

# ARTICLES

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## Trust in Conversation

### ***Abstract***

We may think of the notion of “trust” primarily in epistemological terms or, alternatively, primarily in ethical terms. These different ways of thinking of trust are linked with different ways of picturing language, and my relation to the words of another. While an analogy with an individual continuing an arithmetical series has had a central place in discussions of language originating from Wittgenstein, Rush Rhees suggests that *conversation* provides a better model for thinking about language. Linking this with Knud Løgstrup’s suggestion that “In its basic sense trust is essential to every conversation”, the paper develops the idea of speech as fundamentally a form of contact between human beings. With that, the constraints on which we need to focus if we are to grasp the nature of conversation are not, as in Grice’s influential treatment, maxims whose observance will aid the pursuit of certain general human ends. The relevant constraints are, rather, *limits* on our goal-directed activity: limits that are fundamental to our relations with others. It is within this framework that we must understand the form of “trust” that is central to conversation.

### ***1. Introduction***

Recent treatments of trust in relation to language have focused on testimony: on cases in which someone comes to believe something on the basis of what another has told him. A series of highly illuminating papers have brought out that traditional views, of a

kind that construe what the other tells me as *evidence* that things are as they are said to be, fail to capture fundamental, distinctive features of testimony. In particular, they obscure the fact that when another gives me some information I am *in relationship* with her. There is a crucial contrast between believing what someone tells me and learning from observation of her expressive behaviour. In the former case, my reasons for the belief that I acquire involve trust in the *person* who informs me: this involving the idea that the other is *accountable* for the truth of what she says (Ross 1986; Faulkner 2000; Moran 2006; Faulkner 2007).

My aim in this paper is to suggest that points of this general form have significant analogues in relation to a different, though related, issue: in relation to a “trust” that is involved quite generally in taking someone to have said something. I will draw on considerations developed by Knud Løgstrup. These considerations are neatly summarised in his observation: “In its basic sense trust is essential to every conversation” (Løgstrup 1997: 14). It is clear from the way in which he develops this point that the “trust” of which Løgstrup speaks has a rich ethical dimension. This may encourage the idea that his remarks should be read as a contribution to “the ethics of conversation” – where that phrase is taken to mark a form of enquiry that is distinct from, and secondary to, a philosophical attempt to clarify the nature of language. That would, I believe, be a serious mistake: a mistake that I will try to bring into focus, in part, through consideration of a certain reading of Wittgenstein and also of Paul Grice’s well-known treatment of conversation.

## **2. Trust as an epistemological leap**

In a conversation with a friend about yesterday’s seminar I say, as it might seem quite out of the blue, “Mary is coming over this evening”. You struggle for a moment to grasp what is going on, and even (our having a number of Marys amongst our joint acquaintances) who it is I am speaking of. But, looking for the most plausible construction for my words, it comes to you that I mean Mary Smith – who, being a good friend of Barry, may be able to throw light on his odd behaviour at the meeting. I trust you to

give my words the best construction; and you trust me not to have wandered completely off the point, or, more modestly, down some rather obscure path that you cannot really be expected to follow.<sup>1</sup>

It is clear that, at any rate, much conversation requires a mutual trust of this form. My question is: how are we to understand the “trust” that is involved here? In approaching this, it will be helpful to begin with a very broad contrast between what I will speak of as a “Lockean” and a “Wittgensteinian” picture of language.<sup>2</sup> On the first of these, a person’s meaning something by her words consists in there being within her a representation that, in an appropriate way, lies behind their production. To take another to have said a particular thing is to have formulated a view about what is going on “in the mind of the speaker”. Trying to *find* the sense in what another is saying is trying to identify something that lay behind the words – “in her mind” - which, if only I could have seen it, would have removed the need for the work. That is to say, a need to *assume* that there is some sense in what the other is saying, along with a readiness, in certain cases, to *work* in conversation with her to draw out a sense, are only required because of an epistemological obstacle: an obstacle that would be removed if I could stand to that sense as the speaker herself does (or did at the time of speaking.) The “trust” involved in taking someone to have said a particular thing is an epistemological leap: a confidence that goes beyond anything that is fully justified by what I have actually observed. The need for such trust is the result of my (necessarily) constricted view of the other.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Some will protest that in many cases it would be seriously misleading to speak of a need for “trust” here. If you are one of those, you have my sympathy. I will address the protest in the final section of this paper. If your sense of a gross inappropriateness in my use of this and related terms is an obstacle to your taking much of what I say seriously, turning to that section before you read any further just might be some aid to your engaging with my discussion.

