

“Which is to be master?” Humpty Dumpty and the philosophy of language

Bas Savenije

This is the author’s version before final editorial editing of an article published in:
Franziska E. Kohlt & Justine Houyaux, 2024, *Alice Through the Looking-Glass*, Oxford: Peter Lang, pp.167-76.

One of the extraordinary aspects of *Through the Looking-Glass* is the character of Humpty Dumpty and his statements about the meaning of words. They have brought him some fame but also qualifications as pedant and authoritarian. However, it would be too easy to discard all his statements about language. I will focus on one of them which has often been cited (Carroll 1872: 124,5).

‘When I use a word, it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less.’
‘The question is,’ said Alice, ‘whether you *can* make words mean so many different things.’
‘The question is,’ said Humpty Dumpty, ‘which is to be master – that’s all.’

To confirm that he is really the master, he adds: “When I make a word do a lot of work [...], I always pay it extra.”

This fragment shows a remarkable resemblance with a statement by Lewis Carroll, formulated some years later (Bartley 1977: 232): “Any writer of a book is fully authorized in attaching any meaning he likes to any word or phrase he intends to use.”

In this article I will place these statements in the context of the study of language in 19th century England and analyze the framing of Humpty Dumpty in more recent discussions about language.

Historical background

Ever since Plato’s dialogue ‘Cratylus’ the question is debated how words get their meaning. And, more specifically, is language natural or conventional? Put in another way: are words labels with an inherent meaning, mirroring things and concepts existing prior to language or do they get their meaning from conventions, introduced by the *usage* of language?

During the late antiquity and Middle Ages Aristotle’s view remained dominant: names of things differ from language to language, but refer to concepts in the mind which are universal to all languages and existed prior to language. If this view is correct, the analysis of a language should be the best source for knowledge about reality. But in the 17th century this view was questioned by the rise of experimental science, when it appeared that things existed which had no name in any language. Philosophers like Bacon, Locke, Leibniz and Vico shared the view that languages are not transcriptions of universally equal, predefined concepts and that each language forms its own patterns. This resulted in a growing interest in the history and comparison of different languages.

Yet, especially in France the Aristotelian view gained new authority through Descartes and the rationalists who believed that languages must share a basic structure reflecting universal characteristics of human thought. Efforts to build a new theory of language to replace

Aristotelian theories, were not followed up. Combined with the disinterest of philosophers in language and meaning, this implied that the study of language was back at Aristotle (De Mauro 1967).

The interest in the comparison of languages, however, did not disappear, nor the historical interest. Due to the resulting focus on the origin of language, linguistic studies now began concentrating on the reconstruction of ‘mother languages’. Under the name ‘philology’ a broad range of subjects was combined: etymology, language family trees, and historical and comparative language studies. But there was no interest for syntax and semantics; for these areas one still relied on Aristotle.

In England, Herder’s Romantic philology (from 1772) had gained popularity: language as the voice of the people, which was also related to national identity (Dowling 1986). A special year in England was 1786 when two influential but entirely different books on language were published.

The first was *Diversions of Purley* by John Horne Tooke. Horne Tooke was not interested in the origin of language. According to him all languages share a common underlying structure, consisting of small numbers of names for simple sensations. Other words are so-called abbreviations, incorporated by a historical process, outside the influence of men. The system of language is independent of the mind and it is perfect; it is our understanding of language that is defective. He deduced his detailed theory from a number of a priori principles and supported it by a speculative etymological analysis of more than 2000 words.

The second book was *The Sanscrit Language* by Sir William Jones. He performed an empirical study of ancient languages and separated the study of language from the study of mind. He postulated the common ancestry of Sanskrit, Latin and Greek and his work provided an impetus for comparative linguistics. But for the follow-up on his work, we must turn to the continent and especially to Germany. Englishmen contributed relatively little to this “new philology” (Aarsleff 1967).

In Oxford, in the middle of the 19th century, philology was at a crossroads. At one side there was the inherited English approach, combining Herder’s Romantic philology and Horne Tooke’s etymological speculation. At the other side was the new philology based on Jones’ work, insisting that languages develop beyond human control according to abstract morphological laws.

In this atmosphere Friedrich Max Müller from Germany was appointed professor in Oxford in 1854; Lewis Carroll met him several times. Müller became rather popular by combining several developments: Horne Tooke, the new philology, Herder’s romantic idealism and orthodox religion. According to Müller the morphological and phonological being of language was decisive for its development, which implied that language takes its course beyond human control: language exists apart from man. He claimed a mythical connection between words and thought, through the faculty of reason, which exists by “the hand of God”. Despite his popularity he had a controversial reputation and has been called “one of the greatest humbugs of the century” (Williams 2012).

The general view in Victorian England was that language was an autonomous phenomenon, existing and developing independent of human speakers. Language was often described with the help of metaphors, especially organic metaphors, like a tree or a beehive: “not made, but growing” (Weaver 2015). But altogether Aristotle’s view on language was the basis, which was strongly connected with his logic - still the predominant logic in the 19th century. This also implied a form of essentialism, claiming that the names of objects describe their essence.

