Introduction

No meaning without other people

This book is about meaning. Probably no society has ever been more concerned with meaning than the one in which we live. Never before have so many people felt such an urge to make sense of the world they live in and of the lives they are leading. They find this sense not so much in themselves as in the discourse, which is the entirety of everything that has been said and written by the members of the discourse community to which they owe their identity. It is communication, this verbal interaction with others, which reassures them about their notions and ideas, and in which they find interpretations they can accept, rework or reject, and in which they can recognise themselves.

In principle, everyone has a voice in the discourse. But in reality we find that our modern society is neatly divided into those who are commissioned to produce texts for the media and the rest of us who consume them. While each of us may say whatever we want, it seems to carry less weight than what we are told by the discourse we find on the shelves of our content merchants: newspapers, magazines, television, much of the web, NHS brochures and similar pamphlets issued by our authorities, instruction manuals and even those old-fashioned things called books. Secondary experiences supplied by the media have taken over the role that a person’s own experiences and those of their friends and neighbours had for former generations. Even when we want to find out what our own experiences mean, we trust the texts offered by the content merchants more than our own judgement or that of our friends and neighbours. The media, not the common sense we exercise in conversation with family and friends, will tell me whether feeling fed up with my workload means that I have depression and should take pills. Such a dependence is hardly surprising. Even in the good old days when the media had little power over our thoughts, we always needed a discourse community to make sense of our experiences. Interpretation is inevitably a collaborative act. We do not interpret our experiences for ourselves; we do it for an audience, imagined or otherwise. We want to learn from the interpretations offered by others, and we want others to share our interpretations. There is no meaning without society.

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My view is that the world, our lives, the things we do or don’t do, and what happens to us, have no meaning at all, in as much as we do not
appropriate them through interpretation. Our experiences only make sense when we reflect on them, or when we share them with others by talking about them, or when we weigh them against other people’s experiences as we find them in the media we consume. This is indeed what we do most of the time when we talk with each other: we assign meaning to what we do and what others do. The only reality that counts is the reality we find constructed in the discourse, in this entirety of texts that have been exchanged and shared between the people who make up society. We never cease contributing to this limitless, all-encompassing blog uniting humankind that I call the discourse. The discourse tells us how we experience, how we ‘feel’, what happens to us and what we do. We have learned how to experience things through the stories other people have told about their experiences. For us, too, the only way to communicate our personal experiences is by contributing them to the discourse. We cannot do that without interpreting them, without assigning meaning to them. It is the discourse that makes our lives meaningful. The discourse tells us how we can view the world, our private lives, the things we do or don’t do, and the things that happen to us. Without the discourse, these things, and even life itself, remain devoid of meaning. This is why chimpanzees, lacking language, are not concerned with the meaning of their lives.

The word *life* means what life is for us. The meaning of life is therefore not really different from the meaning of the word *life*. It is all that has been said about it. Google lists c. 229,000 occurrences of the phrase ‘the meaning of life is’. Here are a few citations, taken from the first fifty entries:

*The meaning of life is* that there is no meaning at all.
*The meaning of life is* to live.
*the meaning of life is* what you make of it
*The meaning of life is* to make life meaningful.
*the meaning of life is* to reach Nirvana
*The Meaning of Life is* the title of a 1983 Monty Python film.

The results for ‘life means’ are not so different. Among the first entries (of 1,130,000) listed by Google, we find:

Where *Life* Means Getting a Little Sand in Your Shoes
When *Life* Means Life.
*Life* means so much.
*Life* means suffering.
*eternal life means* serenity
*Life Means* Nothing.
*Life Means* Nothing Behind the Green Wall

It is difficult to imagine that by pondering we would find an answer to the meaning of life/life that is not already expressed in the discourse. The same is
true for all the other things our world consists of. We are aware of no other things, concrete or abstract, beyond those which have already been discussed. By reflecting on them we may hope to find something new. But once we take a closer look we find that what we have taken to be new is no more than a recombination, a permutation, a reformulation of what has been said before. This is how new ideas come about. As long as we keep talking to each other, as long as the discourse goes on, there will always be innovation.

\textit{That content needs a discourse is not such a new idea}

The idea that there is nothing ‘really’ new is not new. It has been with us, it seems, since the beginning of time. In Ecclesiastes 1, 9–10, we find it already spelt out:

The thing that has been, it is that which shall be; and that which has been done is that which shall be done: and there is no new thing under the sun, Is there any thing 

My book is yet another text, in a world flooded with texts on a scale our ancestors would not have dreamt of. Like most other books, it builds on previous texts. The ideas it presents have been around for a long time. What I try to do in this text is to recombine, permute and rephrase them in such a way that perhaps something slightly new takes shape. We can look at the discourse as the memory of all the hands of a deck of cards that have ever been played, and we can see every new text as a new hand, more or less similar to previous hands but not quite identical to them, made up mostly of the very same cards. Sometimes an author may try to smuggle in a new card, and, if she or he is very lucky, the other players will accept it as long as they do not notice.

Rearranging existing units of meaning is more than playing with words. It is presenting the world to us in a new light. We always have the power to change this discourse-internal world by adding yet another, our own, interpretation onto previous texts. If other people take notice, if it leaves traces in future texts, it will have had an impact.

It is the discourse that turns the stuff of reality out there into objects. As objects of the discourse, they are at our disposition. All we have to do when we want to change things as we find them is to reconstruct them, to assign a new meaning to them. Karl Marx was wrong when he said: ‘The philosophers have only interpreted the world differently, what matters is to change it’ (Marx 1888: 7). The only way to change the world as we encounter it, mediated through the discourse, is to reinterpret it.

When we talk, we never start at point zero. We react to things that have been said before. We praise, or accept, or criticise, or reject what has been said before. Perhaps we proffer a counter-example to the example we were given. Even if we
invent a new story, it will be modelled on existing stories. Indeed, unless we had been talked to we would never say anything. For we learn to speak by reacting to those who speak to us first. Whatever we may say, it is made up from the building blocks provided by the existing discourse. All we do in a new text is to rearrange these elements.

