Language Conventions Made Simple

Ruth Garrett Millikan

The Journal of Philosophy, Vol. 95, No. 4. (Apr., 1998), pp. 161-180.

Stable URL:
http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0022-362X%28199804%2995%3A4%3C161%3ALCMS%3E2.0.CO%3B2-8

The Journal of Philosophy is currently published by Journal of Philosophy, Inc..

THE JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY

VOLUME XCV, NO. 4, APRIL 1998

LANGUAGE CONVENTIONS MADE SIMPLE

At the start of *Convention: A Philosophical Study*, David Lewis[1] says "It is a platitude that language is ruled by convention," and he proposes to give us "an analysis of convention in its full generality, including tacit convention not created by agreement" (*ibid.*, p. 1). Almost no clause of Lewis's analysis has withstood the barrage of counterexamples over the years,[2] however, and a glance at the big dictionary suggests why, for there are a dozen different senses listed there. Left unfettered, convention wanders freely from conventional wisdom through conventional medicine, conventions of art and "conventions of morality" to conventions of bidding in bridge.[3] Surely, it is unwise to try to fell these all with a single stone. Lewis's original goal, however, pursued further in "Languages and Language,"[4] was to describe the conventionality of language, and this may be a more reasonable target.

[1] Cambridge: Harvard, 1969.

[2] For a good discussion of the various difficulties, see Margaret Gilbert, *On Social Facts* (New York: Routledge, 1989; reprint, Princeton: University Press, 1992).

[3] *Webster's Third International Dictionary*. Senses 3, 4, and 5 alone—those most pertinent to Lewis's aims—include the following variety: "3. Agreement or an agreement; specif., an agreement enforceable in law; a contract; covenant; 4. General agreement or concurrence, as the basis of any custom, opinion or the like, or as embodied in any accepted standard, method, usage or the like; hence, arbitrary or inflexible custom; fixed usage; conventionality; as slaves to convention; 5. A rule or usage based upon general agreement; a rule or practice generally adhered to; an arbitrary or inflexible rule, form, principle, etc., as in art; a conventionalism; as, the conventions of morality or of everyday life." It is not surprising that an attempt to sum up these uses under a single "analysis of convention in its full generality" should fall to counterexamples.

[4] In K. Gunderson, ed., *Language, Mind, and Knowledge* (Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 1975); reprinted in H. Geirsson and M. Losonsky, eds., *Readings in Language and Mind* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1996), pp. 134-55.

0022-362X/98/9504/161-80

This article is aimed at that target. It is aimed, more specifically, at describing the conventionality of natural as opposed, say, to stipulated language. I do not claim that this kind of conventionality is the only kind of conventionality there is. I do not claim there are no other senses in which even languages, non-natural ones, might be "conventional"; and I do not claim that it is definitional of all language that it has to be conventional. (Perhaps there are animal "languages," languages that are inherited rather than conventional in the sense I shall describe.)

Why should we care about the conventionality of natural language? Because understanding it is essential for understanding many aspects of pragmatics: for example, questions in speech-act theory and about how natural-language demonstratives work. I shall remark in section VII on the relation of the analysis I shall give to speech-act theory.

Lewis's analysis of conventions was very complex, involving solutions to "coordination problems" defined in a complex way, regular conformity to convention within a group, mutual knowledge of this conformity supporting its continuation on rational grounds, and so forth. I shall try to capture the conventionality of natural language in very much simpler terms, displaying its continuity with much more rudimentary conventions. I shall call this kind of conventionality *natural conventionality* and speak, correspondingly, of *natural conventions.* Natural conventions will be described as requiring neither coordinations, regular conformity, nor rational underpinnings.[5] Natural conventionality is composed of two, quite simple, related characteristics. First, natural conventions consist of patterns that are "reproduced" in a sense to be defined. Second, the fact that these patterns proliferate is due partly to weight of precedent, rather than due, for example, to their intrinsically superior capacity to perform certain functions. That is all. I shall discuss these two characteristics in turn, explaining them as they characterize, first, simple noncoordinating conventions, then simple coordination conventions, and, finally, language conventions, most though not all of which are coordinative.[6]

[5] I have inveighed elsewhere against the psychological reality of Gricean intentions, hence of "mutual knowledge" in Lewis's sense—*Language, Thought, and Other Biological Categories* (Cambridge: MIT, 1984), chapter 3.

[6] It is doubtful, for example, whether saying 'Damn!' when annoyed and 'Ouch!' when it hurts are coordination conventions. Expletives are frequently uttered by persons when alone, nor can one question an explicative with 'Were you talking to *me*?' The conventions of saying 'boo!' to scare someone and of calling cats with 'kittykittykitty' (United States) or 'pusspusspuss' (England) or 'tssttssttsst' (Hungary, Poland) are not coordination conventions. Lewis says that guiding horses with 'gee' and 'haw' is a coordination convention among drivers who must drive the same horses, however, and perhaps he is right.

