANING 41 It is in such domains that arbitrary prescriptions of the kind that tell us to write shallower, not more shallow, or to avoid ending sentences with prepositions, may have some measure of success. To some extent, arbitrary rulings in well-defined contexts are necessary, simply to yield consistency in, for example, the way in which dates are written or bibliographies compiled or reports presented. Hopefully the focus of those who write the relevant style guides or otherwise determine conventions in such settings is on clarity and consistency and efficiency, and on meaningful rather than empty traditions. Moreover, even in society at large, it is important, even essentially human, to bring moral perspectives to bear on social and cultural changes. Social and cultural changes can, and should be, evaluated for their effects on human wellbeing, on the distribution of resources, on fairness and justice,

difficult and contentious though the processes and criteria of evaluation may be. And to the extent that language reflects and supports behaviour and social structures, it is open to moral evaluation. Without such evaluation there would be no debate about sexism and racism in language, no possibility for argument about clarity and truth in language. Thus most of us do accept style guides that promote inclusive or egalitarian language, guidelines that provide for a certain degree of consistency of format in journals and bibliographies, courses that teach report writing, and so on. The argument against prescription is not an argument against normativity in principle. But linguistic norms must be founded in social agreement on issues that matter to people - in a recognition by most people that we ought to eliminate racist words from the language, or that it is worth some effort to make instruction manuals as clear as possible, or that bibliographies are much easier to use if they follow standard conventions. This kind of commitment does not constitute justification for prescriptions about whether you can end a sentence with a preposition, and it gives no support to rulings based on individual interpretations of what might make language more regular, nor to arguments that language should be fixed once and for all in some supposedly golden age. 3. 5 A social view of language and meaning In this book we take the view that language is social behaviour and meaning a social phenomenon. By this we mean that language is more than an individual possession or ability, that language 'exists' because of its life in social interaction, that meaning is shaped and negotiated 42 COLIN YALLOP in social interaction and that meaning must be studied with due recognition of its social setting. The concept of meaning itself is difficult to define and it

is no exaggeration to say that modern linguistics has failed to formulate a widely agreed theory of meaning. But the fact that there is something elusive and mysterious about meaning need not embarrass us, any more than humans should be embarrassed by the difficulty of understanding and denning exactly what we mean by time, number, life and other fundamental concepts of our existence. Most of us readily acknowledge that we cannot give a snappy definition of what time is, but we are still conscious of what we call the passing of time, we know the difference between yesterday and tomorrow, we even make it possible for ourselves to measure and quantify time by counting the alternations of daylight and darkness, constructing a twenty-four-hour day, and so on. Similarly, it is hard to give a technical definition of life. Dictionaries resort to phrases like 'the state of being alive' or to descriptions of what distinguishes living beings from dead ones or living beings from inanimate objects. In so doing they demonstrate both the difficulty of what they are trying to do and the good sense of drawing on our experience: we know that some things (people, animals, plants) live, that other things do not, that living beings sooner or later die. We will try to take a similar approach to meaning: it may be hard to define, but we all experience it; we negotiate meanings in our daily life; we (mostly) know what we mean and what others mean. In societies with well-developed literacy and a tradition of publishing and using dictionaries and other reference books, there is always a danger that a language will be equated with some written account of the language. We have already referred to the dangers of assuming that a dictionary of English is the vocabulary of English (2. 2 above), and a book describing the grammar of English may likewise