The text that I contribute to this discourse is a reinterpretation of previous texts, which, of course, were also nothing but interpretations of interpretations of interpretations. For us, the interpretive community, symbolic content never refers to anything tangible. All we can see is how it refers to something said before. The first arbitrary sign used by someone to signal something to someone else referred not to something in the world outside but to an object constructed through symbolic interaction. Any new text is always in some way a comment on previous texts, a re-assignment of meaning. Even those who disclaim the plausibility of this assumption, advancing instead the equally convincing idea that we only speak because we have something new to say, show unwillingly that they are, too, treading no uncharted territory but paths already well-trodden.

Noam Chomsky provides an excellent example:

The first [creative aspect of language use] is that the normal use of language is innovative, in the sense that much of what we say in the course of normal language use is entirely new, not a repetition of anything that we have heard before and not even similar in pattern – in any useful sense of the terms ‘similar’ and ‘pattern’ – to sentences or discourse that we have heard in the past. This is a truism, but an important one, often overlooked and not infrequently denied in the behaviorist period of linguistics, to which I referred earlier, when it was almost universally claimed that a person’s knowledge of language is representable as a stored set of patterns, overlearned through constant repetition and detailed training, with innovation being at most a matter of ‘analogy’. (Chomsky 1972: 11f., my emphasis)

How innovative is this text segment really? According to the Cobuild dictionary, a truism is ‘a statement that is generally accepted as obviously true and is repeated so often that it has become boring’. What Chomsky had to tell us was, it seems, nothing new; it was no more than a reformulation of what we had been told all along. But as such, it was enormously successful. It was the foundational idea of the paradigm of generative transformational grammar which has dominated much of theoretical linguistics for half a century.

My aim in this book is to look again at what has been said about meaning in various fields of linguistics, social studies and the philosophy of language. I will focus on two perspectives. The goal of Chomskyan linguistics and of cognitive linguistics (two prominent schools of linguistic thinking) has been to build a model of the language system, seen as the mechanism for turning thought into utterances and utterances into thought. The mind, both schools agree, is the seat of this mechanism. This is the perspective that I will show to be defective. Instead, I will propound the view that meaning is only in the discourse. Our
world, to the extent that we can make sense of it, is a world we have constructed for ourselves, or, to be more realistic, that others have constructed for us. What we take to be reality is always mediated by what has been said.

The futile quest for a language system

Is there a language system? This is not a question I am really much concerned with. This book is about meaning, and not about the rules and regularities we find in the field of grammar. The rules we are supposed to observe in a language like English have evolved over centuries. That they are relatively stable and largely accepted wherever English is spoken is on the one hand due to inertia – there is no need to change things as long as they work well. On the other hand, there have been, time and again, efforts to standardise language in cases where we find variants. The rule systems for English and for many other European languages, as we encounter them today, owe much to the creation of the modern nation state in the nineteenth century. A unified school system presupposes not only a unified curriculum, but even more a common language. Every pupil had to be taught an inventory of grammatical rules. To a certain extent, this unification also concerns word usage. While in many English dialects *borrow* and *lend* can still be used interchangeably, we are required to use them as converse correspondences in contemporary standard English. What I lend to you is what you borrow from me. In this process of standardisation, dictionaries have played a major role, not only as repositories of the linguistic heritage, but also as voices of authority for the meaning of words.

We should distinguish between rules and regularities. Rules are what we find written down in grammar books, and what is taught in school. While we may not always be aware of our own rule-following, we can look rules up. Regularities concern practices we normally follow without being explicitly told. In English, we would normally place the modifying adjective in front of the noun. In French, it is often the other way around. This is not something native speakers have to be taught; they pick it up quite ‘naturally’ when they acquire their first language. What is a regularity for a native speaker often has to be learned as an explicit rule by the foreign learner.

This also holds for the vocabulary. We tend to take for granted that words are the ‘natural’ elements of any language. Language acquisition, whether learning one’s mother tongue or a second language, seems to be first of all learning the meaning of words. Dictionaries tell us how they are to be used. Even more than the more loquacious monolingual dictionary, its bilingual cousin fosters the illusion that there is a system behind word meanings. But in spite of all attempts to pin down the accurate meaning(s) of a word, word meanings have a tendency to remain fuzzy. Most frequent words can mean many a thing, but dictionaries rarely agree on the number of word senses and their definitions for any
given word. The reason it is quite impossible to standardise the meaning of words is that many single words in isolation have no fixed meanings. It very much depends on the contexts in which they are embedded, on the words we find to the left and right of the word in question, as to how they contribute to the meaning of a sentence. Indeed, from a semantic perspective, the word as the basic unit of language has been shown to be a rather poor choice. Single words are notoriously ambiguous. Yet we language users normally have no problems with them, as the contexts in which they are embedded tend to tell us how we should read them. The unambiguous units of meaning that we intuitively make out, when we listen to someone speaking or read a text, are often larger than this chain of letters between spaces, often consisting of two or more words, which do not even have to be adjacent. Even though many of these units have never found their way into dictionaries, we use them intuitively as elements of the discourse that we have encountered before, in the same or a similar form. These units of meaning create their own regularities, but not a system. A few lines above I have used the phrase quite impossible. Originally I had written sheer impossible. There is no rule that tells me that one does not use this phrase. After a friend pointed out my ‘mistake’, I checked it on Google. There are about 2,000 hits for it (as compared to c. 600,000 for quite impossible), and most of them are translated from other languages. There is no rule, and certainly no law, that tells me sheer impossible is wrong. How systematic is language?

While the founder of the modern discipline of linguistics, the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, did not distinguish explicitly between rules and laws, the discovery of language laws has been the main objective of much of theoretical linguistics since the second half of the twentieth century. These laws would have to be universal and valid for all languages; we would have to follow them, largely unaware of them, just as the apple knows nothing about the law of gravity that makes it fall to the ground. Like the apple, we language users would be in no position to violate the rules. I am somewhat unconvinced concerning such laws. Apart from the (obvious) truism that language, at least spoken language, is organised in a linear fashion, there seem to be few candidates for universal language laws that cannot be violated. The jury is still out on this fascinating question. I will revisit it in greater detail in the next chapter.