<sup>2</sup> In neither case, especially the second, making any strong claim about the strict accuracy of the label. There are strands in Wittgenstein’s thinking that may point in a very different direction from the kind of view with which I link him in this section. For a discussion that is particularly relevant to the topic of this paper see Hertzberg 1988.

<sup>3</sup> Bob Plant has drawn my attention to the relation of this to a widespread philosophical “ideal of mutual transparency”. This seems to me an interesting, and perhaps very important, connection – but not one that I can try to develop here.

We may picture the key shift from Locke’s picture of language to the kind of view developed by the later Wittgenstein in this way. For Locke, the surroundings in the speaker’s life that are central pointers to her meaning – the fact that we were speaking about this group of people, the fact that she goes on in the conversation as she does, and so on – are *externally* related to what she meant when she uttered these words. By contrast, for Wittgenstein those surroundings bear on the *sense* of claims about what she meant – and, indeed, of the claim that she was speaking at all. It is not, as on Locke’s picture, an inductively grounded hypothesis that if the context is of a certain kind it is likely that she meant Mary Smith, and that if she meant Mary Smith it is likely that she will go on to speak and act in certain ways. Grasping these connections is part of grasping the *sense* of the claim that she meant Mary Smith when she said “Mary”.

If I take her to have meant Mary Smith when she said “Mary”, I will expect her to go on to speak and act in certain ways: to say, if asked, “It was Mary Smith I was referring to”, to make connections in her conversation with other aspects of Mary Smith’s life, to ring up Mary Smith when she doesn’t show up, and so on. Now, if we accept the picture I have ascribed to Wittgenstein we will not suppose that it is a matter of empirical discovery that, for example, one who meant *that* Mary when he said “Mary is coming this evening” can be expected to go on in certain ways. With that, taking him to have meant Mary Smith does not involve a potentially shaky leap from what is publicly observable – his words and surrounding behaviour – to an “inner representation”. That said, are we not left with a potentially shaky leap at another point? My taking him to have meant Mary Smith involves, in some way, anticipations of his future speech and behaviour.<sup>4</sup> Now from a certain perspective it may seem of little moment that the anticipations are not a *consequence* of my taking him to have meant a

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<sup>4</sup> We might equally speak here of “*expectations* of his future speech and behaviour”. However, the word “expectations” is, interestingly, open to both an epistemological and an ethical reading, in a way that roughly parallels what we find with the word “trust”. I will, then, speak of “anticipations”, or “expectations (in the predictive sense)”, when it is the epistemological reading that is at issue.

particular thing by his words. We are still, it seems, left with an epistemological gap that will call for a substantial element of “trust” in the sense sketched in my presentation of the Lockean view: that is, a confidence that goes beyond anything that is fully justified by what I have actually observed.

### **3. Language as a form of contact**

We are, here, in the general territory of Wittgenstein’s much discussed “rule-following considerations”. I will not follow the path of that discussion beyond noting that the familiar analogy with continuing an arithmetical series may be deeply unhelpful. Saul Kripke is, perhaps, the most prominent name in treatments of Wittgenstein in this vein. Kripke offers an account of what is involved in my taking someone to mean a particular thing by, say, the word “table” (Kripke 1982)<sup>5</sup>: an account that gives central place to my expectations (in the predictive sense) of the speaker’s future speech and behaviour. He supplements this with an account of the *utility* of the practice of ascribing meaning in this way.

Kripke’s approach, like the views sketched in the previous section, encourages, or at least leaves open, the thought that my relation to another’s words is fundamentally disengaged and epistemological: I am an observer who predicts how he will continue on the basis of what I have so far observed of him. Rush Rhees suggests a quite different approach when he writes: “But if we think of discussion as a centre of variation, with other sorts of speech differing in one direction or another, it may help us to see what it amounts to when one calls them all speech” (Rhees 1998: 108).<sup>6</sup> This may usefully be taken with the fact that when Løgstrup speaks of “trust” he is speaking of something that, as he expresses it, is essential to “conversation”. While it would serve no purpose to attempt clearly to demarcate “conversation” or “discussion” from other activities that involve speech, I take Rhees and

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<sup>5</sup> See, for example, pp. 92-9. In practice Kripke often speaks, not of “meaning a particular thing”, but of “following a certain rule”. That formulation is itself indicative of the perspective in his approach that I will be challenging.