seem to be the grammar of English. But dictionaries and grammar books are only representations of the language (and limited representations of certain aspects of the language). If they have value, it is because they represent, in some generalising abstract way, what people do linguistically. The meanings of words or the rules of grammar have not been laid down by some expert or authoritative decree at some point in the past and then enshrined in print. Dictionaries and grammar books are not legislation enacted by a linguistic parliament, nor are they the official manuals issued by people who created the language. If dictionaries and grammar books have authority, it is because they reflect general usage. Thus a language exists or lives not because it is described or recorded but because it is in use among people who know the language. WORDS AND MEANING 43 We say that people 'know' a language. And this, perhaps as well as images of language as recorded rules and inventories, may imply that language exists in the human mind. While it is obviously true that adult speakers of a language have large resources of knowledge - including for example knowledge of words and meanings and experience of using and understanding them - it would be misleading to suggest that an individual's linguistic knowledge is a complete and adequate version of 'the language'. For an individual, taken in isolation, is just that, an isolated individual. We cannot really speak of a language unless individual human beings are communicating with each other, bringing the language to life. Our individual knowledge of language comes from interaction with others, at first particularly with parents and family, later also with other children with whom we spend time, with schoolteachers, and so on. Some bases of our linguistic behaviour seem to be established relatively

early and firmly. Most people acquire their accent or patterns of pronunciation fairly early and seem to change very little, even if they move to an area where people speak differently (although some people do make substantial changes in their pronunciation, for example at secondary school or at university). People similarly tend to maintain basic vocabulary and idioms that they have used frequently in their early years, although again they may yield to strong pressures to change, for example if they realise there are substantial social and economic advantages in making changes, or if they move to an area where some different words and idioms are customary. But even those whose language seems to change little during their lifetime are still using and experiencing language. For most of us, in most parts of the world, language is realised - actualised, made real - in a wide range of settings, such as homes and schools and workplaces and shops among many others. Our sense of what is normal usage, of what words mean, is constantly shaped by such experience. Consider for example the word stakeholder. Until the latter part of the twentieth century, the meaning of the word was something like 'the person who holds the stakes in a bet'. English-language dictionaries published before the igSos record only that sense. By the end of the 19805, however, the word was being used in a commercial sense, as in an Australian newspaper's reference to 'the best interests of the company taking into account the stakeholders'. From this kind of use in commercial and financial contexts, the word extended into other institutional uses, so that we find, during the 19905, a university talking about its 'accountability and information provision to external stakeholders' and a water supply authority talking about workshops attended

by 'stakeholders, managers and scientists'. A website relevant to 44 COLIN YALLOP the construction industry speaks of the importance of the 'collaborative efforts of all stakeholders' and then helpfully specifies stakeholders as designers, engineers, property consultants, technologists and clients 'among many others'. From uses such as these it is clear that stakeholder can no longer be taken in the sense of someone who is holding or directly investing money. While it would be unwarranted to attach too much significance to a single word, the shift and extension of stakeholder not only illustrates how words and our understanding of them can change, but also how changes in words reflect social movements, in this case the widening scope of stakeholder going hand in hand with an increasingly commercialised perspective on services such as education and health through the 19905 and the extension of many commercial or financial terms into general administrative discourse. The word gender has also shifted in recent years, again reflecting social changes. Until quite recently English-language dictionaries gave as the main use of gender its meaning in grammar, as in talking about the two genders (masculine and feminine) of nouns in French or Spanish, or the three genders (masculine, feminine and neuter) of nouns in Latin or German. Some dictionaries also recorded a technical biological use of the word, as in talking about gender differentiation within a species, and an informal, possibly jocular or euphemistic use, as in talking about people 'of the opposite gender'. By the end of the 19805, dictionaries are recording gender as, having a significant and formal use for something like 'the fact of being male or female'. The word has largely replaced sex in this sense, for sex has increasingly been used as shorthand