There are few rules concerning the meaning of words or phrases, or what I call units of meaning. Of course, as all academic teachers keep complaining, students often misuse words, particularly rarer words that are part of a specifically academic register. It seems that students are not aware of how these words are normally, perhaps even regularly, used. They may have previously encountered them only a few times, and hardly ever in a situation where it would have been feasible to ask the speaker for a paraphrase. Just encountering a word once or twice, or even more often, is rarely enough to understand its meaning. The user has to be told how to use a word and what it means (which is not always the same).
There are a number of language theoreticians who would disagree with me concerning these ideas. This is why a discussion is needed. This book is intended as a contribution to a dialogue on meaning. The different points of view allow us, in an exchange of ideas, to pick and choose among the notions that have been used by either side. By recombining and rearranging the elements of which they consist, we will find formulations that will differ more or less from what was there before. The result will be innovation, a new way to look at meaning. It is only possible if the disputants focus on the differences between existing views more than on what may link them together. Only if the dialogue on meaning speaks in many voices and clearly expresses differences, only if it is truly plurivocal, can we hope to achieve some progress.

In the first part of this book I will try to point out what is wrong with a theory which claims that the meaning of a word (or a phrase) is the mental concept to which it corresponds. This is, as I see it, the foundational stance of all cognitive linguistics, in spite of the fact that some varieties of this theoretical framework are more interested in the construction of 'cognitive' models and less in the factuality these models claim for themselves. Other 'cognitive' schools increasingly delegate the responsibility for the 'true' nature of these concepts to the neural sciences. But mental, or cognitive, concepts, or representations, are a staple fare of many twentieth-century language theories that proclaim that there is a mind endowed with a mechanism that processes linguistic input and generates linguistic output. Against this view, I raise two objections. Firstly I insist that meaning is symbolic. What a word, a phrase or a text (segment) means is something that has to be negotiated between the members of a discourse community. Unless I am told, a word means nothing; it is not a sign. Meaning is not what happens in our individual, monadic minds; it is something that is constructed within the discourse. Of course, each of us has individually learnt what words mean. But unless we actually use them in our contributions to the discourse, this passive knowledge will leave no traces. Second, we know nothing about the mind, and there is no way to access what may be in it. Nobody has ever seen a mind. A mind is something we have successfully constructed as an object of the discourse, and as such it serves many good purposes. But we have no way to find out whether minds occur as objects of the reality outside of the discourse, and they are not even objects of a discourse-internal reality shared by everyone. We use the construct 'mind' to give a name to a virtual interface between our body and our symbolic, meaningful behaviour. Mental concepts, even if they existed, would not be accessible to any empirical investigation of meaning. Of course we can build one model after another of mental concepts. But they will never be more than models.
Language in the discourse community

In the second part of this book I want to develop my view that meaning can be found nowhere else but in the discourse. I do not want to distinguish between meaning and knowledge. The word *globalisation* means all that has ever been said about the discourse object 'globalisation'. Meaning and knowledge are public. Public knowledge, as I see it, does not have to be true. 'Truth' refers to a reality out there, outside of the discourse. But globalisation is not something that we can see, hear or otherwise feel. What I experience is that I can now access my email in an internet café in almost any remote valley in Papua New Guinea, and equally that the gap between the poor and the rich is constantly growing. We can agree to calling it globalisation. But would such an agreement make it a 'true' statement? Whatever people say about globalisation, it is neither true nor false. Other people may like it or find it stupid. If it is repeated by others, it will become part of the meaning of the lexical item *globalisation*. Thus meaning, unlike 'truth', is never final; it is always provisional. Whenever we are unhappy with the way someone uses a word or a phrase, or with a longer piece of text, we will open a discussion about its meaning or, more often, about the discourse object for which it stands. We may not be able to convince our interlocutor of our view. But by talking about the word, or the object (which is the same for me), we will jointly come up with a new interpretation of it that will be added to its meaning or our knowledge about the object, and thus modify it. The discourse is the place where new texts react to existing texts, by discussing, questioning or averring what has been said. The discourse has a diachronic dimension and it goes on forever. New interpretations reinterpret earlier interpretations, and new knowledge is constructed in addition to existing knowledge. We are not at the mercy of the reality the discourse presents to us. Together, we have the power to change it.

This is why I want to look at the discourse as the collective mind of the discourse community. Unlike the monadic minds of individual people, it is open to our investigation. Linguists are in no way privileged. The discourse is at the disposal of all of us. We all can at least check what Google kindly lists as the meaning of 'life' or of *life*. Linguists are not experts in meaning or knowledge. They do not know more about the meaning of a lexical item than any other member of a discourse community.

Since antiquity, it was the *trivium* of the *artes liberales* (grammar, rhetoric and logic) that was seen as dealing with language. In the course of the Continental university reforms at the turn of the nineteenth century, the home of these language studies was seen as part of the *sciences humaines*, or the *Geisteswissenschaften*. David Hume called them the 'moral sciences'. But this categorisation was to change. Ever since the end of the nineteenth century, linguistics (like psychology) has been keen to be counted among the hard sciences and to lose its stigma of
belonging to the human sciences. As the positivists saw it, only the hard sciences, such as chemistry or physics, could lay claim to ‘true’ knowledge, based on brute ‘facts’. Only the hard sciences were seen to be dealing with the reality out there. They were considered important because what they discovered could make a valuable contribution to society; they embodied ‘progress’. A new interpretation of Shakespeare, a new dictionary of ancient Greek, a new look at a painting by Piero della Francesca might enchant a few connoisseurs but could not contribute to the technical revolution.

While it is true that some philologists in the nineteenth century professed to have discovered laws of the language system which could match the laws their colleagues in the natural sciences kept discovering, the majority of them set out to interpret the textual remnants of bygone ages, in all their diversity, inconsistency and unruliness. They were discourse linguists *avant la lettre*. In their thesauri of Sanskrit, Hebrew, Greek and Latin they showed how much the meaning of a word depended on the context in which it was situated. They were more interested in interpreting texts than in language laws as stringent as the second law of thermodynamics. It was this interpretive agenda that Ferdinand de Saussure opposed so fervently. To demonstrate the relevance of linguistics, he set out to rebrand it.