I. FIRST REQUIREMENT: REPRODUCTION

The various conventional aspects of natural-language forms are reproduced structures. Whole sentences and larger units are not usually reproduced, of course; but words are reproduced and—even if we humans all come with a Chomskian inherited universal grammar—many aspects of syntax are also reproduced. A pattern has been *reproduced* if its form is derived from a previous item or items having, in certain respects, the same form, such that had the model(s) been different in these respects, the copy would have differed accordingly. A reproduction is never determined by its model in all respects. The photocopy has a white background not because the original did, but because white paper was put in the copier's paper tray. Similarly, if certain features of syntax are determined by the endogenous structure of the language module, this does not prevent other aspects of syntactic patterns from being reproduced. It is by reproducing language forms that children growing up in France learn to speak French, children in China, Chinese.

Being perpetuated by reproduction is the first basic feature of natural conventionality. Natural conventions are handed down. Consider, by contrast, the *shirt-buttoning* way of proliferating a pattern. Suppose that we all button our shirts in order from top to bottom, but that we do so quite independently, each having independently discovered for herself that this is the easiest way to get the right buttons into the right holes. This convergence of behavior would not result from our shirt-buttoning techniques being handed down, hence would not be conventional behavior. Behaviors that are idiosyncratic or peculiar seem quite certain not to have been handed down, hence these are the paradigm nonconventional behaviors—the *unconventional* behaviors.

On the river in Cambridge, England, it is conventional to punt standing on the deck at the back of the punt boat whereas in Oxford, one turns the deck to the front and stands at the back inside. In both places, you see many other, more awkward, antics besides, performed both by undergraduates and visiting untutored novices. Most untutored novices, however, either stand on the deck in back or turn the deck in front and stand behind and inside. In so doing, they are not *following* the tradition handed down by either university. Rather, their behaviors accidentally coincide with these traditions. Their behaviors are no more conventional than the behavior of a puppy who accidentally wets in the bathroom. A behavior is conventional not because its form matches a conventional one but because its form was produced by reproduction.

There are a number of different ways in which conventional patterns can be reproduced which will be of interest to us. They may be reproduced by being copied from one another directly, or one person may tell another how a pattern goes. For example, Johnny's mother tells him that he is to put his letter in the mailbox and put up the flag. The result is that he reproduces the first part of a conventional pattern of activity, the second part of which will be reproduced by the mailman, who, on seeing the flag, stops at the box, removes its contents, then puts the flag down. He does this, in part, because he is familiar with this conventional pattern of activity and, recognizing that the first part has been performed, reproduces the second part. With his addition, the full conventional pattern has now been reproduced.

Sometimes conventional patterns are reproduced by what I shall call *counterpart reproduction.* A bolt one wishes to be suitable to a given purpose usually has various thread gauges as reasonably functional alternatives, but once a particular nut has been chosen, the choice of suitable thread gauges is strictly determined. Likewise for the nut. So if certain nuts were made to fit certain bolts, and then more bolts made to fit the nuts, and so on, specific thread gauges of both nuts and bolts would be reproduced without any bolt's being directly copied from any bolt or any nut from any nut. The traditional positions assumed by men and women for ballroom dancing were commonly reproduced in part by *nuts-and-bolts reproduction,* each woman settling into the traditional woman's posture in response to the postures of the men with whom she danced, and vice versa. A simpler kind of counterpart reproduction is *handshake reproduction.* Shaking hands by placing the right hand in another's right hand, thumb notch to thumb notch, then shaking up and down (contrast left hands, grasping wrists, interlocked fingers, shaking side to side) is probably learned in part not by direct copying but by fitting in with one's partner; but here the counterparts must be alike to fit. Often each individual part needs to fit arbitrary members from a whole collection of counterparts, and vice versa. This easily results in standardization of forms, more easily than by direct copying. Copies of copies easily drift away from the original; the need to fit counterparts retards drift.

That a certain pattern of behavior is common in one culture but not in another is evidence, but not particularly strong evidence, that the pattern may be being proliferated by reproduction. One reason it is not particularly strong evidence is that the only practical manner of doing a thing may depend upon context and hence vary from cul-

ture to culture, proliferated in the shirt-buttoning way. The sensible way to dress in Iceland is not sensible in Ecuador, copying quite to one side. But the reasonable way to behave may also depend upon prior patterns already established in one's culture, so that a pattern learned merely as practical, as a skill, at a deeper level of analysis may be reproduced by counterpart reproduction. Margaret Gilbert says that in some circles it is conventional to write a thank-you note after attending a dinner party but that, contra Lewis, there is nothing arbitrary in doing so (*op. cit.*, p. 340). Indeed, if the host expects you to write such a note and will think you rude or ungrateful if you do not, then you have reason to write it, conventions quite to one side. On the other hand, the host will have such an attitude only because people before you have written thank-you notes under such circumstances. Had people before you made phone calls, or sent messages or flowers, your host would have expected that instead. Thus, even if you were not aware of doing what others have done, writing a note in response to your host's expectations, however you chanced to discern them, is a reproduced behavior; it is handed down. Reproduced patterns are often learned rather in the manner of skills, or because obviously morally required, and so forth, while at a deeper level they are portions of counterpart-reproduced, conventional patterns.

Patterns of activity are often reproduced unconsciously. For example, social distances—the distances at which people stand when conversing—vary from culture to culture and from one kind of social relationship to another within each culture. If you are standing at the wrong social distance, the person to whom you are talking will move; so to prevent slow circling about the room as you talk, you unconsciously reproduce the conventional social distance by handshake reproduction. Shaking hands with the right hand, specifically, may sometimes be reproduced in this unconscious way. One can even imagine being forced, without realizing it, into the right-hand driving pattern merely in an effort to avoid on-coming traffic. Then one would unconsciously reproduce a driving pattern by handshake reproduction.