<sup>6</sup> Whether what Rhees offers is a quite different reading of Wittgenstein or a correction of Wittgenstein is a moot point, which I will not pursue.

Løgstrup to be suggesting that in our thinking about language we should give a central place to the idea of speech as a form of contact between human beings. Conversation is one of the central ways in which people relate to each other. To the extent that I am in conversation with another I am in interaction with her: an interaction that centrally involves a carrying on with words. (Wittgenstein gives repeated emphasis to the connections between what we say and other activities. While this is of great importance, we will, I believe, be in danger of missing what makes something speech if our emphasis lies too exclusively there: if we fail to highlight the connections between what different people say.)

While we also relate to each other through smiles, eye contact, hugs, and so on, relating through *speech* is clearly central to the human way of being with others. This is not to suggest that all speech involves a relating to another in that sense. There are cases in which another's words – for example, the weatherman's prediction of rain this afternoon – may be, for me, little more than grounds for a judgment about this afternoon's weather.<sup>7</sup> But however we conceive of the relation between such “disengaged” contexts of language use and the interaction of conversation, a philosophical treatment of language that bypasses the latter will clearly be significantly incomplete.

On a model of meaning, and the associated picture of the role of trust in language that some find in Wittgenstein, my taking another to have meant a particular thing by her words centrally involves my having formulated an hypothesis about how she will carry on. Now it is true that if I *overhear* what another says this may lead me to form an hypothesis about what she will go on to say and do: an hypothesis on the basis of which *I* may go on to act in certain ways. But in the case in which I am in conversation with her that model may run into problems. That she carries on in conversation as she does, and that I carry on in conversation as I do, are not two independent developments that, in the case in

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<sup>7</sup> But see the papers that I refer to in the first paragraph of this paper.

which conversation goes smoothly, mesh with each other.<sup>8</sup> How she carries on – what she goes on to say – is, in conversation, crucially dependent on what *I* say. And that is so in a double sense. First, there is a form of causal dependence: how she goes on – in the sense of: what words she goes on to utter – is, in a conversation, conditional on what *I* say. But further, an adequate characterization of how she carries on is conditional, in another sense of that term, on what *I* say: her subsequent words “The one with the hazel eyes” are only the witty response that they are, or her single word response “Yes” only the assertion that it is, in the context of what *I* have said. As we can put this: the one who responds creates the space in which the speaker will carry on – the space in whose absence nothing subsequently said would *be* a carrying on of that form.<sup>9</sup>

That point connects with something else. It can be tempting to formulate a central point to be taken from Wittgenstein in this way: someone’s meaning a particular thing by her words – for example, her meaning Mary Smith when she said “She’ll be late” - need not (as on Locke’s view) be something distinct from, something that causally underpins, her going on to speak and act as she does. But if we do express matters like that we should, I think, find ourselves drawn in two, conflicting, directions. On the one hand, it would seem to follow that my *taking* another to have meant a particular thing by her words is (at least in part) my taking it that she will go on to speak and act in certain ways: this being, in the case of a conversation, something on the basis of which I go on to speak as I do. Now this is a suggestion that, as I noted above, may involve difficulties. That aside, we might wonder whether the very considerations that support the Wittgenstein-inspired thought about meaning something do not equally support the following

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<sup>8</sup> Rebecca West writes: “There is no such thing as conversation ... It is an illusion. There are intersecting monologues, that is all”; quoted in Miller (2006: x). While the remark is directly relevant to my point here, I will be assuming that there is not *too* much truth in her claim.

<sup>9</sup> I will often speak in terms of “speaker” and “listener”. I should note that, while difficult to avoid, this way of speaking is unfortunate in the sense that it is important to something’s being a conversation that such a distinction has only limited application; and that fact is, I think, important to the points I am trying to make.

idea: my *taking* another to have meant a particular thing by her words need not be something distinct from my going on in conversation with her as I do; need not, for example, be an underlying hypothesis about how *she* will go on, on the basis of which *I* go on as I do.