**Should the mind be an object of scientific enquiry?**

To establish linguistics as a hard science, however, required one important move. It necessitated the exclusion from the research agenda of people’s intentionalities, of their experience of reality and of their interpretation of what their reality was about. In order to be accepted, linguists had to present their object of study as a system that was independent of unpredictable human intervention. ‘In their [Saussure’s immediate predecessors’] eagerness to achieve scientific status for their linguistic studies by assimilating the discovery of linguistic patterns to the discovery of laws of Nature, they were more than content to sacrifice any distinction between rules and regularities’ (Harris 1987: 109). But there is a categorical difference between language as a system and the kind of systems we find in the natural sciences. As far as the latter are concerned, we observe and describe them from the outside. The entities and their interrelationships that make up the Newtonian system of gravity, the apple and the force that makes it fall to the ground, are not affected by our observation, our deliberations, our scientific discourse, our interpretations. Mainstream linguists in the twentieth century, in their quest for the language system and in their yearning for recognition, insisted on studying language as a zoologist would study the communication system of ants. They postulated an unbridgeable abyss between the object of observation and the observer. For Chomskyan and cognitive linguistics, the language system is something outside of the
reach of language users. But we as linguists can never escape the fact that we ourselves are language users. All language users engage in the generation and interpretation of utterances. Meaning is an integral part of language. Once we take meaning away, language ceases to be symbolic, to be language. Without intentionality, without the property of an utterance to be about some content that can be discussed, language is no longer language. Apples do not have intentionality. They do not mean. Gravity is a force independent of what we say about it. But language is different. We can never escape the discourse in which we are imprisoned whenever we negotiate the meaning of what is said. All we say becomes meaningful only through the discourse. Thus all we say has an impact on the discourse. The discourse is self-referential. This makes language something that belongs to a category different from that of gravity. There is no Archimedean point, no discourse-independent vantage point, from which we can describe language, as we can describe a falling apple.

It is true that we will never gain access to another person’s individual experiences. Yet we do not fare better with our own experiences. I experience myself and the world in which I am, the things I do or don’t do, directly and immediately, unmediated. But this immediacy is lost once the moment has passed. Not only am I unable to recall a past experience at will in some future situation, I also cannot let someone else share it. All I can do is to reflect on it, or to give testimony of it, to myself or to other people. This involves, however, translating, or rather re-creating, such an immediate experience into symbolic content, into a representation of an experience, into something that I can recall on a future occasion, and into something whose meaning can be collectively negotiated, something that has inexorably become an indirect and mediated account of my ‘raw’ experience. Intentionality, as I see it, leads us away from ‘raw’ experience; it can be described as being conscious of having experiences. Intentionality is the conscious creation of symbolic content, and the reflection on such content through the act of interpretation. The way in which I re-create my experience, turn it into symbolic content, and interpret it, is unpredictable. There is no mechanism for doing it. Language is not a system for turning my perception of myself or of the world outside into a representation. There are no rules that I follow without being aware of them, as the apple follows the law of gravity. Intentionality is outside of the remit of the hard sciences.

We will never be able to say anything about anyone’s immediate, unreflected experiences, not even if they are our own. But there is another way to look at intentionality. The way in which a person transforms their experience into symbolic content will always remain hidden. But how we talk about experiences, assign meaning to them and interpret them, is something that happens inside a discourse, whether an imaginary one in our heads or a real one within a
discourse community. It is the intentionality of this community that we can study, by analysing this discourse, namely the entirety of texts that have been exchanged and shared between the members of the community. The discourse is real, and we are not prevented from viewing it as a system. It is not a mechanism, though, delivering predictable results, telling us what can be said and what not. Rather it is a system that keeps creating itself, an autopoietic system, a system like Darwinian evolution. This is not what de Saussure or Chomsky had in mind. For them, the mind is an engine that can generate correct, grammatical, sentences whose meaning is equivalent to their semantic representations. While we have to give up the hope of ever gaining access to the working of the individual mind, we can without too much difficulty examine the collective mind in the form of discourse. We can interpret what others have said. Linguistics belongs to the human sciences as much as to the hard sciences.

The discourse community constructs reality

The reality we experience is not unmediated reality itself but the reality constructed in the discourse. The colour red I see is not the colour red as it may or may not exist in reality out there. It is the colour ‘red’ as it is constructed in the discourse of the English-language community, and this red is in some ways different from the ‘erythros’ of the ancient Greeks or the ‘chi’ of Mandarin. The discourse object ‘globalisation’, which can make life so hard for us, is not something that really exists out there in some discourse-external reality. It is a discourse construct that works well as an argument when we are told why we have to tighten our belts. Only by reading newspapers, not by looking at the world outside, will we find out who belongs to the discourse object called the ‘civilised world’ and who does not. When we look up to the elevation over there it does not indicate whether it is a hill or a mountain. Nature does not come with categories. We have to check our travel guide. The only reality we have at our disposal is a reality which is thoroughly mediated by what has been said in the discourse.

For die-hard realists this amounts to unreconstructed relativism. For them, such a constructionist view implies a desire to force others to see the world though our tainted glasses. For John Searle, the American philosopher who seeks to integrate the realism of analytic philosophy with the realism of the philosophy of mind, the case is clear:

I have to confess, however, that I think there is a much deeper reason for the persistent appeal of all forms of anti-realism, and this has become obvious in the 20th century: it satisfies a basic urge to power. It just seems too disgusting, somehow, that we should have to be at the mercy of the ‘real world.’ … This is why people who hold contemporary versions of antirealism and reject the correspondence theory of truth typically sneer at the opposing view … [T]he motivation for denying realism is a kind of will to power, and it
Children learn to speak as they grow up among people who are already speaking. These people are normally their parents or other carers, or other people with whom they are brought into contact, and, of course, their peers. It is the interaction with other people that lets children learn the language(s) they encounter in their environment. It is not more normal for children to learn just one language than several. Multilingualism is the norm in many societies and situations, and this is not a new phenomenon. A child in Hong Kong will have few problems communicating with their mother in English, their father in Mandarin, their nanny in Malay and their peers in Cantonese. How they do it we hardly know. Their linguistic behaviour in given situations, and their own reports, are our only sources of information. We know that some children learn languages faster than others, and there is an abundance of literature detailing the ways in which progress is made in the course of language acquisition. We also know that the faculty for learning new languages without particular effort wanes during puberty. What we do not know, in spite of Noam Chomsky and Jerry Fodor, is how this language faculty works. So far, all the models representing it have had to be withdrawn at some point.