The reproduction and standardization of natural-language patterns may take place, in part, through unconscious counterpart reproduction. Reproduced speaker-hearer patterns generally involve inner as well as outer acts so that direct copying is not a means of reproduction for the whole. But given the speaker's portion of the pattern, the hearer's part is not arbitrary; and given the hearer's portion, the speaker's part is not arbitrary. So the ability to play ei-

ther of these roles may be acquired, in part, as skills, given partners who are reproducing the complementary portions of these patterns. For example, those complex patterns whose standard job it is to transfer information—involving, paradigmatically, the use and interpretation of indicative sentences—are completed as the hearer performs the inner act of interpreting these sentences, in accordance with certain rule-like patterns, into beliefs. This movement is a hidden action and (René Descartes to the contrary) not voluntary.[7] Hearers learn to believe in conformity with the conventional rules of the language because this often brings the reward of useful knowledge gained. Except for the (probably very large) boost from certain inborn language capacities (compare the texture and color of the paper fed into the copying machine), they learn it much as they learn to interpret natural sign patterns. Similarly, speaker-hearer patterns that go with paradigmatic uses of imperatives begin when the speaker expresses a purpose with regard to the hearer's actions with outer signs in a certain established, that is, reproduced, manner. Learning to do this may result, in part, from the speaker observing the effects that his imperatives, and those of others, have on hearers who are already disposed to complete these patterns by supplying conforming actions in the established manner.

II. SECOND REQUIREMENT: WEIGHT OF PRECEDENT

Not all reproduced behaviors are conventional behaviors. Handing down a skill is not, as such, proliferating a convention. I learned from my mother, and she from hers, to open a stuck jar lid by first immersing it in hot water. Opening jars this way is not thereby "conventional." To be thought of as conventional, a reproduced pattern must be perceived as proliferated due, in important part, to weight of precedent, not to its intrinsically superior capacity to produce a desired result, or due, say, to ignorance of any alternatives.

Thus, a pattern is considered conventional only if thought to have little tendency to emerge or reemerge in the absence of precedent. This might be because the pattern has no useful function at all: wearing black and white to examinations at Oxford University, decorating for Christmas specifically with red and green, handing out,

[7] Compare Lewis's claim that forming a belief is not a voluntary action and hence cannot be part of any convention (*Convention*, p. 180). Later ("Languages and Language"), he allows beliefs formed on rational grounds to be part of the "content" of language conventions. But social distances are not adopted in accordance with reasons. Indeed, they are so unconscious that their very existence is known to few people and went unremarked until anthropologists began to study them in the 1950s, yet they are surely paradigms of natural convention.

specifically, cigars after the birth of a boy. Or this might be because there are other viable patterns of behavior that could have served the same functions equally well had precedent for them been established. Thus, a certain arbitrariness of pattern in relation to function—evidence for this perhaps gleaned from other cultures, where other patterns do serve just as well—is an argument for conventionality. Conventional patterns are patterns for which other patterns, given different historical accidents, might as well have been substituted. Lewis, too, emphasizes arbitrariness as essential to conventionality.

Yet an arbitrariness of pattern in relation to function is not sufficient evidence for conventionality. The songs of the various bird species are to a large degree arbitrary in relation to function, but they are not conventional because they are not copied or reproduced in the sense defined above. That other reproduced patterns would serve just as well if only their possibility was *known* is also not an argument for conventionality. Lighting fires by rubbing two sticks together may be a sort of convention among boy scouts, but it is not merely conventional in a culture that knows no other way to light fires. Similarly, conventional Western medicine is called *conventional* only because other kinds of medicine are now also known in the West. Calling it conventional also implies (perhaps euphemistically) that these other kinds are genuine alternatives, only weight of tradition serving to exclude them from more common use. But where knowledge of alternatives is unavailable, precedent figures in the proliferation of a pattern not essentially, but only as a means of making its possibility known. If people discovered the pattern's potential independently of one another, it would proliferate just as readily. A conventional pattern, by contrast, proliferates partly due to precedent.

There are various mechanisms through which patterns of activity may proliferate due to weight of precedent. A pattern may prevail over easily invented alternatives merely because it is easier or more natural to copy than to use one's imagination, or because people prefer to do as others do, not wanting to be out of step, or because what is familiar is as such pleasing, or because people feel more secure in the tried and true. In some cultures, all traditional behaviors may be positively sanctioned as such, either out of simple respect for tradition, or for fear of disturbing the moral order. It can also be habitual to place sanctions on certain but not other conventional behaviors, for approval and disapproval themselves are often copied without much thought. In all such cases, weight of precedent itself is

helping to account for the proliferation of the pattern, making the pattern conventional. Sanctions rooted merely in tradition often are not recognized as such but are thought to be independently based in morality, or etiquette, good taste, necessity for health, decorousness, propriety, piety, and so forth. Often there is room for reasonable disagreement over which reproduced behavioral patterns are sanctioned merely conventionally and which are sanctioned due to some function they are serving.