Humpty Dumpty and Lewis Carroll

This is the context in which Humpty Dumpty uttered the words that Lewis Carroll had put into his mouth: “When I use a word, it means just what I choose it to mean.” And as we have seen they show a striking resemblance with the view expressed by Lewis Carroll himself. Here are two more relevant quotes from Carroll (Collingwood 1989: 242 resp. 1899: 136): “I shall take the line ‘any writer may mean exactly what he pleases by a phrase so long as he explains it beforehand’.” And “... no word has a meaning *inseparably* attached to it; a word means what the speaker intends by it, and what the hearer understands by it, and that is all.”

There are two differences between the views of Carroll and Humpty Dumpty. In the first quote Carroll demands that the speaker gives his explanation before his utterance. Humpty Dumpty presents his explanation afterwards, but his reversal of order between the definition of a word and its utterance might also be one of the many reversals we encounter in *Through the Looking-Glass* (Hancher 1981: 50). In the second quote Carroll introduces the hearer as a relevant factor for word meaning. This nuance is certainly absent with Humpty Dumpty.

Despite the differences, there remains a striking parallel between their views. First, we see conventionalism: words get their meaning from conventions, introduced by the usage of language. Conventionalism is opposed to the naturalism, predominant in Victorian language studies. Secondly, we see nominalism as opposed to realism. Nominalism states that universals, such as general properties, are merely words or labels, not having an existence of their own, as is claimed by realism. And finally, there is the absence of essentialism - the view that names of things define their essence.

We may conclude that both Humpty Dumpty and Carroll diverge substantially from the general view in Victorian England. This is also illustrated by the fact that the *Alice* books contain some indirect comments on Müller’s and the Victorian view on language. Carroll makes fun of autonomous language. Language seems to take over the power in Alice’s twisted recitations from well-known rhymes, and also when the white king’s pen is writing in his notebook beyond his control. Carroll also makes fun of essentialism, when the Pigeon concludes that Alice is a serpent because she has characteristics that the Pigeon considers to be essential to a serpent. Finally, although Carroll’s logic is to a large extent based on Aristotle, he does not once mention the term ‘essence’ in the description of his classification process or elsewhere.

Humpty Dumpty in more recent theories on language

Humpty Dumpty’s quote “When I use a word, it means just what I choose it to mean” is often quoted in debates about language, mostly as an absurd claim. Humpty Dumpty is framed as being pedant, authoritarian, or worse, because he wants to decide himself about the meaning of the words he uses. He has “so long been typecast as the ultimate verbal outlaw that he has become a useful symbol of a theoretical extreme” (Hancher 1981: 50).

But in the context of Carroll’s time the essence of Humpty Dumpty’s claim was not his personal power but rather the denial that words are ‘the master’ with their own intrinsic meaning. We better focus on his question: ‘Which is to be master?’ This is a relevant question and a useful instrument in the analysis of every theory of language. Which is to determine the meaning of words? Does the speaker have any power?

Let us look briefly at the relevance of this question for some more recent theories of language and also consider how Humpty Dumpty was framed in their context.

In the beginning of the 20th century Ferdinand De Saussure (1995) developed a language theory, characterized as ‘structuralism’. He distinguished between *Langue* and *parole*. *Langue* is a single organizational structure for both human speech and reason, not to be confused with *parole* or ‘speech’. This language structure itself creates its signs and their relations to each other. It exists as a whole: the constituent parts do not exist independently and individuals or the community do not have power upon the system. Therefore, the system leaves no possibility for individuals to be master of word meaning.

According to Rivero (2010: 20-22) Humpty Dumpty’s claim “gives rise to the apparent chaos of nonsense”, since he provides an argument for the individual’s freedom to introduce changes to the language system: to change the rules at will beyond the alternatives already present in *langue*. However, this possibility is excluded in *langue*.

Ludwig Wittgenstein, when he was young, worked with Bertrand Russell on a formal language system which would be suited to formulate knowledge about reality, based on an isomorphic relation between language, thought and reality. Later in his lifetime, Wittgenstein seriously changed his opinion about language; he focused on the actual usage of language and laid the basis for what has become ‘ordinary language philosophy’.

In his new view language is essentially social; language use is part of the activities of a community and words get their meaning from the way they are used by this community. He used the term ‘language games’ for the combination of language and the activity into which it is woven. We must look for a word’s use in a specific game to get its meaning. When we treat words in isolation from the situations in which they are used, we end up in puzzlement: “Philosophical problems arise when language goes on holiday.” (Wittgenstein 2009: 23). There is no room for a speaker to be master of meaning: the community’s language game is the master.

According to Kind (1990: 38) Humpty Dumpty provides a clear illustration of “language on holiday”. Pitcher (1965: 603) calls Humpty Dumpty one of the most deeply “anti-Wittgensteinian” characters in Carroll’s work, since Wittgenstein attacks the idea that what a person means when he says anything is essentially the result of his performance of a mental act of intending his words to mean just that.