What we call language in this sense is the children's interactional behaviour that lets them deal with symbolic content. They learn the languages they encounter, including accents, dialects, registers, and levels of sophistication. The verbal skills of a child growing up in a deprived household, in which family members have other things to worry about than the niceties of a good education, will compare badly to those of children whose parents take great care to develop their eloquence. While the faculty for learning language (whether spoken, signed or written) is certainly innate, they learn what they encounter. There is no innate universal grammar, and no innate repository of mental concepts waiting to be triggered. It is like learning to participate in a game of baseball or football. Some elements can be gleaned from observation, others just seem to make sense and are the result of trial and error, and some things have to be told. There is a difference, though. In sports, rules have to be obeyed. If they are violated, there is no game, or it becomes a different game. We employ referees or umpires to make sure the rules are observed. Apart from teachers, editors and perhaps a few
other professions, no one in particular is there to punish us for rule violations in language. Indeed, for spoken language, when it comes to grammar, not very much seems to be regulated. In a foreign environment, friendly local people will try hard to make sense of the few ill-applied words I speak. We normally get away with all kinds of unruly language.

The language mechanism we carry around in our minds is not what I am interested in. For me, language is what takes place between people, not inside them. Using language is exchanging and sharing content. People are social beings. They grow intellectually if they are integrated in communities. In isolation, their minds tend to deteriorate. It is not the mode language takes that nourishes their thinking. Whether spoken, written or signed, what counts is the content, not the form of what is said. Human beings are unique in this ability to relate symbolic content, for instance the story that Freddy’s dog has just had a litter of three pups, two of them quite white and one of them with black paws. Freddy may live in the next village, and the man who tells us the story has perhaps not seen the pups himself, but has heard about it from Freddy’s wife, whom he has met shopping. Some animals are said to communicate just like human beings. However, I do not believe that any dolphin or any chimp will ever tell us a story about Freddy’s dog.

We can look at the story about Freddy’s dog as a text. This text can be investigated from two points of view. We can look at its form, assigning to it a phonetic, syntactic and lexical description. We can also look at its meaning. We can assign to it a paraphrase. If the original text was in English, it can be paraphrased in Cantonese (which is the same as being translated into Cantonese), for those people in Hong Kong who do not speak English. But it will not be possible to reconstruct the original form from the paraphrase or the translation. Computers can be programmed to deliver a thorough description of its structure, a sentence or text parse, providing us with a full description of its form. Such a parse can be reverse-engineered, to reconstruct the original form. Paraphrases and translations (at least as long as they are carried out by humans), on the other hand, are arbitrary acts involving intentionality and their outcome is not predictable. Every paraphrase, every translation is also always an interpretation. Interpretations are conscious acts. Their results are, unlike the results of computational processes, contingent.

Meaning is what people have said about a word, a phrase, a text segment or a text. They will tell us the meaning of globalisation or grandmother or intelligent design, or what Hamlet’s famous monologue is ‘really’ about or how Shakespeare’s contemporaries understood his play Hamlet. Meaning is in the discourse. It is not the reality out there that tells us if there is such a thing as globalisation or intelligent design, and there is no strict method that will tell us what any text (segment) means. Otherwise we would need only one translation of Shakespeare’s plays in German. There are dozens, because every translator reads Shakespeare differently.

Over the last fifty years, the word discourse has come to mean many things, so it might be useful to try to explain how I normally use this word. For me,
Language as discourse

the discourse, and the texts (utterances) that constitute it, are the only firm ground, the only reality we have. ‘We’, in this sense, is not only the community of linguists. It is also all the members of society reflecting on themselves, their relationships with other people, and on their grasp of reality. In this part of the book I will show that the raw reality out there, unmediated by the discourse, including the brute facts of which it consists, is never available to us. It is as inaccessible to us as the working of our individual minds. The reality out there includes the stuff we see and hear and feel, including the sky above us, the ground on which we stand, all the props, for instance apples and pears, that we have learned to distinguish, the temperature of the weather, our own bodies, the people around us, Iraqi weapons of mass destruction, angels and unicorns, prime number pairs, the discipline of linguistics and also society itself. For those without language all this is no more than stuff. For them there are no apples or pears as objects of reality, because they have no expressions, no lexical items, no language signs that would enable them to distinguish between the two. They may have non-symbolic concepts of them, making them prefer one over the other, but they would not be aware of these concepts. People who are not taking part in any discourse might still feel hungry, or cold, or even sad, but they would not be conscious of their states. We would not find them enjoying the beauty and sublimity of the Lake District, because beauty and sublimity would mean nothing to them. They would have no sense of identity, and they would not be aware of their thoughts.

It is the discourse that makes reality available to us. This reality, however, is not the unstructured reality out there; it is a reality that we, the members of a discourse community, have constructed for ourselves. In many ways, it will not be totally at odds with the external reality. What we feel, what we do and find we cannot do, will determine what we make of the utterances we hear from other members. Those we agree with, those that we can repeat, in whatever form, would be those we find not in contradiction with what we take to be our non-symbolic, unmediated existence. But we must remember that these feelings, dispositions and drives are not accessible. Neither can we be sure to what extent they are really non-symbolic, ‘in the flesh’, as George Lakoff would say, unmediated by the discourse into which we are drawn. To feel the beauty of Bach’s fugues, intellectual puzzles more than hormone-arousing music; to prefer source water over Coca Cola; to want to do mountain-climbing, owe more to the discourse of middle-class complacency than to naturally occurring hormonal variations. What will be successful in the discourse is something we cannot predict. This is not because there are discourse-external factors determining how the discourse will develop. The discourse at large is irreducible to discourse-external laws. It is as unruly as the weather. What has led to what, can only be determined after it has taken place. We can measure the success of an utterance by the traces it leaves in subsequent utterances. We cannot predict whether the people taking global
warming seriously, or their critics, will prevail. It might well be that the last person standing will still insist that global warming was caused by sunspots and nothing else. As to the role our non-mediated existence, or the reality out there, plays in the way the discourse evolves, we can only speculate. It is not something we will ever find out.

