A Difference of Some Consequence Between Conventions And Rules

[running head: A difference between conventions and rules]

Ruth Garrett Millikan

Abstract:

.......Guided by whatever analogy we notice, we tend to follow precedent...There might be alternative analogies. If so, there is room for ambiguity about what would be following precedent and doing what we did before... (Lewis, Convention, p. 37)

Lewis's view of the way conventions are passed on may have some especially interesting consequences for the study of language. I'll start by briefly discussing agreements and disagreements that I have with Lewis's general views on conventions and then turn to how linguistic conventions spread. I'll compare views of main stream generative linguistics, in particular, Chomsky's, views on how syntactic forms are passed on, with the sort of view of language acquisition and language change advocated by usage-based or construction grammars, which seem to fit better with Lewis's ideas. Then I will illustrate the interest of Lewis's perspective on the dissemination of conventions with a variety of linguistic examples.

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Lewis's view of the way conventions are passed on may have some especially interesting consequences for the study of language. I'll start by briefly discussing agreements and disagreements that I have with Lewis's general views on conventions and then turn to how linguistic conventions spread. I'll compare views of main stream generative linguistics, in particular, Chomsky's views on how syntactic forms are passed on, with the sort of view of language acquisition and language change advocated by usage-based or construction grammars, which seem to fit better with Lewis's ideas. Then I will illustrate the interest of Lewis's perspective on the dissemination of conventions with a variety of linguistic examples.[1,2]

Elsewhere I have written quite a lot about conventions, especially the conventions of language, in a way that was in part highly critical of Lewis's views but also in part supportive. Before exploring implications of what I consider the most helpful part of Lewis's analysis, for balance, I will mention my disagreements. For detailed discussion and defense of them, however, I must refer interested readers to prior publications (1998, 2003).

On the positive side, Lewis is surely right that a natural language consists at least in part of a set of conventions affording solutions to coordination problems involved in communication and that these conventions are grounded in precedent. In his "Language and Languages*" (1975), Lewis takes the position that this coordination is between speakers and hearers (not merely among speakers, as in his (1969)), which I also think is right. But he also takes it that the

existence of any such convention must involve regularities of production and response among members of some group, and that, I think, is mistaken.

Lewis says this regularity is, specifically, in "truthfulness and trust" in the use of a particular set of mappings, $\mathscr{L}$, from "sounds or marks" to "meanings."

> ...To be truthful in $\mathscr{L}$ is to act in a certain way: to try never to utter any sentences of $\mathscr{L}$ that are not true in $\mathscr{L}$...To be trusting in $\mathscr{L}$ is to form beliefs in a certain way: to impute truthfulness in $\mathscr{L}$ to others, and thus to tend to respond to another's utterance of any sentence of $\mathscr{L}$ by coming to believe that the uttered sentence is true in $\mathscr{L}$.

The regularity that Lewis has in mind is merely that when members of the community use any of the sounds or marks that are part of $\mathscr{L}$, they regularly intend these to be true in $\mathscr{L}$, and that hearers of these sounds or marks regularly believe them to be true. He does not mean, as Chomsky seems to have supposed (1980: 81-84), that the same meaning is always expressed the same way. Still, Lewis (along with many others[3]) was mistaken to suppose that the existence of a linguistic convention requires there to be a regularity in behavior among all members of a linguistic community (or among those within some social setting[4]). In the case of a blind convention such as the convention that the original caller calls back when a telephone connection is broken, Lewis is surely right that regular conformity within a group is important to its effectiveness. This is because neither party receives information concerning the other's action before having to make a decision on their own. But language conventions are not like that. Instead they are "leader-follower" conventions. A speaker, the leader, automatically reveals which precedents she is proposing as soon as she speaks. There is no need for any unique set of semantic mappings to be used by all members of an interacting community, so long as identical

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linguistic forms are not regularly used in conflicting ways. Speakers and hearers may have quite

different sets of linguistic conventions in their repertoires, so long there is some overlap.

More important, and in direct conflict with Lewis's statement above, all that is required

for a leader-follower convention to survive, to be repeated and passed on, is to succeed in

coordinating the interests of speakers and hearers some critical proportion of the time, weighing

the value of coordination successes against the disvalue of failures. For any language form to

propagate, enough useful information must be obtained from believing what one hears when it is

used (or doing what one is told, etc.,) to offset the harm done by misinformation obtained (or

hurtful instruction followed). This propagation is facilitated, of course, when people use

judgment about which sources to believe (or with which to comply). But no predetermined

degree of "regularity" is required in the community's truthful and trusting usage. Regular

successes are not needed to maintain a leader-follower coordination convention, any more than

they are needed to maintain many biological traits. If the cat catches one mouse for every ten

pounces, and the beggar receives one quarter for every ten people accosted, it is sensible for both

to keep at it. Notice that this observation obviates Lewis's rather problematic discussion of lying,

non-literal uses, and so forth (Lewis 1975). It also obviates the crucial difficulty involved in

trying objectively to define the group, the reference class, in which there must be a "regularity"

without circularity --regularity among those people who happen, mostly, to conform to the

convention.

A second respect in which I have argued that Lewis's analysis of linguistic convention is

mistaken is in postulating nested Gricean intentions behind the normal propagation of linguistic

conventions.[5] I have argued that in a majority of cases, thinking about the intentions of speakers

is not necessary to hearer understanding. But this disagreement with Lewis does not bear on the main theme of this essay at all, so I'll not defend it at all.