Perhaps one lesson to take from this is that it should not be assumed that there will always be a philosophically illuminating answer to questions of the form “What is x?”: that, for example, we will gain the kind of understanding that we seek in philosophy by discovering “what it *is*” to mean a certain thing by one’s words, or to take another to mean a certain thing by her words. Illumination may flow more from a grasp of the general framework of human life within which particular ways of speaking and thinking have their sense. Now my focus here is on how we speak and think about speaking and thinking: on the general framework of human life within which there is a place for the idea of someone meaning something by what she says – for the idea of someone *saying* something. We may (taking a tip from Wittgenstein) suppose that something central to that framework can be articulated in terms of the speech and behaviour that surrounds a person’s words: in particular, in so far as I hear another’s words in a certain way I hear them as something to which some but not other continuations in speech and behaviour can be expected. Now to the extent that we take conversation to be central to the place of language in human life we will take continuations *in speech* to be central here; and, as I have noted, in a conversation it is the one with whom she is speaking who creates the space in which the speaker will continue. In so far, then, as the possibility of certain continuations in speech is an aspect of the general framework of human life within which there is a place for the idea of someone meaning something by what she says, so, at least in a central range of cases, is the fact that the one addressed creates, through his response, a space for continuations of the relevant form.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Of course, he might have said just the same even though the other’s response did not provide him with *these* possibilities for continuation. But, as we might express this, the *possibility* of those possibilities is involved in our recognition of what we have here as speech. I should note that my suggestion here is of a general form that is fairly common

#### 4. “Talk without purpose”

In his well-known treatment of conversation, Paul Grice (1989: especially essay 2), like Løgstrup, focuses our attention, not simply on “language” considered in the abstract, but on conversational interchanges between specific individuals at particular times and places. His aim is to display the framework within which particular utterances are accepted as appropriate, and their implications grasped, within a specific conversational context. While grasp of “the conventional meaning of the words (the sentence)” uttered is, on Grice’s view, a necessary precondition of this, it is clearly not a sufficient condition. The smooth flow of conversation, and a grasp of what is being said, requires also mastery of a series of maxims by which conversation is governed.<sup>11</sup> These maxims derive their rationale from “the particular purposes that talk (and so, talk exchange) is adapted to serve and is primarily employed to serve” – purposes that include not simply “the maximally effective exchange of information” but also “such general purposes as influencing or directing the actions of others” (Grice 1989: 28). Part of his aim is to show, by reference to these purposes, that standard forms of conversational practice are something it is *reasonable* for us to follow (Grice 1989: 29).

While Grice conceives of his goal as an understanding of the workings of “conversation” his talk of “the particular purposes that talk (and so, talk exchange) is adapted to serve” should alert us to the fact his approach presupposes a specific, and controversial, view of the character of conversation and its place in human life. We can contrast this view with that indicated by Rowan Williams when he speaks of “conversational models of social existence” (2000: 94). Williams contrasts “(broadly) purposive talk, designed to change situations in particular ways” with “talk that is *designed* for

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in discussions of Wittgenstein. A rather different presentation of this kind of thought, one to which I am particularly sympathetic, can be found in Hertzberg 2002.

<sup>11</sup> To give just one example of these, at the most general level is the Cooperative Principle: “Make your conversational contribution such as is required at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged” (Grice 1989: 26).

nothing” (2000: 74). It is the latter that marks talk exchange of the “conversational” form. Conversation is not a *means* to goals of forms widely shared by human beings. It is, in itself, one of the central values of human life: one of the activities that constitute a life as one of the specifically human form. And it is this, in part, through its being a form of activity that embodies “mutual recognition and thus mutual honour or respect” (Williams 2000: 56).<sup>12</sup>

In a recent book on the topic conversation is defined as “talk without purpose” (Miller 2006: 195). The author’s pre-eminent model of “conversation” is the type of leisurely interchange that was the central activity of the coffeehouses and clubs of 18<sup>th</sup> century London, and which he laments is a dying art. But while there is no doubt a lot to be said for that judgment, “talk without purpose” remains a central feature of our lives. Such talk ranges from simple greetings and the passing exchange of pleasantries, which, while hardly “conversation”, are amongst the central embodiments of mutual recognition, to, for example, the shared reminiscing about the distant past, or mutual recounting of the highlights of yesterday’s match, that may be an important dimension of the shared life of two individuals. Further, in much talk that *does* have a purpose the purpose is strictly secondary: more an excuse for the talk than its fundamental motivation. In other cases again – much philosophical discussion providing, perhaps, a good illustration – while there is room for an idea of “purpose”, the purpose is not *external* to the talk: a goal that is independent of