What we have in our heads will be forever hidden from us. All we know is knowledge that is publicly known, knowledge that has been, at some point, contributed to the discourse, by other people or by ourselves. It is this knowledge alone that constitutes our reality, the only reality we can talk about. All we have is the reality of texts, the meaning they express, the knowledge they contain. The texts are real. Not all texts that have been entered into the discourse will be accessible. Many will be lost or forgotten, or will have just disappeared. But the remaining texts are there for us to discuss them, to form an opinion on them, to reflect on them, and to react to them by contributing more texts. These texts form the accessible part of the discourse. It is discourse that constitutes our only unquestionable reality. All we can negotiate is discourse itself, not the world outside it.

I distinguish between discourse at large and smaller, special discourses which are subsets of it. The discourse at large, in its widest extent, consists of all spoken, written or signed utterances from the time when people started using language, in any dialect or language, as long as they had an audience. What people signed to themselves when they were not observed by anyone, what they wrote in diaries that were burnt before they were read by anyone else, the speeches people gave to imagined audiences while hiking in the solitude of dense forests, do not count as a contribution to the discourse, because such utterances forego the chance to have an impact on subsequent contributions to the discourse.

The full discourse at large is not available to us. Most of what has been said over time has long been lost. The discourse at large which is, in principle, available for research is a repository, an archive, of those texts that exist in recorded form. In most cases they have been written. Some spoken language texts exist as recordings on audiotape or other mediums. Signed texts can be preserved, for instance on DVDs. Memorised, or remembered, texts in the heads of people do not count, as we have no direct access to them. Recordings of recitals of such memorised texts, however, are a part of the accessible discourse at large. This discourse is a live, active archive, and a never-ending stream of new texts is continually added to it.

Even the discourse at large cannot be a sensible object of research. It is a bit like the map described in Jorge Luis Borges’ one-paragraph story *On Exactitude in Science*, a map of a province or an empire which is, in the end, made so detailed that it becomes isomorphic, in size and content, with the represented surface itself. What we can study can only ever be a tiny selection of discourse. But we have to define what this selection is in such a way that we can be sure for each
Language as discourse

text whether it belongs to this particular discourse or not. We might be interested only in texts written in English between 1 January 1901 and 31 December 2000. But much more is needed. We have to define what counts as a text written in English. We can include texts written by non-native speakers, or we can define a level of linguistic competence that has to be satisfied. We have to decide if we want texts only written by native speakers in English-speaking countries, or if we also want to include the first English tests written, for instance, by Chinese beginners. On the other hand, we can also define a discourse consisting of Shakespeare’s works, regardless of the language in which they are written. We may have difficulties deciding what counts as a translation, and what is more a re-creation. We can define a special discourse on global warming. We can say that we want to include in this discourse all newspaper articles written in English in which the phrase global warming occurs at least once. Should we also include texts which do not feature this phrase but mention climate change, or the greenhouse effect? Another discourse we might be interested in is that consisting of texts, spoken but recorded or transcribed, of Alzheimer patients. It is, first of all, up to the researcher(s) how to define their discourse. As I have shown, defining parameters can be either text-internal (e.g. language, or the occurrence of certain lexical items), or text-external, like parameters of space or time situation, or categories describing people. Often it will not be feasible to compile a corpus of all the texts belonging to a discourse. Then it is necessary to define in which way the texts included in such a corpus have been sampled.

The reason why we should not just collect the texts we find interesting for a particular research question, but take great care in defining our research object, is that we want to give the other members of our peer communities the opportunity to agree or disagree with our findings in a principled way. The discourse is what provides the common undisputable basis for the negotiations. Setting up the parameters defining a discourse or a sample thereof will reflect our prejudices. As I will show below in Chapter 15, prejudices are unavoidable. Our prejudices sum up the knowledge we have, as an individual or as a group. By talking about them we become aware of them. This allows us to achieve a higher level of reflection. But as all discussion of content can be resumed at any moment, all the reality we have jointly constructed is generally only provisional. The discourse is open-ended. The consequence is that no interpretation will ever be the final one. This is what I will show in Chapter 16. Some may regard this absence of finitude regrettable, as it seems to cut the ground from beneath our feet. But it also ensures that the discourse remains open to innovation, to new ways to talk about the world, by recombining, permuting and reformulating what has been said before. Unless the discourse were open to unpredictable development, we would not be able to reconstruct the reality that we encounter in the discourse. It is the collaborative act of interpreting what we find, by accepting it, rejecting it or modifying it, that puts us in charge of reality.
So far I have talked about special discourses mostly from the standpoint of the observer(s). We want to find out what has been said in certain texts at a certain time about certain things. But the people who are contributing their texts to the discourse are not ants or chimpanzees whose behaviour is being analysed by the appropriate experts and who themselves have no say in their findings. The people whose texts we analyse can talk back; they are in a position to discuss with us the interpretation of texts that, we, the discourse experts, suggest. Unless we are dealing with a discourse of the distant past or places far away, we should engage in a discourse with them about their discourse. For any discourse is self-referential. People talk about what people say. They know in a given situation what should be said and what not. The Tories know what Tories are allowed to say and what not. They have their own ideas of what belongs in a given discourse and what not. Therefore we, the observers, and they, the observed, will have to enter a reciprocal discourse; the observers will have to collaborate with the observed in the interpretation of their discourse. For each special discourse is only a segment of the discourse at large, and each text in a special discourse is intertextually linked to texts outside. There is no vantage point outside a discourse that can give us an undistorted, unprejudiced view on what is being said in a discourse. None of us will ever be able to escape the prison of the discourse at large. Just as the content of a discourse is a matter of interpretation, discourse boundaries are always arbitrary and can be redrawn.

The special discourses thus are constructs of the discourse at large, the discourse where the observed and their observers meet. The way we often talk about these discourses implies that we see ourselves as participants in many of them, often at the same time. I say something in a discourse made up of the people in a classroom, and I say it as a member of the staff of an English department, and I also say it as one of the German academics who is teaching at British universities. What I say belongs to the discourse of linguistics, but also, I hope, to that of social studies. It is, more specifically, part of the discourse of a social constructionist stance. It belongs to a discourse of a given date, and in a given place, a discourse of people in their early sixties, of the male sex. Indeed, what I say can be pigeonholed in a nearly infinite number of special discourses.