My interest here is in the way language users interpret the precedents that guide them during linguistic communication. I am not interested in why people follow precedents once they have interpreted them (Lewis --mistakenly, I think-- gives a Gricean account) but in the prior question how speakers resolve what the precedents are. We should have fresh in our minds just what Lewis said about that:

> *...of course, we could never be given exactly the same problem twice...We cannot do exactly what we did before. Nothing we could do this time is exactly like what we did before --like it in every respect-- because the situations are not exactly alike. ....Guided by whatever analogy we notice, we tend to follow precedent...There might be alternative analogies. If so, there is room for ambiguity about what would be following precedent and doing what we did before....In fact, there are always innumerable alternative analogies. Were it not that we happen uniformly to notice some analogies and ignore others...precedents would be completely ambiguous and worthless...Every coordination equilibrium in our new problem (every other combination, too) corresponds uniquely to what we did before under some analogy, shares some distinctive description with it alone. (Lewis, Convention, 37-38)*

If we think of the propagation of conventional forms on analogy with the propagation of genes --think of conventional usages as successive reproductions of what Richard Dawkins (1976) called *memes*-- then Lewis's comment here concerns how lineages of solutions to linguistic coordination problems achieve what Dawkins called *fidelity*. How does it happen that copies of copies of copies of a solution to a linguistic coordination problem don't quickly diverge

from the original model, generating relatives with nothing substantial in common? In the

tradition of generative linguistics, a version of this concern is referred to as the problem of the

"poverty of the stimulus." There no way, it is claimed, that a child can accumulate enough

experience, using simple induction, to distinguish those sentences that conform to the

grammatical rules of the language from those that do not. Environmental evidence alone is

insufficient to allow a child to construct a grammar. In Dawkins's terminology, grammatical

fidelity cannot be achieved by simple induction. There has been sharp debate about what kinds

of environmental evidence are in fact available to the child, and also important disagreements

about exactly what it is that the child needs to learn, about what the grammar of a language

actually consists in. Still, it cannot be denied that some kind of quite stringent constraints on

what evidence a child will use, and on how she will generalize from it, are necessary if the child

is to "go on" in the formation and understanding of sentences in the same way the adults do.

What fills this lacuna is called by Chomsky *Universal Grammar.* Chomsky has argued

that universal grammar is innate, and also that it resides in an autonomous language module, that

is, the constraints on linguistic generalization are peculiar to language, not derived from any

more general cognitive dispositions or abilities. Setting that problematic claim aside, I prefer to

think of universal grammar in a broader and less prejudiced way that also reaches well beyond

mere syntax. As Jackendoff has recently described it ,

> ...Universal Grammar is...the "toolkit" that a human child brings to learning any of the
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> languages of the world. (Jackendoff 2002:75).

Or, looking at this from a Lewisian perspective, universal grammar is whatever is built into the

human that makes the same channels of analogy, the same lines of similarity, appear salient to

the various learners, and also the older speakers, of a language as they follow what they perceive to be usage precedents. Universal grammar is some kind of very strong filter on analogy reading, on how, given a series of examples, humans are disposed to "go on."

Given this description of universal grammar, one of its elements is the ability to learn what in the home language counts as the same phoneme again and what as a different phoneme. This allows a person to recognize when she is hearing what others will count as the same word or phrase again and to reproduce various words and phrases in ways that will be recognizable to others. The principle that the child picks up and projects is that the words of her language are recombinations of a relatively small set of phonemes used over and over, sameness and difference in phoneme combination corresponding to sameness and difference in words hence, roughly, in elements of meaning. It is, first of all, because each language has a definite small recombinable set of phonemes that linguistic precedents can be copied and recopied hundreds of thousands of times with remarkable fidelity. The presence of phonological structure is "a way of digitizing words for reliability and massive expansion of the vocabulary" (Jackendoff and Pinker 2005).

Regularities found in languages are often equated with *"rules"* by linguists. For example, typically the phonology of a language is described as containing rules that restrict phonetic combinations. In Japanese there are no final consonants, in English, every syllable has a vowel, the sound sequence PS doesn't occur in initial position, NF doesn't occur in final position, and so forth. If we take Lewis's description of how conventions are passed on as a starting point, however, it is not obvious off hand why an ontology involving rules must be invoked. These regularities cannot be expressions of *prescriptive* rules as they can be interrupted without

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incurring sanctions. For example, we have *brrr* and *psst* and *shhh* --surely just as good English

words as *ouch* and *yuck* and *shoo*. And we are happy to talk, surely while speaking English, of

the places Banff and Pskof. Departure from standard pronunciation is also common both in

young children and foreigners. If the postulated "rules" are neither sanctioned nor universally

followed, in what objective medium are they presumed to be ensconced?

What obviously IS public in any language is a large set of prior instances of successful

speaker-hearer coordinations from which to generalize.[6] But what dictates that one must

generalize to a regularity excluding initial **PS** and final **NP** in recognizing and in using new words

rather than to one that allows all pronounceable combinations? Lewis's answer, and Chomsky's

answer too, is that what causes the projection of certain linguistic regularities and not others is a

similarity in the make up of the humans that interpret linguistic precedents. But a common

tendency to see certain patterns in the data is not, as such, a rule. It need not preclude, for

example, that given different or new background conditions, different or new patterns might be

projected from the same data instead, or projected by some people even in roughly the same

background conditions. There are dialects of English, for example, that contain various of the

following nonstandard *new* (not merely archaic or leftover) verb forms:

> *bring-brang-brung* [c.f, *sing-sang-sung*], *dive-div* [c.f., *slide-slid*], *chide-chode* [c.f., *ride-*
> *rode*], *snow-snew* [c.f.,*blow-blew*], *climb-clomb*, *drag-drug*, *slide-slud*, *fling-flang*, and
> literally hundreds of others. (Pinker 2000:84)

Someone must have been first to articulate these forms, indeed, surely there are many thousands

of idiolects that contain some such forms but that have not spread to create proper "dialects." A

tendency for people to perceive certain patterns in the data might be widespread without being

rigid, and without involving any "rules" subsisting either in the public domain or in individual people's minds.

Chomsky has been very clear in rejecting any such liberal view, certainly when applied to syntax:

> Bloomfield (1933) held that when a speaker produces speech forms that he has not heard, "we say that he utters them *on the analogy* of similar forms that he has heard," ...This idea is not wrong but rather is vacuous until the concept of analogy is spelled out in a way that explains why certain "analogies" are somehow valid whereas others are not, *a task that requires a radically different approach to the whole question*. (Chomsky 1986:32, italics mine.)

> [I]t seems reasonable to suppose that a child cannot help constructing a particular sort of transformational grammar to account for the data presented to him, any more than he can control the perception of solid objects or his attention to line and angle. (Chomsky 1965:59, from Jackendoff 2002:70).