When patterns of behavior are proliferated by counterpart reproduction, often it is weight of precedent which keeps them afloat, and which does so for very practical reasons. In the Orient, because people have learned to use chopsticks, they are the implements placed on the table for dining, manufactured in quantity, available easily and cheaply, and so forth. In part because they are manufactured in quantity, available easily and cheaply, and so forth, chopsticks are placed on the table and people learn how to use them. Similarly for forks in the West. Weight of precedent proliferates their use, and not just because people are conformists. Proliferation of the use of standard units of measure is another example of this sort. Measurements taken in conventional units proliferate in tandem with the calibrated devices used to make the measurements. For example, measurements taken in yards proliferate as yardsticks proliferate, and vice versa. Weight of precedent proliferates the use of conventional units of measure also by handshake reproduction. Measurements taken in yards are easiest to compare or to calculate with other measurements taken in yards, those taken in meters with others taken in meters, and so on.

III. COORDINATION CONVENTIONS

Lewis claimed that all conventions solve coordination problems among the participants.[8] A subclass of natural conventions, I believe, are indeed *coordination conventions*. My description of coordinations will be simpler than Lewis's, however. Especially, no beliefs on the part of the participants will figure as essential ingredients in the analysis.

There is a need for coordination when:

(1) members of a group ("partners" in a projected coordination) have a purpose in common;
(2) achieving this purpose requires actions by each of the partners;
(3) more than one combination of actions will achieve the purpose;

[8] *Convention*, pp. 36ff.

(4) the set of workable combinations fails fully to determine what any single partner's contribution must be independently of the actions performed by the others.

Coordination is achieved if the partners' combined actions achieve the common purpose. Coordination conventions are conventional patterns of activity that proliferate, in part, (causally) because they achieve coordinations.

Some coordinations require the partners to act the same way, others to act differently. Coordinating social distance requires acting similarly. Although each person learns independently to maintain the conventional distances (as we may learn independently to button our shirts from top to bottom), it is not so that keeping just these distances has intrinsic superiority over keeping other distances, nor that ignorance of other possibilities is a factor in proliferating the distances actually kept. Rather, that others are already doing things this way causes new participants to follow after. Thus, mere weight of precedent perpetuates this coordination solution. Another coordination, discussed by Lewis, which requires similar actions, is a community's using certain standard media (minted money) for exchange of goods. I have mentioned that common units of measure are proliferated in part by handshake reproduction because of the ease of comparing measurements made with a common measure (the "partners" here might be oneself at different times). As such, the use of standard units of measure is a conventional coordination. In another case discussed by Lewis, different actions are required by the partners to achieve coordination. When a telephone connection is broken, one person must call back while the other waits.

On the other hand, we could say of the telephone partners that they must do the same thing, namely, follow the pattern: original caller calls back, original receiver waits; or perhaps original receiver calls back, original caller waits; or perhaps, whoever's sentence was interrupted calls back, the other waits. If any one such pattern should begin to appear slightly more frequently than others, due perhaps to the vagaries of statistics with small numbers (compare "evolutionary drift"), granted this is consciously or unconsciously noticed, it will tend to reproduce in a counterparts manner because people learn from experience. Then, like a gene with a fitness advantage, it may "tend to fixation." That others are already doing things this way causes new partners to follow after.

Gilbert has argued that there is nothing rational about following precedent in the attempt to solve a coordination problem, unless one makes more assumptions about the nature of one's partners than

just that they are rational.[9] What more one needs, I am suggesting, is to assume that one's partners routinely adapt themselves to their environment by repeating what has worked in the past. Coordination conventions proliferate because, rationality aside, people learn from experience exactly as other animals do.

IV. CONVENTIONS DO NOT IMPLY REGULAR CONFORMITY

There is a long tradition of taking conventions *as such* to involve regular conformity within a group either de facto or de jure.[10] If conventions are as I have described them, this is a mistake. In this section, I shall argue against regularities de facto; in section V, I shall argue against regularities de jure.

That people need not regularly conform to noncoordinating conventions is clear. Few actually hand out cigars at the birth of a boy, nor does everyone wear green on St. Patrick's Day, or decorate with red and green on Christmas, or punt from the deck when on the Cam River. What, then, of coordinating conventions?

First, I shall argue that to solve a coordination problem it is not usually needed that all sets of cooperating partners in some group solve it in the same way. It will help here to differentiate among three different kinds of coordinations that can be proliferated by weight of precedent. I shall call these *blind coordinations, half-blind coordinations,* and *open coordinations.* In blind coordinations, each partner must act before having any evidence concerning the other's action(s). Thus, when a telephone connection is interrupted, neither party has information about the other's reaction until the coordination has either succeeded or failed. Contrast two people moving a couch together where each sees the anticipatory motions of the other. Usually, one adopts a leader role, the other a follower role, and an excellent open coordination may be achieved in the absence of any conventions at all. Between these extremes is half-blind coordination: for example, when a child raises her hand to speak in a classroom and is called on by her teacher. Here, part of the conventional pattern wishing-to-speak-produces-hand-raising-produces-be-

[9] *On Social Facts,* chapter 6; "Agreements, Conventions, and Language," *Synthese,* LIV (1983): 375-407.