An interesting question is in what way can my definition of discourse be related to the ‘discursive formations’ at the centre of Michel Foucault’s quest for knowledge and meaning. Foucault did not see himself as a linguist. In France, the sixties were the heyday of a linguistics focusing on the language system, a kind of Saussurean structuralism dressed up as Chomskyan syntax, that owed its clout to Claude Levi-Strauss. This was a paradigm that Foucault thought inadequate to deal with the meaning of the discourse (‘parole’ in Saussure’s, and ‘performance’ in Chomsky’s terms). Like Claude Lévi-Strauss, he did not distinguish it from Chomsky’s universalist theory of language. Both were the linguistics of the language system. Even though Foucault purposefully disregarded the linguistic form of his discourses, and insisted on calling his object of investigation
Language as discourse

‘discursive formations’, he saw them as real objects, as objects comparable to the artefacts dug up by archaeologists. For Foucault, a discursive formation is an ‘objective’ entity, something that is defined by discourse-external givens. Whether a given text belongs to a given discourse is not something that has to be negotiated. It depends on its being covered by the rules underlying this discursive formation. In his view, there has to be a set of scientifically discoverable regularities:

If I succeed in showing, as I shall do shortly, that the law of such a series [a group of acts of formulations] is precisely what I have called so far a discursive formation, if I succeed in showing that this discursive formation really is the principle of dispersion and redistribution, not of formulations, not of propositions, but of statements (in the sense in which I used this word) the term discourse can be defined as the group of statements that belong to a single system of formation. (Foucault 1972: 107, emphasis in the original)

This is repeated some pages later: ‘Now, what has been described as discursive formations are, strictly speaking, groups of statements’ (Foucault 1972: 115). What binds them together had already been explained. It is a law: in order to find out what binds the statements of nineteenth-century doctors together, ‘we must first discover the law operating behind all these diverse statements’ (Foucault 1972: 50). The identity of the discourse is established by a law, by regularities, by a set of rules operating in the texts belonging to a given discourse. This is a theme repeated countless times in his Archaeology of Knowledge. Another example is: ‘[The] ‘discursive practice’ … is a body of anonymous, historical rules, always determined in the time and the space that have defined a given period, and for a given social, economic, geographical, or linguistic area, the conditions of operation of the enunciative function’ (Foucault 1972: 117). The final goal of the discourse researcher is to write the archaeology of a given discourse. ‘Archaeology … is to uncover the regularity of a discursive practice’ (Foucault 1972: 144f.).

For Foucault, a special discourse is a real-world entity whose identity rests on laws, rules and regularities. The question he does not address in a straightforward way is the nature of these principles. Are they, as the word law would imply, comparable to the immutable laws of nature, such as the famous second law of thermodynamics? Are they rules instituted by social convention, either explicitly or implicitly? Are they maxims each member of a discourse society has to follow out of a moral obligation? ‘The rules of the formation [of a text]’, he says, ‘operate not only in the mind or consciousness of individuals, but in the discourse itself; they operate … on all individuals who undertake to speak in this discursive field’ (Foucault 1972: 63). For me, this sentence is more an obfuscation than a clarification.

Foucault was writing at a time in which, in his words, a ‘discourse rupture’ took place. In French intellectual circles, particularly in the Tel Quel grouping, the fascination with structuralism was increasingly clashing with the rediscovered charms of hermeneutics and the kick-off of post-structuralism. For reasons
for which we perhaps have to search in Foucault’s biography, he was vitally attracted to the concept of order in the chaos of reality, to the quest for some Archimedean point which would distinguish necessity from contingency. Linguistics, as he understood it, had nothing to contribute to the interpretation of the discourses of the past in which he was interested. Yet he also retains the structuralist obsession with the concept of an abstract system, a system existing independently of the texts that make up a discursive formation. While the focal point of his enterprise is the interpretation of the thought archives of the past, he does not establish them as emanations of *la parole*, but of a system based on rules. Thus Foucault’s approach leads him, in the end, into a cul-de-sac. He is, in all his writing, unable to give us a clear example of what the laws, rules, and regularities are that establish the identity of a discursive formation.

Many years ago, Dietrich Busse and I claimed that the texts belonging to a given discourse have to deal with the objects, topics, epistemic complexes or concepts of the study to be carried out, that they are therefore semantically related and share a set of statements, communicative situations, functions and purposes (Busse and Teubert 1994: 14). Today, I would be more reluctant. All these conditions are themselves constructs made by the discourse observers. They decide what is semantically related, what is a communicative situation, what functions and purposes can be ascribed to texts. But it is also a discourse, namely the discourse of discourse observers, that establishes and constructs the discourse objects ‘discourse observer’ and ‘discourse contributor’ and consequently also ‘discourse community’. Even ‘discourse’ itself is an object of a discourse, constructed by that very discourse. A discourse, I would say today, is not generated by laws; it is contingent, and so is any interpretation of it. It is an arbitrary decision to conclude that the intertextual links obtaining between texts are strong enough to justify assembling these texts in a special discourse, while leaving other texts outside. There is no law to which we can appeal for an objective decision. Discourses do not exist as such. Paradox as it may sound, I would like to argue that it is discourse that creates discourse, in an autopoietic, bootstrapping fashion.

A few words also need to be said about how my view of the discourse compares to that which we find in the relatively recent, but certainly very active, field of critical discourse analysis. CDA is loosely based on Michael Halliday’s paradigm of Systemic Functional Linguistics, the dominant backbone of the kind of applied linguistics we find in all the university English departments in Britain and all over the world, wherever English Studies are moulded by British rather than American academia. At the heart of CDA is the relationship between the discourse and society. While I admire the plurivocality and open-minded dynamics of this approach, I take issue with the way it describes the relationship between discourse and society.