> ...The mind passes through a sequence of states under the boundary conditions set by experience, achieving finally a "steady state" at a relatively fixed age, a state that then changes only in marginal ways. ...the initial state of the mind might be regarded as a function, characteristic of the species, that maps experience into the steady state. (Chomsky 1980:187)

Linguists in the Chomskian tradition --"mainstream generative grammar of the past 50 years" (Jackendoff and Pinker 2005)-- assume that the steady state reached by a normal mind that experiences a particular language incorporates two main features (1) a lexicon that provides a list of single morphemes and words along with category markers and (2) a set of recursive rules

for generating well formed sentences by assembling these lexical elements into syntactic trees that are combined and moved about in regimented ways. In this Chomskian "steady state" tradition it is commonly assumed, also, that a single sentence with a single meaning will always have a single syntactic analysis, implicitly recognized by every normal speaker of the language. Alternative analogies are not recognized by the parsers. Chomsky describes the naive language learner's mind as though containing a complex but entirely definite set of deeply dug alternative channels into which heard language forms flow. Many or most of these channels become dammed or obstructed, not being needed to process the linguistic input received. Those that remain open correspond to THE productive syntactic rules that characterize the language to which the learner has been exposed.

> Thus learning a grammar is conceived as rather like customizing a software package: everything is there, and the learner has only to set the options to suit the environment (Jackendoff 2002: 190).

An alternative view that fits better with Lewis's remarks on how conventions spread is presented in various "usage-based" or "cognitive" or "construction" grammars, which seem to fit better with Lewis's ideas[7]. These grammars often leave open that different ways of understanding the same linguistic precedents can occur. They emphasize the occurrence in every language of a very large number of forms that have traditionally been laid aside by mainstream generative grammars either as merely "idiomatic" or as puzzling constructions that don't seem to be derived from more general principles. These idioms and constructions form a continuum, some generating only one variable

[John, Bill, Susan] kicked the bucket

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take [John, Bill, Susan] to task

some generating two or three

How dare [John, Bill, Susan] [complain, go, contradict Grandma]

[John, Bill, Susan] [drank, danced, argued] the whole [hour, afternoon, night]
away.

The more [John, Bill, Susan] [reads, worries] the less [he, she] [understands,
accomplishes])

some with only variables

Wilma watered the tulips flat.

Clyde cooked the pot black.

Drive your engine clean [ad for gasoline])[8]

According to Jackendoff, who, though a Chomsky student, also respects this alternative tradition,

"What makes the elements of a language *rules* rather than basic elements is that they
contain typed variables (i.e., open places)--that is, they describe *patterns* of linguistic
elements." (Jackendoff 2002:57)

"Productivity and compositionality are implemented by the instantiation of variables in
stored structures through the process of unification, which applies in phonology, syntax,
and semantics. Syntactic rules or principles are regarded as general constructions with
maximally unrestricted variables, sometimes but not always bleached of meaning."
(Jackendoff and Pinker 2005)

"In this approach, the only "rule of grammar" is UNIFY PIECES, and all the pieces are
stored in a common format that permits unification. (Jackendoff 2002:180)

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The reference here to "a common format" reflects the view that instead of the sharp distinction drawn by mainstream generative grammars between lexicon and syntactic rules, these should be recognized to be on a continuum. Compositionality is an important principle helping to account for the productivity of language, but it is not overriding.

A second way in which these alternative grammars often fit better with Lewis's views on convention and on language is in maintaining that analogies perceived in the use of language are projected not merely from syntactic form to syntactic form, but rather from whole constructions along with their meanings to new whole constructions along with new meanings. Similarly, Lewis sees the use and understanding of language as involving the perception of new communication-coordination problems as being like old communication-coordination problems, hence solvable with analogous linguistic tools. This suggests different constraints on where the relevant analogies are to be found, suggesting a bigger role for general cognition in the constitution of universal grammar than is acknowledged by mainstream generative grammars.

Encouraged by the existence of these alternate theories, my purpose in this essay will be to illustrate some of the phenomena that can be illuminated by an approach that acknowledges Lewis's suggestion that following precedent is not always a determinate matter. Crisscrossing salient analogies in the linguistic data may sometimes lead different users to different perceptions, or to unstable perceptions, of patterns in linguistic precedents. Moreover, crossings between our perceptions of narrowly linguistic precedents and of broader communication conventions may also occur. Failure to recognize these possibilities, or to keep them well in mind, may result, for example, in futile disputes over which are THE correct analyses of various linguistic forms.

I will explore this perspective by considering the following hypotheses:

(1) <u>Linguistic</u> <u>Conventions</u> <u>are</u> <u>not</u> <u>rules</u>: There can be well beaten paths of analogy and less well beaten paths in extant linguistic precedent, with no absolute barriers to prevent one's striking out on new paths of analogy so long as one is understood. Making such departures is neither "breaking the rules" nor speaking a different language. "Correct" reading or extension of linguistic precedent is not a determinate matter. Reproduced departures from more beaten paths may slowly become "conventional," a matter of statistics, hence of degree. To speak a language "idiomatically" is merely to use mostly patterns that are well worn, that is, familiar (trite), patterns that place few demands on a hearer.

(2) <u>Linguistic</u> <u>conventions</u> <u>interweave</u> <u>with</u> <u>wider</u> <u>conventions.</u> There is no clear distinction between linguistic rules and wider conventions of usage within a linguistic community. Indeed, a fully conventional sign may have as parts both an utterance and a part or aspect of the context of the utterance.

\ (3) <u>The</u> <u>semantics/pragmatics</u> <u>distinction</u> <u>needs</u> <u>rethinking</u>. Both the division between near-side and far-side pragmatics and the division between semantics and pragmatics display indeterminacies. Many debates about what is strictly "said" may be intrinsically moot. Compositionality is not hegemonic in the generation of language forms.

I will discuss and lightly illustrate these themes in order, but they are strongly interdependent so boundaries between them will blur. Some examples will be from the literature, some I have introduced in previous writings, some will be new. I am hoping that the cumulative

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impact of a diverse set of examples will sharpen appreciation of the flexible perspective that I see Lewis's observations as suggesting.