[10] John Searle, *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* (New York: Cambridge, 1969); Lewis, *Convention* and "Languages and Language"; Stephen Schiffer, *Meaning* (New York: Oxford, 1972); Kent Bach and R. M. Harnish, *Linguistic Communication and Speech Acts* (Cambridge: MIT, 1979); Gilbert, "Agreements, Conventions, and Language" and *On Social Facts*; François Recanati, *Meaning and Force: The Pragmatics of Performative Utterances* (New York: Cambridge, 1987). Recanati takes it that conventional language devices "indicate" or, using the linguists' term, "mark" uses of language; that is, conventions mandate that these devices shall be used only for those purposes. This is not explicitly stated, but see, for example, §22.

ing-called-on which the child initiates is visible to the teacher, but the wishing-to-speak part is not. Only conventions for achieving the first kind, the totally blind coordinations, depend for effectiveness on a degree of regular conformity within an interacting group.

Consider the right- (or left-) hand driving convention. The cooperative purpose requires that drivers approaching one another both either drive on the right or drive on the left. There is no secure way for leader-follower roles to be established, the time for decision is small, and it is hugely important that the coordination be achieved. The coordination thus behaves like a fully blind one. The only way to achieve it with complete reliability for every pair is to achieve it always the same way within some group that can easily identify its own members (people driving in America; people driving in England). Regular conformity to the same pattern is required among members of the entire larger group from which the various cooperating pairs emerge.

Contrast with blind coordinations what I shall call *leader-follower coordinations.* Here, there is no need for regular conformity. One member leads off in a manner either wholly or partially observable to the other, the other responds so as to reach a mutually desired conclusion. Many such coordinations are completely open, hence completely unproblematic, as when you seat yourself at an arbitrary table in the restaurant and I follow after. The interesting ones, those which are helped by conventions, are those which are partially blind. Consider the couch-moving case more carefully. The follower cannot be guided by the very actions with which he is simultaneously coordinating, but only by their natural precursors. It is natural, then, that the leader should exaggerate and stereotype his anticipatory movements so as to make them easier to follow. Exaggerated and stereotyped anticipatory movements, reproduced by experienced cooperators because they have been previously experienced to produce effective coordinations, are conventional*ized* movements.[11] One more step gives us conventions proper. Let the leader's indication of

[11] The ethologist Niko Tinbergen considers the communicative signals of animals to be "ritualized" versions of "intention movements"—"'Derived' Activities, Their Causation, Biological Significance, and Emancipation during Evolution," *Quarterly Review of Biology,* XXVII (1952): 1-32. An *intention movement* is one from which it is possible to infer what an organism is likely to do next. *Ritualization* is a process whereby specific features of such movements become progressively exaggerated. It is considered likely to occur when the benefits to an organism of conveying information about its future behavior exceeds the cost of doing so. For instance, conveying information about an intention to fight may be beneficial if it prevents the fight from occurring.

the action pattern he purposes for himself and his follower be divorced from any natural anticipatory movements. That is, let the reproduced pattern—it begins with a lead from a leader, proceeds through a specified pattern of action involving roles for both leader and follower, and culminates in a certain result—have an arbitrary beginning. Then it is a fully conventional coordination pattern. But there is no need for any whole group regularly to use this pattern for it to be effective in individual cases.

Conventional leader-follower coordinations begin when a leader reproduces a certain portion of a traditional pattern, which portion is observable to a follower. The follower is familiar with the pattern, recognizes it, and reproduces the complementary part, resulting in a coordination of a sort that is partly responsible for the proliferation (due to precedent) of the pattern. When the convention is half-blind, the leader may also have completed an important part of the pattern beforehand but it was unobserved by the follower. Thus, the leader of the mailbox-flag convention places mail in the mailbox before the postman arrives, and the leader of a conventional-language pattern has invisibly made a conventional transition from belief or intention into an outer language. Or perhaps a portion of the leader's part is completed only later on, as when a promise is made.

To achieve such a coordination, the leader and follower must, of course, be reproducing parts of the *same* conventional pattern. But there is no need for only one pattern to be used in one group. There are an indefinite number of ways to impart any given piece of information using English. It is not even necessary always to speak the same language, even with the same partner. Leader-follower conventions emerge where coordinations are half-blind, but also half-sighted. Enough is seen for the follower to discern with which conventional pattern he is dealing immediately on observing the lead. Following is like chiming in after the first line of a song; there is no need for a community to know just one song. Nor does this sort of convention require that there be some definite group in which it is mutually believed that it is a convention. People acquainted with a certain leader-follower coordinating convention need not form a social group, or always know who one another are. It is usually best to know in advance whether I shall be understood by my follower, but the brute existence of a convention does not require this in each case.

Perhaps it will be thought that I have missed the essential regularity that is required by leader-follower conventional coordinations, namely, regular follow through by both parties in completing conventional patterns once initiated.

Again, consider the case of blind coordinations first. Even there, only regular *enough* observance is required to sustain them. If only one in five friends follows the telephone convention, I shall still be somewhat better off following it myself. Similarly, even if only one in fifty folks that I ask 'Give me a dime, please, just a dime?' actually gives me a dime, it may be quite sane to keep at it. On the other hand, if more than a certain critical mass of statements were (nonobvious) lies, our indicative mood forms might indeed die out. I shall say more about this below.