for 'sexual intercourse'. At the same time the word gender has increasingly appeared in various kinds of official and academic discourse. A corpus search suggests that in formal written discourse in the 19905, references to grammatical gender were now vastly outnumbered by the use of the word in phrases like 'redefining gender roles' or 'gender balance (in the workforce)' or 'gender and sexuality'. Thus demographers can refer to the 'age/ gender profiles' of population groups and a trade union can raise the question of 'gender inequities in the existing staff structure', while universities offer courses with titles such as 'Gender and Policy' and the 'Politics of Culture and Gender'. Readers may like to ask themselves what they would take to be the current difference in meaning between 'the politics of gender' and 'the politics of sex'. There is a sense in which the meaning of (most) words is constantly being negotiated. Our notion of what words like stakeholder, gender and sex mean is dependent on our discourse, on our experience of these WORDS AND MEANING 45 words, on our experience of how others use these words in real situations. Older readers may remember uses that are now archaic or obsolete, like 'the gentle sex' and 'the second sex'. Even phrases that are current may reveal a certain competition between different senses: note for instance how we understand the word sex in 'sex discrimination' compared with 'safe sex', or 'sex stereotyping of women' compared with 'gratuitous sex scenes'. (Compare examples given earlier of meanings which may be associated with particular contexts, or of meanings which may disappear other than in a few phrases, such as meat in the sense of food in general, 2. 3 above.) The word patron comes from a Latin word that meant something like 'protector' or 'guardian'. In English, the word has

had a similar meaning, still evident in the phrase 'patron saint' for example. When we read about the eighteenth-century lexicographer Samuel Johnson and his need for patrons (and see his biting definition of patron, 2. 2 above), we also understand the word against a background of benefactors and their dependants. Current corpus evidence shows continuing use of patron in this kind of meaning ('galleries which were trustees of public art, with local government as their major patrons') but also shows the word with a meaning that is closer to customer or client, especially a customer in a hotel or restaurant ('most diners want privacy ... some patrons, however, do not mind being observed'). Meanwhile the French word patron has come to be used in the sense of 'manager'. Thus in a restaurant in France, someone who asks for le patron is looking for 'the boss', not any of the customers. That two words of one origin can end up with contrasting, almost opposite meanings demonstrates again that meanings are negotiable and negotiated. In the following section, we will further develop this perspective by looking briefly at the contribution to linguistic theory of the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure and the British linguist J. R. Firth. Saussure is widely considered to be the founder of modern structural linguistics and Firth a leading figure in mid-twentieth-century British linguistics. While these are by no means the only two linguists whose ideas we respect and draw on, they are both influential and explicit theoreticians who have shaped the way many linguists talk about meaning. 46 COLIN YALLOP 2. 6 Saussure and Firth Saussure Ferdinand de Saussure was a francophone Swiss, born in Geneva in 1857. He seems to have had a great talent for languages and at the age of 15 was said to be already competent in Latin, Greek, German and English (as

well as French, his mother tongue, of course). He came from a family with a tradition of scientific achievement - his father was a well-known naturalist, for example - and he entered the University of Geneva as a student of physics and chemistry in 1875. But his talents and enthusiasm were focused on language, and after a year of studying science in Geneva, he persuaded his parents to send him to Germany to study Indo-European languages. Saussure studied in Germany for four years, mixing with learned and creative scholars, acquiring extremely useful experience in the research methodology of the times. He then taught for ten years in Paris, where he seems to have been highly regarded and influential, before returning, in 1891, to a professorship in Geneva. He taught mostly the linguistics of the time - Sanskrit, comparative and historical linguistics - but there is some evidence from his correspondence that he was dissatisfied with general linguistic thinking, that he thought there was need to reform the jargon and terminology of the day, and that he thought linguists needed to think more about what they were doing. In 1906, the University of Geneva asked him to take over the responsibility for teaching general linguistics, and from then until 1911 he gave a series of lectures in alternate years. In 1912 he fell ill and he died in 1913. (For a concise account of Saussure's life and work, see Culler 1976.) He had written a substantial amount about Indo-European languages and historical reconstruction, by which he had maintained his high reputation, but he had written nothing about his ideas on language in general. His colleagues and his students were so impressed by what they had heard from him that they thought they should try to preserve the lectures from the last years of his life. Two of his students put together what

they could, from Saussure's own lecture notes and their and other students' notes, and created a book now known as Saussure's Cows de Linguistique Generate or Course in General Linguistics. The Cours was first published in Paris in 1916 and has been through several editions since then. A critical edition of the French text, prepared by Tullio de Mauro, was published in 1972 (Saussure 1972) and includes copious background and notes on the text. An English WORDS A