(1) <u>Conventions</u> <u>are</u> <u>not</u> <u>rules</u>

> In <u>Knowledge</u> <u>of</u> <u>Language</u>, Chomsky chides Lewis because he
>
> doubts that there is any way "to make objective sense of the assertion that a grammar Γ is used by population P whereas another grammar Γ', which generates the same language as Γ, is not." He believes that "there are facts about [the population] P which objectively select the languages used by P" but he is "not sure there are facts about P which objectively select privileged grammars for those languages."....He might be interpreted as offering a version of the thesis that language has no structured vehicle...[But s]ince the language is infinite, it makes no sense to speak of a "given," except insofar as some finite characterization --a function in intension--is given. The inductive problem is to determine this function in intension, the grammar, given some finite amount of data. That is the problem for both the language-learner and for the linguist. A person can neither follow conventions for an infinite language nor have expectations with regard to observance of conventions by others, without some finite characterization of the language that is somehow under his control. ((Lewis 1975, Chomsky 1980:83-84)

But if one interprets Lewis according to his remarks on how conventions not formed by agreement are passed on, then it should follow that far from being some definite function in intension, a language is merely a very large set of extant (token) precedents of usage.[9] The problem of induction posed to the language learner, and also the adult user, is how to make use of these precedents, which do not determine a unique set of functions in intension, without generating misunderstandings.

Our vision of learning (Culicover 1999, Culicover and Nowak 2003, Jackendoff 2002, Tomasello 2003, Croft and Cruse 2004) is that the learner stores current analyses of novel heard utterances in the lexicon. The learning procedure then attempts to construct new and more general lexical entries, in which common parts of existing lexical entries are retained and differing parts are replaced by a variable. This makes the new lexical entry function as a schema or rule that encompasses existing entries and permits construction of new utterances. In turn, this schema along with others may be further abstracted into a still more general schema by replacing further dimensions of variation with variables. (Culicover and Jackendoff 2003: 39-40)

The language learner begins by "chunking" (Millikan 2004, Ch. 11; 2005, Ch. 10). Chunks are then broken up as they become reinterpreted as constructions of various sizes containing variables. Of course much of language is eventually interpreted compositionally. This accounts for the immensely consequential (and much advertised) linguistic phenomenon called "productivity." But the capacity for brute memory connected with language is also consequential, indeed, it is staggering. Average sixteen year old American youths have a vocabulary of 45,000 separate dictionary-entry words plus perhaps as many proper names (Bloom 2000, p. 6). There is no reason to suppose these youths to be short on idioms, chunks and special constructions as well. When first year philosophy students are asked to write essays on difficult materials one finds hundreds of chunked expressions, unparsed, hence often only half understood, hence misused. Adults and more educated people may understand language with more precision, but for everyone there are some expressions that are never dissected. This

sometimes happens because, not understanding their origins, we are unable to make word by word --compositional-- sense of them (*Cock and bull story*, *getting down to brass tacks*, *made no bones about it*, *has a chip on his shoulder*). Other times we just never bothered to reflect (perhaps, *know the ropes*, *a loose cannon*, *above board*, *an open and shut case*, *beat the rap*, *barefaced liar*, *caught red-handed*). These shortcuts in understanding surface, for example, when *Anchors Aweigh* is spelled *"Anchors Away"*, in the famously natural sentence *The dog went to the bathroom on the living room rug* (Morgan 1978) and when Douglas Hoffstader's dean said, without noticing, *I pulled out no stops unturned.*[10]

Even for proficient adults, chunks broken up for one person may remain whole for others. Generalizing this, a pattern in the data seen by one person may be different from that seen by another, or a single individual may be equally sensitive to several patterns in the data. New patterns are sometimes seen in the data as well, patterns not previously exploited, but that are easily recognized by others as soon as they are projected. That a certain similarity or analogy is highly salient does not mean that another is impossible to perceive or to understand, nor are any that can be perceived and understood excluded from what is colloquially called "the same language." Further (we are hypothesizing) there is no higher standard, awaiting discovery by the science of linguistics, for being part of "the same language." Let me illustrate these various possibilities with a small heap of examples.

Quite often the uses of individual words, especially adjectives and verbs, seem to meander in winding and branching paths, covering meanings that are not discrete and countable, nor organizable into any very definite patterns. Liquids, tables, paths, coasts, messages, bells, arguments, implications, views, truths, consciences, jumps and reputations are all said to be

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clear. Exactly how many different senses of the word *clear* are involved? Which of these senses are literal and which metaphorical? If I say that a financial transaction has cleared or that a person is in the clear, are these different uses from any of those above or the same uses again? If metaphors, which are the literal meanings of these metaphors? Should all competent English speakers answer these questions the same way? Taking a simpler case, are long speeches and long poles long in the same abstract sense so that *long* has but one semantic rule (the first through fourth dimensions are all on a par?), or are these two separate senses of *long*? If separate, in which sense is a long road long? A long journey?

In a famous passage, William James (1968) tells of an argument among fellow campers over whether they had or had not gone around a squirrel they were watching. They had gone around the tree the squirrel was on, hence had navigated through every compass direction relative to the squirrel, but the squirrel had kept to the back side of the tree so they had not passed around the back side of the squirrel. The usual case of going around involves both these things. Are both then required by the semantic rule for *going around* or is just one enough? Would a callous that had not been caused by rubbing really be a *callous* or do I contradict myself in speaking of such a callous? Is *synthesized* in *synthesized diamond* an additive adjective as in *large diamond* or a subtractive adjective as in *toy diamond*? Is red hair red, or it is just red for hair? If the latter, is a red dress just a dress that is red for a dress? Or is does the *red* in *red hair* have a different sense than in *red dress*? (There is a literature debating that!)

Consider the role of context for the words *now* and *here.* In paradigm cases, the speaker and hearer of the word *now* or of the word *here,* face one another at the same time and in the same place (close enough), so whether it is the time/place of the speaker or the time/place of the

hearer that is meant, or perhaps the time/place of the word token itself, is invisible. Compare *I am not here now* left as a message on an answering machine with *It has now turned very hot here* written in a letter that travels from Spain to Canada. Both seem to follow precedent, but precedent as understood in different ways. Each continues a conventional pattern, but in a different way.

Suppose that I say, what many linguists are prone to say I cannot say, of Matilda[11], who is currently the star in a Broadway play, *And I mean! Matilda really broke a leg last night!* thus treating the meaning of the idiom *break a leg!* both as a well-wishing and as decomposable. Won't you understand me? Or suppose I say encouragingly to Matilda herself, before the first performance, *Now go break your neck and have a sneezing fit!* Can't I run on that analogy without incurring, well...what? If nobody has thought to express themself that way before does that prevent this form of expression from being part of the language? Where are the invisible rules written that prohibit it?