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<sup>12</sup> To pick out just two other passages that are very relevant to my theme: “... the social miracle, the fact of linguistic sharing. Charity uncovers the bedrock of speech: sheer converse, the exchange of sounds in codified patterns and the peculiar exhilaration that attaches just to that. It affirms that it is in language that is ‘there’ before and after argument and context – which is not self-expression (a meaningless idea outside the frame of converse) but the possibility of recognition” (Williams 2000: 72); “I discover in the conversations of charity that what we have in common is, in one sense, simply the conversation itself; or rather, that my interest is bound up, not with the ‘out there’ we may both be referring to, not with the common defence of what we share, but with the continuance of the conversational relationship” (Williams 2000: 81). See also Gadamer 1975: Part Three. Gadamer writes: “Language is by nature the language of conversation; it fully realizes itself only in the process of coming to an understanding. That is why it is not a mere means in that process” (1975: 443).

our ability to talk with each other and so one that, as Grice expresses it, “talk (and so, talk exchange) is adapted to serve”. We might add, perhaps more controversially, that talk that is *all* purpose is, with the possible exception of certain well demarcated contexts, widely recognised as an abomination. At any rate, an interchange that I have with another is compromised as “conversation” in so far as what I say at each stage is guided solely by a concern to secure some external end. In certain circumstances I might be accurately described as *pretending* to engage in conversation.<sup>13</sup>

Talking with another is not, or not solely, a means to something else. Conversation is a form of contact between people; and in so far as I have no interest in the *person* – in so far as my interest in what she says, in what she *means* by her words, relates purely to my need for information or my ability to predict or control her future behaviour – there is a sense in which I am not talking with (talking *with*) her at all.

None of this is to deny that, as Grice suggests, it is essential to conversation that we view what we say as subject to certain constraints. It *is* to deny that these constraints are properly understood as a means to an end that conversation serves. Indeed, the above remarks may suggest that, in a certain respect, this is to stand things on their head. For the constraints on which we need to focus if we are to grasp the nature of conversation are not maxims whose observance will aid the pursuit of certain general human ends. The relevant constraints are, rather, *limits* on our goal directed activity: limits that are fundamental to our relations with others. In developing this idea further, it will be helpful to return to Løgstrup.

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<sup>13</sup> As with feigned threatening looks, the effectiveness of such tactics is dependent on their being simulations of something else – the real thing being something from which such crude purposiveness is absent. It may be worth adding that the “pretending” I have in mind here is something we may, in certain contexts, judge to be completely in order: for example, the interactions of a therapist with a client may often move into this region.

## 5. *The demands on speaker and listener*

“In its basic sense trust is essential to every conversation.” I earlier sketched an epistemological reading of the “trust” that is involved in conversation: my taking another to have said a certain thing involves a confidence that goes beyond anything that is fully justified by what I have actually observed - whether this “going beyond” is to be construed in terms of an hypothesis concerning a representation “in the mind of the speaker” or one concerning the speaker’s future speech and behaviour. Rather differently, we may construe the “trust” in terms of a confidence that our partner in conversation is, in saying what he does, conforming to the conversational maxims outlined by Grice. In either case, the “trust” is a *means* to something else: to reaching a correct conclusion about what the speaker means, or, more broadly, to achieving the purposes that talk is employed to serve.

That Løgstrup is in fact speaking of something very different is clear from the way in which he relates trust to the notion of a *demand*:

In conversation as such we deliver ourselves over into the hands of another. This is evident in the fact that in the very act of addressing a person we make a certain demand on him. ... [S]imply in addressing the other, irrespective of the importance of the content of what we say, a certain note is struck through which we, as it were, step out of ourselves in order to exist in the speech relationship. For this reason the point of the demand – though unarticulated – is that the speaker is accepted as the note struck by the speaker’s address is accepted (Løgstrup 1997: 14-15).

In so far as we give a central place to the idea of conversation as a way in which people *relate* to each other we will think that an adequate characterisation of conversation will give primary place – not (or not simply) to my relation to the other’s words or to meanings expressed in them – but to my relation to the *speaker*<sup>14</sup>, and to demands that may be involved in that.

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<sup>14</sup> As Hertzberg has expressed it, a conversation is “an exchange in which there [is] no doubt about who you were talking *to*” (2001: 2-3).