V. CONVENTIONS WITHOUT PRESCRIPTIVE RULES

Complementing the claim that conventions require regular de facto conformity among members of a group is the common claim that conventions rest on rules requiring conformity de jure.[12] In what sense then do conventions involve rules, and what kind of rules are these? It will be well to proceed quite carefully here.

There are many conventional patterns that are usually reproduced by explicitly following a set of rules. This is true, for example, of the conventional patterns constituting most games and of the pattern that is parliamentary procedure. Of course, it is not just the having of rules that makes a game conventional, as is shown when you make up rules for a game, thus playing an unconventional game. Notice also that rules of this sort concern regularities only within conventional patterns, not regularities, either de facto or de jure, in their being used. The rules of chess do not tell you when to play chess, nor do the rules of parliamentary procedure tell you when you must use it. It is just that you are not reproducing that particular conventional form unless you produce a pattern showing that internal regularity: in chess, the king always moves just one square; in parliamentary procedure, the chair never speaks to a motion; and so forth. On the other hand, some conventions are indeed described by rules telling when they are to be applied. There is the conventional rule, "on Christmas, decorate with red and green," and the rule, "when you are the new father of a boy, hand out cigars." In neither kind of case, however, are conventional rules, just as such, prescriptive. These rules describe conventional patterns; they do not prescribe them. The bare existence of a convention neither mandates, nor gives permission for anything.

On the other hand, conformity to a convention may be or become mandated and sanctioned. Following parliamentary procedure is mandated by law in the United States Congress. Crucially important

[12] Gilbert, for example, explicitly endorses the latter claim but not the former.

blind conventional patterns, like driving on the right, are heavily sanctioned (indeed, often written into law), and it is not a mere matter of convention that they are sanctioned. Whenever it is desirable that some predictable social pattern or other be stabilized for some purpose in a society, or that some convention or other be universally followed, then it is not merely conventional that there are sanctions attached to conformity. But there are also conventions that are sanctioned merely conventionally, that is, sanctioned for no reason beyond tradition; and in some societies all or most conventional behavior may be sanctioned simply as such.[13]

Just as rules for constructing conventional patterns do not, as such, mandate that you must construct them, they do not, as such, prohibit constructing part or parts of the pattern without constructing the rest. The rules of chess do not mandate that having started a game you cannot then quit in the middle, or that you cannot set up an end game or a middle game and just play that much for the practice. If you cannot quit or change rules in the middle, that will be a matter of external rules or sanctions—say, rules of etiquette, or tournament rules, not the conventions of chess.

Conventions often involve repetitions of complex patterns. But fragments of these patterns may also occur quite freely. Conventional patterns are very frequently broken. This is especially common when construction of a conventional pattern requires the cooperation of more than one person. Consider again, 'Give me a dime, lady, just a dime?' That the pattern, if unbroken, would involve transfer of a dime is clear. The syntactic pattern for directive sentences continues to be reproduced only insofar as the whole speaker-hearer pattern in which it is conventionally embedded is sometimes completed. If nobody ever complied with another's directives, the directive forms in a language would soon cease to be used, indeed, to be understood. Earlier, I made a similar remark about

[13] The distinction is blurry between (1) patterns that are first merely conventional and only later written into law or otherwise mandated and (2) partially arbitrary patterns that originate only when written into law or otherwise mandated, resulting in a blurriness in what counts as conventional. Compare, for example, the pattern of behaviors that constitutes getting married in a certain state of the United States with the pattern to which one must conform to arrive at United States citizenship. Both are to a degree arbitrary. Neither is nowadays reproduced merely due to weight of precedent, but the marriage ceremony once was. Which, if either, is conventional? If either is conventional, might there be another sense of 'convention' edging in here, say, the kind that, according to *Webster's Third*, is "formed by agreement"? This sort of blurry line between natural conventions that are sanctioned and what we might call *regulated conventions* may help to produce the illusion that natural conventions are de jure.

hearers' believing assertives. It does not follow that complying with directives or believing assertives is, as such, mandated by a "rule of language" understood as prescriptive.

Lewis tells us that the conventions of language are "truthfulness" and "trust,"[14] which unpacked means roughly: "Say only what is true or what you actually want the hearer to do," "Believe what you hear," and "Do what you are told." He is right, I believe, that these rules elliptically describe conventions for certain of our most basic language forms, but he is not right that these rules describe regularities, nor, I am now arguing, do they mandate conformity. Certainly, there are circumstances under which people are under mandate to do what they are told, and under some political regimes, even to believe what they are told. But this has nothing to do with the conventions of language.

VI. CRISSCROSSING CONVENTIONS

Another thing that the rules describing conventional patterns do not mandate is that these patterns or portions of them cannot be used outside the conventions. Broken fragments of conventional patterns are frequently used purposefully in secondary ways. They are literally or figuratively "played with" in ways requiring only that the participants understand from what wholes they were taken. Compare uses such as in word games, irony, metaphor, and so forth. Pieces having the same form as those used in one conventional pattern may be used also in constructions that have nothing to do with that convention. Sometimes they are portions of other unrelated conventions. Raising one's hand is conventional in order to request to speak, but it is also conventional in order to vote. That it is conventional to use the shape or sound 'bank' to refer to river banks does not prohibit its use in another convention to refer to financial institutions, nor does it prohibit its use in nonsense rhyme.