It is often supposed that some verbs, by conventional rule, may be either transitive or intransitive whereas others are always transitive. In the latter case, if no direct object is explicitly supplied then it is normally supplied from context, otherwise nothing complete will have been said. For example, the verb *to eat* may be either transitive or intransitive: *John eats* conveys a full proposition explicitly. But the verb *to devour* is supposed to be stubbornly transitive: *John devours*, standing alone, does not convey a full proposition. Similarly *I have finished* is supposed to be finished whereas *I have completed* still requires completion. But suppose, after having mentioned how ravishingly hungry you are and that you must eat before we can go, you emerge from the kitchen saying *OK; I'm ready; I have devoured*. What you say

is amusing and, of course, it is not trite, but does it fail to be English? Suppose that Mother keeps saying to Johnny *I really mean it; you can't go out until you have fully completed your assignment on fireflies*; *No, you really have to complete all of it first.* Finally Johnny emerges saying, somewhat saucily, *OK, I have now completed.*

Each of the following sentences

Who does John want for Mary to meet?

Who does John wonder whether Mary likes?

Who does Mary think that likes John?

What does John know that a bottle of fell on the floor?

Who did John talk with Mary after seeing?

strikes most people as ill-formed when first heard. But after hearing five to seven other sentences with a parallel structure (in appropriate contexts) each begins to sound fine.[12] The question is then raised whether these sentences are ungrammatical or whether the problem is merely that they are difficult to parse. But there is a prior question: why should we assume there is an answer to this question?

Languages are constantly shifting, and one reason seems to be that new patterns are being seen in old data. A well known example is *going to,* which was used only to mean moving or traveling towards, but then began to be heard instead as an auxiliary part of the verb showing merely that an action was future. At the transition were sentences like *I am going to* [traveling to] *see my mother* and *I am going to* [traveling to] *buy a cow.* Similarly, the verb "will" changed from a simple verb taking a direct object to an auxiliary verb (Roberts 1985, Roberts and Roussou 2003). Changes of this kind require that readings of the syntax of the original forms

must have been ambiguous at one time, suggesting that syntactic ruts may not be as deep as a Chomskian view would suggest. Recently *another*, when spoken, has begun to be heard as *a nother* rather than as *an other,* resulting in spoken phrases such as *a whole nother apple* or *a whole nother issue*. The unit phrase *tire out* has recently been taken apart and projected to produce, for example, *freak out*, *gross out, chicken out*, *bliss out*, *poop out* and now even such expressions as *I'm (all) coffee'd out* and *I'm all Edward G Robinsoned out* (from Jackendoff 2002, 187-8).

Examples of this kind are countless, of course, and well known. I rehearse them to help fill out the more general suggestion that a language is basically composed of a collection of token precedents, sometimes readable in alternative ways, rather than a set of definite rules. Similarly, the difference between merely "correct" English usage (*the pen of my aunt*) and "idiomatic" English usage (*my aunt's pen*) is a matter of degree, of statistics.

(2) Linguistic conventions interweave with wider conventions

Chomsky's views on the fixedness of a very detailed universal grammar, allied with Jerry Fodor's claims that much of the mind/brain is modular, have abetted the view that the language faculty is strongly independent of other cognitive abilities. A more moderate view can open our eyes to possible continuities between purely linguistic conventions and conventions of other kinds.

Jerry Morgan (1978) describes what (following Searle) he calls "conventions of usage" as distinguished from "conventions of meaning." As examples of the former he tells of cultures in which it is conventional to "greet by inquiring after the other person's gastronomic welfare, most likely, but not exclusively, by saying something like *Have you eaten*?, i.e., its direct translation,"

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(Davis 246) and of Eskimo culture in which "the customary way of opening a conversation...is by saying (the direct translation of) *You are obviously_____* , where the blank is filled in according to what the hearer is doing at the time of the utterance" (Davis 247). Initially Morgan treats this distinction as though it were quite clear, conventions of meaning being a matter of "the relation between linguistic form and literal meaning, which is arbitrary, a matter of knowledge of language...knowledge of the conventions of English," whereas conventions of usage are "properly considered, conventions of the culture that uses the language" (Davis 246). But he goes on to say:

> As an initial approximation, I think conventions of usage can be considered to contain three kinds of elements: occasion, purpose and means. As the statement of means becomes more and more specific, the convention approaches a convention of the language, a statement about literal meaning. As the connections between purpose and means become obscured, the relation between them is ripe for reinterpretation as merely arbitrary, at which point the convention of usage is reinterpreted as a convention of the language. (Davis 247)

His central example is the evolution of *Goodbye*. Morgan hypothesizes an original custom of wishing a person continued well-being upon parting. This evolved through a more specific custom of wishing God's benevolence for them, then through a still more specific custom of saying *God be with you*, to the current custom of saying *Goodbye*. Morgan goes on to claim that an expression such as *Can you pass the salt*? can become "conventionalized" as a polite form of *Pass the salt* without losing its original literal meaning. It is a "convention of usage" (derived from an original Gricean implicature) to use a literal question to make a request in this way. Morgan claims that changes of linguistic meaning can take place when people begin to forget

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origins, truncating and then completely bypassing an understanding of *why* the literal expressions used to implement conventions of usage are connected to their purposes. They then perceive the relation between the expression and its use in the convention of use as "arbitrary," hence as a convention directly of meaning.

The phenomena to which Morgan points in this classic essay are clearly there. I think they made more perspicuous, however, by recognizing at the start that there is no *line* to cross between conventions of a language and conventions of the culture that uses the language. What is the difference between *Can you pass the salt?* being a literal question but conventionally used as a request and its having two literal meanings, the most common of which is a request? Whether perceived as a literal question or a polite literal request, exactly the same result is achieved, the same batch of new tokens serving the same functions is produced. Which pattern is "really there," if anywhere, would be in the statistics over individual ways of seeing the patterns, but surely most people easily see both patterns. Which one they are projecting is moot.[13] Many of the expressions that Grice would have labeled as "generalized implicatures" (*He broke a finger* [his own], *He's out with a woman* [not his wife or mother or sister]) seem to have this in-between status as well. Tiresome arguments over what has been literally "said" in such cases seem pointless.