For the doyen of CDA, Norman Fairclough, it is society that determines discourse. Discourse is ‘social practice determined by social structures’, ‘actual
discourse is constituted by socially constituted orders of discourse’, and ‘orders of discourse are ideologically shaped by power relations in social institutions and in society as a whole’ (Fairclough 1989: 17). Even though he accepts that discourse also ‘has effects upon social structures’, it is clearly society that is in the driver’s seat. We are to assume that there are social structures which somehow pre-date discourse. It is a perspective of society reminding of the way biologists look at the social lives of ants or bees, a perspective from the outside. For us, whether linguists or just lay members of discourse communities, such a perspective is not viable. While we can talk about queens in bee hives and alpha males in primate troops, I am not sure if these queens and alpha males are aware of their status. Should we really expect drones to be depressed because they are not given a share of the work to be done and exhaust themselves in their reproductive activity? For me, it is the discourse that constructs social structures, not the other way around. There is no vantage point outside of the discourse from which an observer could describe the way a group of people is structured. Foucault’s ‘orders of discourse,’ too, are not possible without a discourse at large in which these orders must be negotiated. I agree, with Foucault and critical discourse analysts, that much of what we say is the result of ‘ideological’ positions that have been passed on to us by authorities. But I would not be aware of authority if it had not been verbally communicated. Neither bees nor apes reflect consciously on the hierarchies in which they find themselves. Hierarchies have to be discussed in a discourse in order to become an object of this discourse, and only if they are discourse objects can we make ourselves aware of them.

The way I see the relationship between discourse and society puts me, I am afraid, very much in a minority position. Even one of the most outspoken critics of CDA, the linguist Henry Widdowson, leaves no doubt that ‘[y]ou cannot study discourse in disregard of social factors and I do not know of anybody who claims you can’ (Widdowson 1995: 159). What he argues is that ‘discourse analysis has made statements about social attitudes and beliefs, the exercise of power, the influence of ideology, and so on, with scant reference to the linguistic data; and another tradition has made statements about the specifics of language in use without paying much attention to social factors’ (p. 159). While I am not aware of any social factors which are not first of all discourse constructs, I fully agree with Widdowson’s admonishment that only real language data, i.e. the reality of the discourse, can be the evidence on which the peer community can agree. This is also Michael Toolan’s position: CDA ‘needs to be more critical and more demanding in the text linguistics it uses [and] it must strive for greater thoroughness and strength of evidence in its presentation’ (Toolan 1997: 101).

For CDA, discourse is a social practice. This is not my view. As I will try to show in this part of my book, it makes sense to turn the relationship around and to view society as a discourse construct. There are people, and sometimes these people interact. They do things together. They help each other. They fight each
other. So far this is not different from a troop of primates. What makes up society is not the people themselves but their interactions; it is what is happening between people. Society becomes an object of observation and reflection at the very moment when people's interaction becomes symbolic, when acts carried out have acquired a meaning, a meaning which has been discussed, interpreted and reflected upon by the people and a certain consensus (which need not be comprehensive) has been reached. Society is the sense that a group of people make of themselves. An interaction becomes symbolic only when people assign a meaning to it. Throngs of people on the street can mean many things: people are trying to get hold of something considered valuable but scarce (when in Britain they would queue); a charismatic preacher is elevating the spirits of his followers; a procession of students are on their way to their degree congregation; millionaires are demonstrating for tax cuts, or the beginning of the world revolution.

A society is what remains, for the members of a society and for their observers, once one disregards the people's individual intentionalities and focuses only on their shared, collective intentionality. While a person's intentionality is something that cannot be observed, the collective intentionality of a group is accessible. It is expressed in that group's discourse. The relationships obtaining between the members of a group exist in, or can be inferred from, the texts that make up their discourse. Without discourse, there are no kinship relations, there are neither friends nor foes, there are no kings and no subjects, there is no property, there is no freedom, and there are perhaps not even genders. I obey the orders of my line manager because I have been told that I will lose my job if I disobey her. I know that there are Iraqi weapons of mass destruction because it has been continually asserted in the media I consume, as long as I have not heard anything to the contrary.

The members of a chimpanzee community are not aware of a power structure. Only to her human observers does it seem that that a female group member is deliberately grooming an alpha male because she wants to move closer to the top. She herself is unaware of her motives, if she ever had any. She is also immune to the ideology that chimpanzees are 'better' than gorillas, because there is no discourse in which such an ideology could be formulated. Her behaviour, as well as that of her fellow group members, is non-symbolic. Only to us, to her observers outside of her discourse, do her interactions make sense. Once there is language, once there is a discourse, ideology becomes unavoidable.

If the world outside is not (directly) accessible by us, then we cannot tell whether the world we construct in our discourse properly represents this reality, including our social reality, the reality in which our symbolical interactions take place. Jürgen Habermas, who is often quoted in CDA texts, accepts Karl-Otto Apel's view that we should look at the discourse as some kind of meta-institution on which all other social institutions depend, for social activity consists solely in ordinary language communication. ('Es hat einen guten Sinn,
Sprache als eine Art Metainstitution aufzufassen, von der alle gesellschaftlichen Institutionen abhängen, denn soziales Handeln konstituiert sich allein in umgangssprachlicher Kommunikation’ (Habermas 1971: 53)). However, he continues: “But the discourse is also a medium of domination and social power. It serves to legitimise relations of organised force. To the extent that the legitimisations fail to spell out the power-based relationship which they enable, even though it is contained in these legitimisations, the discourse is ideological, as well.” Because we cannot see through the power-base relationships. Habermas claims, the discourse represents reality in a systematically distorted way, and the consensus to which sense negotiation leads is forced. Instead of communication, there is, for him, only pseudo-communication. He does not tell us, though, how we would recognise a non-distorted discourse. He insists that it is due to the distortion of the discourse that we end up having a biased view of reality. But is this reality really available for our scrutiny?

I do not want to be misunderstood. Of course I accept as a fact that there is a social reality which I encounter in my interactions, that there are people who put themselves in charge of me, that equality before the law is an illusion, that there is plenty of torture even in the so-called civilised world, and that women are still in many respects oppressed. That these are facts is shared opinion of many of the discourses in which I participate. There may be other discourses in which these opinions are not considered mainstream. But it is my own personal decision to choose the former and to shun the latter. Taking a moral stance means to choose, on private grounds, between available options. Different discourses construct different realities. None of these ‘realities’ can claim to be the only one. They do represent different ideologies. But they never represent reality as it ‘really’ is.