Where conventions overlap, using some of the same forms, it is not a matter of convention which if any is being instanced on a given occasion. That a token of any form instances a convention or piece of a convention is a matter of its individual history, not a matter of what it matches. The rules of chess do not tell when moving my queen next to your king constitutes playing that she kisses your king instead of putting your king in check, nor do any other conventional rules do this job. Only tokens reproduced due to weight of precedent are conventional, and which convention each instances depends on the precedent from which it is derived. Which if either of

[14] *Convention*, pp. 148ff; "Languages and Language," pp. 137ff.

the hand-raising conventions is instanced when a particular hand goes up depends on which if any previous instances of hand raisings are the causes and models for this one—whether instances used for requesting to speak or instances used for voting. Which, if either, conventional word 'bank' is being used depends on which family of previous instances this instance was copied from, not on some meta-convention or rule.[15]

A language consists in a tangled jungle of overlapping, crisscrossing traditional patterns, reproducing themselves whole or in part for a variety of reasons, and not uncommonly getting in each other's way. Places where these patterns cross can produce ambiguities. These are sorted out not by conventions, but by the hearer managing to identify, by one means or another, the source of the pattern, that is, from which family it was reproduced. Nothing guarantees recognition of these sources. There cannot be, for example, such things as absolute semantic markers in a language, that is, forms reserved *merely by convention* to serve always the same function. No convention can prevent the possible accidental incursion of other crossover conventions. Where conventions cross, that the conventional pattern piece actually instanced is usually identifiable by the hearer is a function, mainly, of the speaker's skill, not of any conventions or rules of language. It is not conventional, for example, but surely good sense, not to raise your hand to speak when a hand vote is being counted. True, there can be conventions that ride piggyback and concern the use of other conventions. To avoid people taking back their hand votes later by pleading lack of intent, a rule might be made or another convention arise that when a hand vote is taken, no matter why a person put up his hand, it is counted. Still, as Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson[16] have rightly insisted, understanding a language is never just decoding.

VII. "CONVENTIONAL ACTS" AND THE SPEECH-ACT TRADITION

As I have described natural conventions, a conventional act is an act of reproducing or helping to reproduce, in whole or in part, a conventional pattern. Thus, people who reproduce conventional patterns do things that have been done before, and presumably were once done for the first time, thus done at least once without precedent. Conventions, I have claimed, really are nothing whatever beyond reproduced patterns of perfectly ordinary activity. Perfectly ordinary activities, like putting a letter in the mail box and then

[15] Compare my *op. cit.*, chapter 4; and also David Kaplan, "Words," *Aristotelian Society Proceedings*, Supplementary Volume LXIV (1990): 93-119.

[16] *Relevance: Communication and Cognition* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1986).

putting up the flag, or taking a letter out of the box after seeing a flag, are none of them such that they could not in principle, perhaps accidentally, occur in the absence of conventions. It follows that conventional acts achieve natural ends, but achieve them in conventional—that is, in reproduced—ways. I can set my table, hold my fork, and use my napkin in conventional ways or in unconventional ways. This was apparently the way H. P. Grice was thinking about acts of communication in "Meaning."[17] I was following a different but parallel route earlier when I described the possible evolution of fully conventional leader-follower coordinations from exaggerated and stereotyped natural anticipatory movements.[18] Given this sense of "conventional act," proceeding with a bridge game in the conventional manner after someone has said 'I bid two diamonds', and also believing what one is told and doing what one is told (these latter being traditionally counted among the "perlocutionary acts"), are all conventional acts in exactly the same sense as are, say, conventional biddings and tellings, traditionally labeled "illocutionary acts."

The tradition of speech-act theory has something quite different in mind with the term 'conventional act'. John Searle,[19] for example, tells us that, unlike illocutionary acts, perlocutionary acts are never conventional. From J. L. Austin through P. F. Strawson, Searle, and Stephen Schiffer, to Kent Bach and Robert Harnish and Donald Davidson,[20] this tradition has taken it that "conventional acts" are acts the performance of which would be strictly impossible in the absence of conventional rules. Nor is it meant, merely, that you cannot do a thing in a conventional way unless there exists a conventional way to do it. Rather, there are supposed to be conventions that "constitute" certain natural acts (for example, raising your hand) as being, also, different acts that are conventional acts, such as acts of voting or requesting to speak, or of giving someone orders, or of asserting something, or of christening a ship, or of making a motion in a meeting, or of marrying someone. Thus, Bach and Harnish (*op. cit.*, p. 109),

[17] *The Philosophical Review*, LXVI, 3 (1967): 377-88; reprinted in J. Rosenberg and C. Travis, eds., *Readings in the Philosophy of Language* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1971), pp. 436-43.

[18] A critique of Grice's way of doing this is in my *op. cit.*, chapter 3.

[19] *Intentionality: An Essay in the Philosophy of Mind* (New York: Cambridge, 1983), pp. 178-79.