We can extend the principle that linguistic conventions are interwoven with wider conventions into another dimension as well. Notice that no one doubts that ASL (American Sign Language) is a language. The "language faculty" with its tool kit of universal grammar can't be restricted to the interpretation and projection of conventions utilizing vocal tract gestures and

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their derivatives in writing. Suppose then that I say to you *That is absolutely...* and I form a circle with my thumb and forefinger to mean *perfect*. I thus communicate something in a wholly conventional way: something I do with my vocal tract is part of a this conventional sign while another part is something I do with my hand. Now consider the sign that I construct when I affix a label with the word *poison* written on it to a bottle. The sign is mixed. Part of it is the written word *poison*; another part is the bottle which stands for itself; another part --aspect-- is the way these are joined, the one affixed to the other (the syntax). Clearly the language faculty is capable of interpreting both mixed signs and also signs having some parts that are not arbitrary but that are recognized through ordinary "non-linguistic" channels. A conventional sign can consist of an arbitrary part plus a portion of the context into which this part has been purposefully injected. That is, certain uses of context fall under definite conventions, determining literal meaning, not merely pragmatic meaning or speaker meaning. In ASL, *tongue* is said by slightly protruding the tongue and touching it with the first finger. The tongue is thus part of a sign for itself. Similarly, *hair* is said by touching the hair of one's head, hence hair is part of a sign for itself. Or think of the touching as an arbitrary sign (touching could conventionally have meant something else), its position in the sign sequence showing the logical position of this term for *tongue* or *hair* in the proposition expressed, the touched tongue or the hair itself being a context into which this conventional sign is purposefully injected. Part of the context of the arbitrary sign is then a proper part of the conventional sign as a whole. Conventional signs, signs with conventional syntax, can have parts that are not at all arbitrary in their correspondence with meaning, though they have meaning at all, of course, only as embedded in a syntax.

Compare these last examples with an English imperative such as *Close the window!*

Where is the subject of this sentence? The subject is, of course, the person spoken to. The predicate, *...close the window*, is purposefully injected into that person's presence. Speaking to this person in the imperative mood is parallel to touching the tongue or the hair in the example just above, thus positioning this person as both the grammatical and the topical subject of the sentence. Like the bottle with *poison* written on its label, this person stands for herself. This is, anyway, a perfectly natural way to perceive the pattern running through the set of precedents that are extant uses of English imperatives.

Similarly, an English sentence containing the word *you* can be looked at as using the actual person spoken to as a part of a mixed sign. This person stands for herself, while the word *you* parallels touching in the examples from ASL. *You* shows by its position in the spoken sign sequence the grammatical position that the person spoken to has qua sign of herself. It shows her place in the logical form of the proposition expressed. Similarly, the word *I* shows the grammatical place to be taken by the speaker of the sentence qua sign of herself. And the word *this* shows the grammatical place to be taken, qua sign of itself, by the thing that the speaker indicates. --That this indicated thing is actually a part of the conventional sign being employed is evident from the fact that you have to perceive this thing to understand what proposition is being expressed.

Understanding patterns in the use of indexicals and demonstratives in this sort of way obviates the need to introduce a second kind of meaning called "character" (Kaplan 1989). Rather than viewing sentences containing these forms as "context sensitive" we can, alternatively, view them as incomplete conventional signs. The complete conventional sign is a mixed sign, part of it occurring in the environment of the words. Call the part of a linguistic sign

that would typically be represented in a dictionary or grammar for a language --paradigmatically, the part made up of strings of phonemes-- a "narrow linguistic sign." In some cases one can legitimately look at a token of a narrow linguistic sign as being merely a portion of a wider linguistic sign, the rest of the sign being found in the environment. Let me offer two other kinds of examples before moving on.

When the sergeant barks out *Halt!* to the marching men, his order has as a function to make true that the men will halt at the time of the order, not ten minutes later or next day. Change the time of the order and it changes when the men are to halt. Just as a touched tongue represents a tongue in ASL, the time of the order represents the time of the halting. Similarly, the place of a stop sign on the road shows the place one is to stop. Time and place are usually considered to be aspects of the context of a linguistic sign, but in these cases they could also to be considered as proper parts or aspects of the linguistic sign itself. The time or place the sound or shape is positioned is as much one of its meaningful aspects as the shape or sound itself. Similarly, the positioning of the shapes *John* and *Mary* in the sign *John loves Mary* carries part of the meaning: *Mary loves John* means something different.

If we are playing blackjack and I am the dealer, you are likely at some point to say *Hit me!*. In this context *Hit me!* is most likely to mean *Deal me another card!*. Is the context of playing blackjack possibly itself part of your sign? Do you understand the precedent you are following to be just SAYING *HIT ME!* TO GET SOMEONE TO DEAL YOU ANOTHER CARD, or is it SAYING *HIT ME!* TO GET THE DEALER TO DEAL YOU ANOTHER CARD WHEN PLAYING BLACKJACK? Perhaps there is no reason to choose.

(3) The semantics/pragmatics distinction.

Recently Korta and Perry began an explanation of the semantics/pragmatics distinction as follows:

> Pragmatics deals with utterances, by which we will mean specific events, the intentional acts of speakers at times and places, typically involving language. Logic and semantics traditionally deal with properties of types of expressions, and not with properties that differ from token to token, or use to use, or, as we shall say, from utterance to utterance, and vary with the particular properties that differentiate them. Pragmatics is sometimes characterized as dealing with the effects of context. This is equivalent to saying it deals with utterances, if one collectively refers to all the facts that can vary from utterance to utterance as 'context.' (The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, November 28, 2006)

Korta and Perry go on to divide "near-side pragmatics," which is concerned with determining "what is said," from "far-side pragmatics," which concerns what is meant beyond "what is said."

More exactly, they say that near-side pragmatics concerns "what language the speaker intends to be using, what meaning he intends to be using, whom he intends to refer to with various shared names..." and so forth. Could they have said, more simply, that it concerns what language the speaker IS using, what linguistic meaning he IS using, what his shared names DO refer to? Or do they imply that the speaker's intentions determine from what language the forms he uses have come, and what their meanings are, and to whom the proper names he uses refer?[14] I suspect that Korta and Perry (along with numerous others) don't really wish to affirm this last identity, but that there is a problem about how to make a distinction. What else is there besides the speaker's intentions to determine what language he is speaking when different languages contain same-sounding words, to determine the meanings of the words he is using when the language contains homonyms, to determine who the bearers of the proper names he uses are

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when different people bear the same names?