Consider first what Løgstrup might mean when he speaks (without further elaboration) of “demands on the speaker”.<sup>15</sup> We might say that I have not met the demands on me as a speaker if what I say is not rooted in a sense of the conversational context, or if I am not *in* my words in the sense of their being something that I am prepared to stand by. That is to say, I betray the trust of the one to whom I am speaking, and so am open to criticism, if my words are simply off the point; or if they are spoken unthinkingly or with a lightness such that I would withdraw them at the drop of a hat, or would not (or could not) continue with them in conversation in ways they will give the other to expect. The “trust” on the part of the listener – the correlate of the demand on the speaker – is not an epistemological leap that the listener must make: must make since her convictions are not fully justified by the reasons available to her. She has *expectations* of the other: “expectations” not (or not simply) in the sense of anticipations of how the other will go on to speak and behave, but in the sense of demands such that, if he fails to meet them, she will feel let down by the other, and may have grounds for *complaint* against him.

Just as there are demands on the speaker, so there are demands on the listener. Løgstrup articulates a central aspect of these in this way: “Everything which is said is given the best construction. No one lies in wait to see whether we expose ourselves. Awkwardness is not taken advantage of...” (Løgstrup 1997: 201). On the epistemological models discussed earlier, any idea of a “charity”, or “justice”,<sup>16</sup> in how I take the other could only be construed as a

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<sup>15</sup> It may be objected that talk of “demands” is quite out of place in the context of most conversations between friends: that something is not quite right in the relationship if either thinks of their situation in such terms. I believe there is something true and important in that protest. I will return to it.

<sup>16</sup> There are, I think, things to be said for and against each of these terms in this context. In particular, while the term “charity” points to relevant links with Donald Davidson’s treatment of radical interpretation, there are two key differences that need to be highlighted. First, for Davidson, being charitable in how one takes others is a matter of taking most of what they say to be true. Now while that is an aspect of what I mean by “charity”, it is far from being the whole of it. To stress a single dimension of what I think needs to be added: charity, as I am understanding this, involves taking most of what another says as somehow *relevant* to the conversational context. Second, Davidson insists that charity is not simply an epistemologically good strategy: it is a *requirement* on interpreting another’s words. While I believe there is a sense in which that is correct, his

*means* to something else. In so far as listening well requires that I give the other's words "the best construction" this is because such an attitude maximises the likelihood that I will take her words correctly: that I will form the correct hypothesis about what she is saying. The charity is a *means* to an end. Now what this fails to capture is the fact that the charity or justice is not simply an epistemologically good strategy. It is something that is *owed to the speaker*. I betray the trust of the speaker, and she has grounds for *complaint* against me, if I take her words in an obviously uncharitable, or straightforwardly absurd, way. Conversely, she may have grounds for gratitude if, despite obvious temptations to the contrary, I take her words in a way such that they make an insightful contribution to the discussion.

I said that charity – giving another's words the best construction – is not a means to something else. This is related to my earlier observation that in conversation the listener creates the space in which the speaker will continue. We should not think of the charity, or justice, of which I have spoken as something that can be recommended on the grounds that it is the most effective policy to adopt for determining what another meant. For in the absence of a fair measure of charity of this form there would *be* no "meaning something by one's words". Thus, suppose that, as we may picture it, we systematically took what others said in deeply uncharitable ways. For example, when my wife says "The children are having friends over today" I take her reference to "The children" to be a reference to all the children of Botswana; and in *her* reading of my seriously perverse response to what she has said my wife is equally perverse. In such a social world nobody would ever have a remotely suitable space in which to follow up their words; and, with that, there would be no place for people meaning things by what they say: no place for people saying things. Charity, and the concomitant trust, is, then, not the most effective policy to adopt for determining what another meant. It is part of the framework of human life within which there is a place for the idea

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treatment fails to highlight the ethical dimension that I wish to stress: the key idea of what is *owed to the speaker*.

of “what someone meant”. And when Grice speaks of the “goals of conversation” (as opposed to the goals of this or that conversation), and Kripke of the “utility” of the practice of ascribing “meaning” to another’s words, we must reply that these notions may be as out of place here as they would be if one were to speak of the “goals of smiling” or of the “utility” of taking smiles as an expression of friendliness.

## **6. Giving words their best construction**

The demand to give the other’s words the best construction is rooted, not, or not solely, in some goal that it serves, but in my relation to the speaker. This is an expression of the fact highlighted earlier that talking with another is not, or not solely, a means to something else.