[20] Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (New York: Oxford, 1962); Strawson, "Intention and Convention in Speech Acts," *The Philosophical Review*, LXXIII, 4 (1964): 439-60 (reprinted in Rosenberg and Travis, pp. 599-614); Searle, *Speech Acts*; Schiffer, *op. cit.*; Bach and Harnish, *op. cit.*; and Davidson, "Communication and Convention: Moods and Performances," in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (New York: Oxford, 1984), pp. 265-80.

closely following Searle,[21] claim that a convention requires that there be circumstances such that it is mutually believed in some group that whenever such-and-such action is performed in those circumstances, a certain conventional outcome is the result: for example, the action is automatically "counted as" a marrying, or a christening. Strawson says of conventional speech acts, "the speaker's utterance is not only *intended* to further, or affect the course of, the practice in question in a certain conventional way; in the absence of any breach of the conventional conditions for furthering the procedure in this way, it cannot fail to do so" (*op. cit.*, p. 612). On these grounds, Strawson, Bach and Harnish deny of many illocutionary acts that they are conventional, replacing convention with Gricean intentions in the analysis of these speech acts. Davidson actually denies that any language is conventional on the grounds that its (ordinary) uses do not result in conventional acts of this sort (*op. cit.*, p. 276). I close this essay by offering a description of phenomena generally taken to be paradigms of "conventional acts" in this latter strong sense, but a description that shows them instead to be constituted merely by natural conventions of the kind I have been describing.

These seemingly extraordinary acts (voting, christening someone, giving orders), I shall argue, reflect little more than a way that we have of *classifying* some kinds of conventional, and also some kinds of regulated, patterns of social behavior. Examine any part forming the beginning, or occurring in the middle, of some conventional pattern of activity. There will be a piece or pieces of the pattern that conventionally follow after this part. Or perhaps this part merely puts constraints on what can follow while conforming to the convention. Call the chosen part a *conventional move*, and call what must follow its *conventional outcome*. A move while playing chess or solitaire is a conventional move in this sense. It places restrictions on what can, conventionally, happen after. Telling someone to do something is a conventional move. Its conventional outcome is that that person complies. Saying 'the meeting is adjourned' in the right circumstances is a conventional move. Its conventional outcome involves, for example, that no more motions are made and no more votes are taken.

Besides conventional patterns of activity, there are other patterns that are regulated by law or other authority: for example, the patterns of activity that constitute applying for citizenship or for a visa

[21] *Speech Acts*, pp. 51-52.

and its being granted or not granted, and the patterns involved in entering into a legal contract along with what legally follows. Call any parts of such patterns that have mandated outcomes or outcomes that are constrained by authority *regulated moves*, and call the mandated or constrained outcomes *regulated outcomes*. There are also many moves that are hybrid between being conventional and being regulated, a good example being traditional marriage ceremonies. Certain kinds of conventional move outcomes, and likewise many hybrid and regulated outcomes, consist in the honoring by the society at large or its representatives of certain rights and privileges, or the carrying out of certain acknowledged duties, that is, more generally, in the imposition of certain restrictions on the behaviors of people designated as involved.

Now, often there are numerous different existent conventional or regulated patterns, reproduced or produced in different cultures or perhaps in the same culture, which contain differently constituted initial or middle portions, but which have the same or similar conventional or regulated outcomes. Then we are likely to possess verbal tools for classifying these conventional or regulated moves according to outcome rather than structure. Rather than talk of the natural actions that are initial or middle parts of these conventional or regulated patterns, such as raising one's hand or uttering certain sounds, we speak of voting (how?), or saying that it is raining (in what language?), or ordering someone to leave, or performing a marriage ceremony, or paying back a debt, or appointing a committee, and so forth.

In such cases, because the actions are described or identified only by reference to their conventional outcomes, of course they must be actions that are "constituted as what they are"—that is, correctly placed under these labels—due to the existence of certain conventions or regulations. They are, as such, *essentially conventional* (or *essentially regulated*). Still, there is nothing more here than perfectly ordinary natural convention and perfectly ordinary social regulation—nothing, that is, except terminology. These acts are still just ordinary actions that have been reproduced after a pattern, or following a regulation, in no way any more or differently conventional than is the act of shaking hands with the right hand, or believing it when you are told it is raining. Throwing this sort of terminology into the passive, we say that people have been appointed to committees, or are married, that the meeting is now adjourned, and so forth. That is, conventional patterns have been initiated that have certain sorts of conventional outcomes. (That these patterns have

these conventional outcomes does not imply, of course, that they always or even usually come out that way.)

These oversimplified remarks may make some start, though rather a small one, toward understanding what speech acts are, and what their relations are to language conventions. Elsewhere,[22] I have argued that the central criterion that we use in categorizing speech acts does not, in the first instance, concern the conventional outcome of the act but rather the purpose of the words uttered. This purpose often coincides, of course, with the conventional outcome. The purpose of a spoken set of words, however, has two independent sources: (1) the intention of the speaker; and (2) the purpose or proper function, in the public language, of the expressions used. In central cases, both of these purposes will coincide with the conventional outcome of use of these expressions, but any two or all three of these can also come apart.

RUTH GARRETT MILLIKAN

University of Connecticut

[22] See my "Proper Function and Convention in Speech Acts," in L. E. Hahn, ed., *P. F. Strawson: The Library of Living Philosophers* (Chicago: Open Court, forthcoming), and my "Pushmi-pullyu Representations," in J. Tomberlin, ed., *Philosophical Perspectives*, Volume IX (Atascadero, CA: Ridgeview, 1996), pp. 185-200 (also in L. May and M. Friedman, eds., *Mind and Morals* (Cambridge: MIT, 1996), pp. 145-61).