If Lewis is right in his view that linguistic conventions are essentially tokened precedents (precedents in extension) handed down from one pair of communicators to another, then there is a way that these matters are determined quite apart from speaker intentions. The language a person is currently speaking is determined by the *origin* of the linguistic forms she is using, the meanings of the words and the referents of the proper names by what these forms have been copied from. Suppose, for example, that a person's first language was German, and sometimes she inadvertently slips in the German *und* in place of the English *and* in an otherwise English sentence. She is intending to speak English and she thinks she is speaking English, but that does not make her tokens of *und* into English words. Similarly, if she uses the word *temerity* to mean timidity, that does not make her word *temerity* mean timidity. Or if she uses the name *Hillary Clinton*, having copied it from speakers who were talking about Senator Clinton, and mistakenly applies it me, what she applies is a token of Hillary-Clinton-the-senator's name. I am not the person named by that public name, even when it is used by someone intending to speak of me. Compatibly, when a child imitating the English word *sick* says what sounds phonetically like *thick*, the child speaks English and the word she produces means sick. As for the Reverend Spooner when he uttered what sounded like *tons of soil* but meant *sons of toil,* what he said was probably indeterminate. Having crossed some wires, his production was a mixed copy of two things at once. Similarly, the dean's *I pulled out no stops unturned* was a mixed copy, which, amusingly, meant pretty much the same thing either way.[15]

From this perspective, Korta and Perry's divide between near-side pragmatics and far-side pragmatics is, more accurately, a divide between a concern with the question which

conventional language forms a speaker is using/copying, and the question what the speaker means above or beyond (or other than) what these forms mean conventionally. Given their premise that "[l]ogic and semantics traditionally deal with properties of types of expressions," we can interpret the job of near-side semantics as that of exploring how a hearer recognizes, perhaps with the use of extra-linguistic context, which extant linguistic precedents are the ones that have been invoked in particular utterances. For example, it explores how we know, when the sign reads *Recycle cans and waste paper*, whether *waste* is a verb or an adjective, and when the child articulates what sounds like *The minithter ith talking about thin*, whether her last word is a well-formed token of the word *thin* or an ill-formed token of *sin*. Given this new reading, however, notice that near-side pragmatics no longer appears to deal with "properties that differ from token to token...from utterance to utterance" of the same "type of expression" --unless, that is, one equivocates on the notion "type of expression" between the shape or sound of the expression and the lineage of the expression.[16] What makes two word or syntactic form tokens fall under the same type for purposes of semantics is not shape but lineage.[17]

But from this perspective, certain indeterminacies emerge. These can concern from which conventional form a given token was derived, or where one conventional form ends and another begins, or where convention itself ends and far-side pragmatics begins hence where the semantics/pragmatics divide itself occurs. For we are putting aside the tidy classical view, expressed by Korta and Perry, that "[s]emantics consists of conventional rules of meaning for expressions and their modes of combination." We are assuming that there are no such rules, but only precedents into which patterns have been and will continue to be read, patterns that may be strong or weak, or that may sometimes be read in crisscrossing and even inconsistent ways.

Begin with the obvious indeterminacy concerning when a new metaphor has become dead, that is, when it has finally turned into a new linguistic form. Entwined is the question, for any individual user during the transition, indeed, for any individual token of use, whether an echo of the original meaning is responsible for the production of this token or whether it is merely an imitation of the new use. Surely the answer is often indeterminate, acquaintance with both uses having played a role in determining production. (Compare *Can you pass the salt*?, as analyzed above.) Similarly, how long does it take for a new construction (*She blissed out*, *He's a really nice man...not*!) to have entered the language so that a special inference to speaker intentions (or whatever it is that far-side pragmatics should analyze) is no longer required. And might not individual hearers differ as well?

Similar indeterminacies may be there when an analysis by way of Gricean implicature appears possible for a very common usage. Customary candidates are *I broke a finger,* which, typically, would mean my own finger, *I have had breakfast,* which, typically, would mean that I had it earlier today, and *John has two children*, which, typically, would mean exactly two. As with *Can you pass the salt?*, however, each of these forms *could* be heard, on reflection, as derived by analogy to more general forms, the mentioned restrictions being derived by implicature. Compare analogous forms not carrying these implications: *I broke a dish*, *I have had the measles*, *I have two quarters for the parking meter*. In each case, these classic examples match forms of a more explicit narrower type, but may also be understood as derived by implicature from forms of a broader type, or they may have been derived by over-determination, both ways.

Moving to a different kind of example, it is obvious, perhaps, that despite their similar

shapes, the *bolt* in *The bolt of cloth was already sold* is not from the same lineage as the one in

The bolt on the door was already closed. But what about the *bolt* in *Please don't bolt the door*?

Compare: *He bolted the door*, *He watered the plants*, *He buttered the bread*, *He milked the cow*,

He shoed the horse, *He painted the wall*, *He capped the bottle*, *He nailed the boards together*. It

looks as though nouns are often used as a verbs taking a direct object when it is understandable

what action would connect the kind of object named by that noun with the kind named by the

direct object. Then a pattern could be projected: the *bolt* in *He bolted the door* is the same lexical

entry as in *The bolt on the door was closed.* But now consider *He hatted his head*, *He jammed*

his bread (put jam on it?), *He keyed the lock* (opened it with the key?).[18] Many a modern

linguist would star all the latter as ill-formed. And yet, did we really have to learn each of the

nouns and verbs that seem to pair this way independently? Suppose that I say to you *I jumped*

out of bed, slippered my feet, and ran to the door. Will you understand me? Is the expression

slippered here a possible extension of patterns in extant precedent tokens of English or not?