Consider an example. Speaking of her colleagues at work Jane says “They’re all scoundrels”. Did the “all” include Simon, someone with whom she is quite close and who really doesn’t seem to deserve the label “scoundrel”? “Giving her words the best construction” will involve taking it that she did not mean to include Simon. Following Wittgenstein<sup>17</sup>, I take it that there need be nothing that went on at the time she spoke that settles one way or the other whether she meant to include him. And, depending on the details of the case, it may be difficult to offer completely compelling grounds for the claim that she did not say that, along with all the others, Simon is a scoundrel.<sup>18</sup> Still, it is clear to me (the listener) that it would be quite unfair – unfair to *Mary* - to read her remark in this way. I do not mean: being fair to Mary will involve allowing her to modify her claim without censure. I mean rather: being fair to Mary will involve not taking her to have said that Simon *is* a scoundrel – will involve not taking her “all” to be read in *that* way. And if it is asked “What must your words ‘She didn’t

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<sup>17</sup> “If God had looked into our minds he would not have been able to see there whom we were speaking of” (Wittgenstein 1968: 217).

<sup>18</sup> I may be justified in my confidence while not being able to offer grounds to others. This goes with my knowing the speaker.

mean Simon' be true to if they are to be true?" the only informative answer may be: "Mary".<sup>19</sup>

I did not take her to say that Simon was a scoundrel. That is not to say that I formulated an hypothesis on the basis of which I went on to do something. I simply carried on in a certain way: for example, asking whether Simon shares her views. Consider a slightly different case: one in which the question of what she meant *does* arise. Knowing what a good man Simon is, I am slightly shocked by Mary's words. When I ask her if she means him too she responds, perhaps indignantly, "Of course not". Or perhaps she hesitates before replying "No, I don't mean him". Perhaps again it is only under some gentle pressure, reminding her of instances of his good, conscientious work, that she says this. Or in another case again, while, in her anger, her first response may be to insist that her reference to them "all" *did* include Simon, I may feel that I should try, and I may succeed, in convincing her that he should not be included. In a particular case, perhaps around the middle of the spectrum, we may move fairly freely between tenses: between "I didn't mean him" and "I don't mean him". With that, it may be indeterminate at what point in the spectrum of cases we switch from saying that we are getting clear about *what* she said to persuading her to modify her claim.

Analogues (more or less distant) of these points will arise wherever there is a concern about *what someone said* – where this is to be contrasted with a concern about what conclusions I can draw, about, for example, her likely future behaviour, on the basis of her vocalisations. Thus, if someone has *said* something there is room for questions about the implications of what she has said. When she said "It will rain today" was she committing herself to something more than the familiar drizzle; was she committing herself to rain in *Lampeter*, or simply in the general region; and so on? When she said "It is a dreadful thing to break a promise" did she mean that there are no circumstances in which it might be acceptable to do so; again, would *this* (what I did last week) count

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<sup>19</sup> And that is to say that the philosophical notion of "truth conditions" will be seriously unhelpful here.

as “breaking a promise” as she meant this; and so on? (Obvious analogues of these points arise in the context of questions, commands, expressions of hopes, and so on.)

A word of warning is in place here. The particular example that I have worked with, along with the language of “charity” and “fairness”, could leave us with a lopsided picture. I suggested that in response to the question “What must your words ‘She didn’t mean Simon’ be true to if they are to be true?” the only informative answer may be: “Mary”. Now there are cases in which “being true to Mary” may involve the recognition that a certain awful remark is just the kind of thing she would say. Despite her indignant denials, our knowledge of Mary leaves us, we may feel, with little choice but to say that her “all” *did* include Simon. “Giving her words the best construction” is, then, not necessarily giving them the construction that the speaker would most welcome or that casts her in the best light. We may, then, do better to speak of what is called for as *justice* in how I take another’s words. Justice involves taking the speaker seriously: a proper acknowledgement that these were *Mary’s* words. In this sense, I *fail* in what I owe to her in so far as I see her through rose-tinted spectacles.

### **7. A condition for “language”?**

I have suggested that in our philosophical thinking about language we do well to give a central place to the idea of speech as a *form of contact* between human beings; and, with this, to an idea of what is *owed* to the one with whom I am speaking. I owe it to the other (as she does to me) to be *in* my own words, and to be charitable – to be just – in how I take her words. The other side of these responsibilities is a mutual trust: trust that the other will take me in the best way possible is part of speaking, as trust that the speaker is *in* her words is part of listening. Closely linked with that, making something of another’s words is making something of *the speaker*: is seeing that this would be an appropriate way to go on with her in the conversation.