Interesting examples may also be found when we take a look at *pragmatics*. Where semantics is concerned with sentence meaning, pragmatics is concerned with the speaker’s meaning: the sentence in combination with its context. In the 1960s Paul Grice formulated his theory of *Implicature*. What a speaker means with a sentence is not necessarily the meaning of the sentence. Although the utterer’s meaning is not logically entailed by the sentence, it is clear to a well-informed, competent audience. That is, if the speaker sticks to the rules of conversation (‘maxims’), such as being relevant and not saying what you know to be false. In this view the speaker *can* have his own meaning and within a number of restrictions be master.

Grice is frequently criticized for underestimating the importance of general convention for word meaning and has been characterized as another Humpty Dumpty: “An extreme version of this position had already been satirized long before Grice’s lifetime by Lewis Carroll in the person of Humpty Dumpty” (Hanks 2013: 90).

Talking about the context of an utterance, we also see studies analyzing meaning in relation to power between speaker and audience. Lakoff (1993) interprets the question ‘Which is to be master’ in a broader sense than the relation between speaker and words. According to her it

also concerns the relation speaker – audience. Authority and language reinforce and create each other: those who have power have also the power to decide about the meaning of words. This relationship between language and power is made explicit by Humpty Dumpty who “for all his arrogant elitism” fits perfectly in Lakoff’s vision of the *Alice* books as “a commentary on power, its uses and abuses”. Also Bourgois (2002: 40,1) refers to the “intensified representation of word power” of “Carroll’s proud egg”.

Conclusion

Humpty Dumpty preaches a conventionalist and nominalist theory of meaning. Lewis Carroll’s view is also conventionalist and nominalist, but somewhat more nuanced. Both views contend that words derive their meaning from conventions which are introduced by the usage of these words and diverge from the general view on language in Victorian England that words have their own intrinsic meaning, independently from speakers.

Humpty Dumpty’s statement is often quoted in debates about the philosophy of language and mostly to point to a pitfall that has to be avoided. Generally spoken, Humpty Dumpty’s statement that he can give words any meaning according to his own preference, may be called oversimplified or be questioned with good reasons. His question “Which is to be master?”, however, was highly relevant in comparison with the predominant view on language at that time. Moreover, it provides a useful tool in comparing and characterizing different views on language.

Literature

Aarsleff, Hans, *The Study of Language in England, 1780 - 1860* (Princeton University Press, 1967).

Bartley, William Warren III (ed.), *Lewis Carroll’s Symbolic Logic* (New York: C.N. Potter, 1977).

Bourgeois, David, “Making Space: The subversion of authoritarian language in Lewis Carroll’s *Alice Books*,” (Montreal, McGill University: Master Thesis, 2002).

Carroll, Lewis, *Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There* (London: Macmillan, 1872).

Collingwood, Stuart Dodgson, *The Life and Letters of Lewis Carroll* (London: Fisher Unwin, 1898; reprinted New York: Century Co, 1967).

Collingwood, Stuart Dodgson (ed.), *The Lewis Carroll Picture Book* (London: Collins’ Clear-Type Press, 1899).

De Mauro, Tullio, *Ludwig Wittgenstein. His Place in the Development of Semantics* (Dordrecht – Holland: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1967).

De Saussure, Ferdinand, *Course in General Linguistics* (U.S., Open Court, 1995).

Dowling, Linda, *Language and Decadence in the Victorian Fin de Siècle* (Princeton University Press, 1986).

Grice, Paul, "Logic and Conversation," in Paul Grice, *Studies in the Way of Words* (Harvard University Press 1989), 22-41.

Hancher, Michael, "Humpty Dumpty and Verbal Meaning," in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 40, No. 1 (1981), 49-58.

Hanks, Patrick, *Lexical Analysis: Norms and Exploitations* (Cambridge Massachusetts, MIT Press, 2013).

Kind, Amy L., "Wittgenstein, Lewis Carroll and the Philosophical Puzzlement of Language," in *Episteme*, Vol. 1 (1990), 33-42.

Lakoff, Robin Tolmarch, "Lewis Carroll: Subversive Pragmatist," in *Pragmatics*, Vol. 3, No. 4 (1993), 367-385.

Pitcher, George, "Wittgenstein, Nonsense, and Lewis Carroll," in *The Massachusetts Review*, Vol. 6, No. 3 (1965), 591-611.

Rivero, Silvia, "Representations in Linguistics and Literature: An Analysis of Ferdinand de Saussure's and Lewis Carroll's Construction of the Object *Language*," in *Invenio*, Vol. 13, No. 24 (2010), 13-26.

Weaver, Sarah, "Philology and the Metaphors of Language," in *Literature Compass*, Vol. 12, No. 7 (2015), 333-343.

Williams, James A., "Lewis Carroll and the Private Life of Words," in *The Review of English Studies*, New Series, Vol. 64, No. 266 (2012), 651-671.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig, *Philosophische Untersuchungen / Philosophical Investigations*, translated by G.E.M. Anscombe, P.M.S. Hacker, and Joachim Schulte, 4th edition, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2009).