Although you won't find a verb *to slipper* listed in the dictionary, it seems to me that it is, and

that *I sprang from my chair, cloaked and hatted myself and ran out the door* is perfectly

understandable too. Also, for example, *The salad was too thoroughly garlicked for me* and *He*

flowered his mother's grave every Sunday. Surely these are also cases in which the lines are not

firmly fixed.[19]

Where part of the wider context of a narrow linguistic sign may be functioning as a

proper part of a whole conventional sign, indeterminacy about which aspect of context is

involved or whether context is conventionally involved at all is almost inevitable. Earlier I

mentioned the role that phonological structure plays in making nearly perfect fidelity possible in

the copying of words over many reproductions. When the context of utterance plays a role in meaning conventions, there is no such filter on what is to count as following precedent. In Lewis's words, there is, in these cases, much "room for ambiguity about what would be following precedent and doing what we did before." An example, previously mentioned, is the indeterminacy or ambiguity in the role of context when the word *now* is used to indicate a time or the word *here* is used to indicate a place. A more subtle example of this kind is the use of context to show when or where something happens but without the explicit grammaticalization of, say, a *now* or a *yesterday* or a *here* or an *over there*. A stop light tells when and where to stop by when and where it is, and when the Sergeant yells *Halt!* or when Mother tells Johnny *Please stop that!* it works in the same way. How does *It's raining* work? Does it work the way the stop light works, its time and place standing for the time and place of the rain? Compare Perry's example:

> suppose... that my son has just talked to my older son in Murdock on the telephone, and is
> responding to my question, 'How are things there?' Then his remark ['It is raining'] would
> not be about Palo Alto" (Perry 1986, p. 211).

There is a tradition, discussed at some length by Recanati[20] according to which

> whenever we think or talk, the content of what we say or think is to be evaluated with respect to a
> situation which is determined contextually. The complete content of the representation - that
> which an interpreter must grasp - involves both the content to be evaluated and the situation in
> which it is to be evaluated... [hence] ...the speaker tacitly refers to a situation, and asserts that it is
> raining in that situation. The content that is compositionally determined is only the proposition
> (or propositional function) that it is raining. (Recanati forthcoming b)

According to this tradition, the place meant in Perry's example is determined by far-side

pragmatic inference to be the situation the speaker has in mind. Compare *There I am, lost in the woods; it's raining and cold and I have no coat...* in which it is clear that the time meant is determined as the one the speaker has just been talking about. Now notice that in paradigm cases of the use of sentences such as *It is raining*, the place and time meant are *both* the place and time of the sentence token *and*, of course, the place and time meant by the speaker. It requires a strong but, if our Lewisian standpoint is right, a questionable faith in the ultimate supremacy of systematicity in the production of semantic phenomena to yield the conclusion that the only pattern to which speakers and hearers of English are sensitive is the one that covers all uses of such sentences in the exactly the same way. --Hence by far-side pragmatics rather than by context-incorporating semantics (and prior to that, near-side pragmatics). If we try to cover cases such as the sergeant's order *Halt* to his men in the far-side way, however, the stretch becomes palpable.

Rather than debating about what has been said versus what has only been meant, or about what is in the semantics or in the conventions *versus* in the (far-side) pragmatics, we need, I suggest, to acknowledge the degree of indeterminacy there can be in semantic patterns --even though this may indeed, as Austin once put it, "open.. a loophole for perjurers and welshers and bigamists and so on."

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1. This essay was written from the perspective of the American northeast where only the tradition of generative grammar is clearly visible. I am grateful to William Croft, one of the referees, for pointing me to a number of references from outside that contain data and arguments supporting various of my points. I have now cited several of the most pertinent readings that Croft suggested, but I have retained my primary emphasis on very recent writings by Jackendoff, Culicover and Pinker as major spokesmen for a departure from the central generative tradition. It should be evident that these people, at least, could not possibly have simply failed to understand the force of the generative tradition. My bibliography contains a number of references supplied by Croft that I do not cite but that may be of use to others who would like to explore the territory into which I am venturing here.

2. I will not be trying to prove, of course, that various phenomena I describe cannot possibly be accounted for within a generative grammar perspective. My purpose is only to illustrate the

interest of Lewis's idea that conventions are essentially subject to indeterminacy in interpretation.

3. Including, for example, Searle 1969; Schiffer 1972; Bach & Harnish 1979; Gilbert 1983, 1989/1992; Recanati 1987.

4. Clark 1996, Croft 2000.

5. Millikan 1984 chapter 3; 2004 Chapters 9-12; 2005 chapters 8-10.

6. This is the major premise of those who advocate "usage-based" grammars, for example, Tomasello 2003, Croft & Cruse 2004.

7. For example, Fillmore 1988, Heine & Hünnemeyer 1991, Fillmore and Kay 1993, Zwicky 1994, Goldberg 1995, Dubrowska 1997, Hopper & Traugott 2003, Tomasello 2003, Croft and Cruze 2004, Culliover & Jackendoff 2005.

8. These examples are adapted from Jackendoff (2002) chapter 6.

9. Compare Croft (2000), p. 26.

10. From a public lecture Hoffstader gave at Stanford University in 1991.

11. See, for example, Morgan (1978).

12. From Snyder (2000); Hiramatsu (2000). See also Dabrowska (1997).

13. For more discussion here, see (Millikan 1984) Chapter 4.

14. "'When I use a word,' Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, 'it means just what I choose it to mean -- neither more nor less.'" Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass*

15. As for what the person calling me "Hillary Clinton" *means* (rather than says), that is indeterminate too; having crossed some wires, she means two persons at once (Millikan 2000).

16. This equivocation occurs , I believe, in the Korta and Perry quotation with which I began this section and, indeed, permeates much of the literature in pragmatics.

17. See Millikan (1984, Chapter 4; 2005 Chapters 2-3)

18. *He keyed the car* has recently come to mean that he took his key and maliciously scratched the finish of the car.

19. Clark & Clark (1979) compiled a list of denominal verbs that included more than 400 documented examples which they considered to be "innovations," including *He enfant terrible'd gracefully*, *to stif-upper-lip it through*, *to bargain-counter the Bible*, *She Houdinied her way out of the closet,* and so forth. They propose that the use of these innovative denominals "is regulated by a convention: in using such a verb, the speaker means to denote the kind of state, event, or process that, he has good reason to believe, the listener can readily and uniquely compute on this occasion, on the basis of their mutual knowledge,....." and so forth. Rules, rules, even here there are supposed to be rules! In exactly what medium are they written?

20. For example, in his (forthcoming a, forthcoming b).