I am tempted to add: if I don’t, in that sense, care about the speaker, I don’t care what he meant – or rather, I don’t care in a sense significantly different from that in which I may care whether

the clouds mean rain. But the addition would go beyond anything that I have argued in this paper, and its truth could only be assessed in the light of a particular conception of what constitutes a *significant* difference. Closely linked with that, I have not argued that there is no language where there is no conversation. Could the word “language” be correctly used of a community within which “speech” plays a purely functional role, perhaps of the form illustrated by Wittgenstein’s builders? We should not assume that, in the absence of a specific context, that question must have an answer. We do not have a notion of “language” that, in the abstract, determinately settles of any conceivable community whether it has one or not. The point here is not that the line between having and not having a language is not a sharp one; but, rather, that how we draw the line (however hazy that line may be) will turn on our reasons for wanting to draw it. Only given a context in which it is clear what turns on a search for “necessary and sufficient conditions” for being a “language” will it be clear what could be relevant to answering it.<sup>20</sup>

My aim, then, has not been to prove that something must have certain features if it is to qualify as “language”. My concern has, rather, been to identify indisputably important features of the phenomenon of language in human life, and to argue that no philosophical treatment of language that ignores conversation – that ignores the “trust” and “demands” of which Løgstrup speaks – will be adequate to central dimensions of that.

## **8. The philosophical context of this discussion**

I must, finally, address an important objection to the idea that, as Løgstrup expresses it, trust is essential to every conversation. It would, it might be argued, be absurd in most contexts in which I am having a conversation with my wife to say that I “*trust*” her to

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<sup>20</sup> I thus have both huge sympathy with and reservations about remarks of the following kind: “If one cannot talk freely with the ape before, during and after the test, the ape cannot be said to have language, no matter how impressive the test results are” (Fields, Savage-Rumbaugh, Segerdahl 2005: 40). There may, of course, be grounds for the judgement that the marvellous discussion in which this remark appears *does* provide just the kind of context that I have suggested is required.

give what I say the best construction: trust her, for example, to take me to be referring to *our* children, and not, say, all the children of Botswana, when I say “The children are having friends over today”. It might be added: just as talk of “trust” would generally be out of place here, so too would talk of a “*demand*” on me “to give her words the best construction”. To take her to be speaking of Sean and Patrick is not to “give her words the *best* construction”; it is to give them the only possible construction. (And that is to say: talk of “giving a construction to her words” has no application here.)<sup>21</sup>

While I believe that there is something right, and very important, in that objection, I do not think that it calls for any modification of Løgstrup’s proposal. Talk of my “trusting” another requires a certain context: a context, for example, in which there is a possibility of the other letting me down. I do not mean (though it is clearly true): such a way of speaking is only in place if the relation between the people spoken of is of a certain form. I mean, rather: such a way of speaking only makes sense in so far as the one *ascribing* “trust” speaks within a certain context. One relevant kind of context is of this form: while neither those spoken of, nor the person speaking of them, takes there to be a possibility of the one letting the other down, someone else – perhaps the one addressed – does take there to be such a possibility. For example, Mary is aghast at John’s willingness to lend £100 to someone who approached him in the street. I explain: “He trusts her. They are neighbours”.

There would be nothing remotely resembling language as we now have it were the possibility that one person might “let another down” in the ways I have discussed pervasively in the air: that is, were it not the case that contexts in which one might speak of “trust” – and, with that, of “giving another’s words the best construction” – the exception. That said, a philosophical discussion of relations between people itself involves a certain context. The context of, for example, Wittgenstein’s *On Certainty*, in which the notion of “trust” has a central, if somewhat ambiguous, position, is

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<sup>21</sup> A generalized version of this protest, and its philosophical importance, is forcefully argued by Olli Lagerspetz and Lars Hertzberg (2013).

a philosophical tradition in which, in one's relations both to the natural world and to other human beings, *doubt* is taken to be the default position. It is within the context of an assumed permanent possibility of others letting one down, and, more generally, of things falling apart, that Løgstrup's suggestion that trust is involved in all conversation has its sense. Acknowledging that it has sense *here* is quite consistent with insisting that it is philosophically important that in the great majority of contexts in which we speak of conversation such a way of speaking would be senseless.<sup>22</sup>

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### **Biographical note**

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