13 | Conclusion

People use language for doing things with each other, and their use of language is itself a joint action. Much of this book has been devoted to these two points. In the course of this examination, I have made three broad arguments. One is that people use language only within broader joint activities. Another is that communicative acts divide into levels, tracks, and layers. And a third is that the very notion of language itself needs to be expanded if we are to account for language use. In this chapter I take a final look at these arguments.

Social action

Language is rarely used as an end in itself. It is primarily an instrument for carrying out broader activities – buying goods, planning parties, playing games, gossiping, exchanging stories, entertaining and being entertained. All of these are *joint* activities in which two or more people, in socially defined roles, carry out individual actions as parts of larger enterprises. Language is simply a device by which they coordinate those individual actions. When I buy a bottle of shampoo in the drugstore – a joint activity – among other things I talk to the clerk. But if I were asked, "What did you do in the drugstore?" I wouldn't say, "I talked to the clerk," even though I did. I would reply, "I bought some shampoo," which describes the larger enterprise. Using language was only a means to that end.

We cannot study language use without studying joint activities, and vice versa. People cannot carry out joint activities without signaling each other, nor do they ordinarily signal each other except in the course of joint activities. Language use – in its broad sense – is an essential ingredient in all joint activities. The tight link between language use and joint

activities has been a source of confusion. Many phenomena have been treated as features of language use when they are really features of the joint activities in which the language is being used. These phenomena include coordination, cooperation, conventions, turns, closure, joint projects, opportunistic actions, and the accumulation of common ground.

If the examples in this book are any guide, joint activities range widely. They run the gamut from cooperative to competitive, formal to informal, egalitarian to autocratic, extended to brief. There may be two, or many, participants, and they may be acting at the same place and time (face-to-face conversation), or at great distances in place (telephone conversations) or in time (writing). Most joint activities depend on norms, practices, skills, and expectations that are shared by communities of expertise – Scots, physicians, baseball aficionados – and that cover everything from how to shake hands or deal cards to how to show deference or display emotion. Although there has been some effort to analyze joint activities, we will need more thorough analyses if we are ever to have a proper account of language use.

The word *social* comes from the Latin word *socius* for "partner" or "companion." It is in this sense that language use is a species of social action – perhaps the most basic species there is.

Lines of action

Using language is usually treated as if it were a single line of action – like walking along a trail in the woods. On the trail you avoid rocks and fallen trees, choose to go left or right at each fork in the trail, and wander up, down, and around, but your path is always continuous and coherent – a single unbroken line of movement. Using language is not that way at all. It is composed of separate lines of actions along three distinct dimensions: *levels*, *tracks*, and *layers*. The most basic of these is levels, but we need tracks and layers to account for a variety of things people do with words and gestures.

LEVELS

It is one thing to claim that communicative acts are joint actions, and quite another to specify what that means. When a drugstore clerk says to me, "I'll be right there," she and I are doing things together, but what? I have argued for four levels of joint action in the performance of such an utterance:

	Speaker A's actions	Addressee B's actions
4	A is proposing joint project *w* to B	B is considering A's proposal of *w*
3	A is signaling that *p* for B	B is recognizing that *p* from A
2	A is presenting signal *s* to B	B is identifying signal *s* from A
1	A is executing behavior *t* for B	B is attending to behavior *t* from A

At level 1, the clerk is getting me to attend to her voice and gestures. At level 2, she is getting me to identify the English expressions she is presenting – "I'll be right there." At level 3, she is getting me to construe what she is to be taken to mean – that she will serve me in a moment. And at level 4, she is getting me to consider taking up the joint project she is proposing – that I accept her delay. Levels beyond level 4 are needed to account for more extended joint projects, but I haven't considered them much in this book.

Levels of actions form what I have called action ladders, which have the properties of upward causality, upward completion, and downward evidence. If we look at the clerk's and my actions separately, they each form action ladders. But viewing our actions separately misses the fact that they are linked, tied together, at each level as two parts of a single action by the pair of us. We each perform participatory actions at each level that require the other doing his or her part. The result is a ladder of joint actions. It is these ladders that specify how the clerk and I are acting jointly during her utterance.

TRACKS

In joint activities, most talk is about the official business – about the buying of goods, the planning of a party, the playing of a game, etc. Yet there is also talk – in the background – about the communicative acts by which that business is conducted. I have called these two lines of talk primary and secondary tracks – track 1 and track 2. Tracks are recursive, so new tracks can be added indefinitely, although they rarely go beyond track 3 or 4. And there are tracks at each level of joint action. Whereas the communicative acts in track 1 have been well studied – after all, they constitute the conversation proper – those in track 2 have been largely ignored. They have often been viewed as unsystematic noise, or as performance errors, and therefore unworthy of our attention. In fact, they are systematic and essential to the successful use of language.

The communicative acts in track 2 are used for managing conversation at all four levels of action. When people nod, smile, or say "uh huh" during another's utterance, they are saying "I understand you so far," a signal in track 2 to help achieve closure at level 3. When speakers add "uh" or "um" to their utterances, they are signaling breaks in their presentations, also in track 2, in order to deal with problems at level 2. When speakers make repairs, which are also in track 2, they may be dealing with problems at any level. Remarkably, signals such as "uh" and "um" have evolved just for use in track 2, and so have such procedures as repeating a word as part of a repair. It is only by dividing signals into tracks that we fully appreciate the division of labor in the signals people use. Managing talk is truly distinct from carrying out official business, and it comes complete with many of its own techniques and signals.

LAYERS

People sometimes make as if to say things they don't really mean. When Sam tells Reynard "I must go down to the bank" (1.1.423), he really, truly means that he has to go down to the bank. This utterance has a single layer of actions, which I have called layer 1. But when Sam says to Reynard, "A girl went into a chemist's shop," as part of a joke, he doesn't really, truly mean that a girl went into a chemist's shop. Rather, he and Reynard engage in the joint pretense that he really, truly means that a girl went into a chemist's shop. This utterance has two layers of actions. At layer 1, Sam and Reynard make the joint pretense that the events in layer 2 actually occur. At layer 2, a reporter played by Sam is telling a reportee played by Reynard about a woman going into a chemist's shop. Layering is also recursive, and there may be as many as four, five, or six layers in a situation.

Although layering is needed to account for how we create and understand works of fiction – novels, plays, movies, television comedies, jokes, short stories – it is also needed for what I have called *staged* communicative acts. These include verbal irony, sarcasm, teases of all sorts, hyperbole, meiosis, rhetorical questions, and other such tropes. It is also needed for ostensible communicative acts. In an ostensible invitation, for example, speakers and their addressees make as if the speakers were truly inviting their addressees to do something, but recognize all along that the addressees are not expected to accept the invitation. Layering is widespread in everyday talk, imbuing it with a spirit, edge, and sense of imagination it wouldn't otherwise have.

Levels, tracks, and layers are not just figments of the analyst's imagination. They are distinctions people using language appreciate – even if their appreciation is not always explicit. People tacitly know what it is for listeners to attend to a speaker's utterance without identifying it, or to identify it without understanding it, or to understand it without taking up the speaker's proposal. People tacitly know what speakers are doing when they say "um" or "I mean." People tacitly know what speakers and addressees are doing when speakers tease, become sarcastic, or make ostensible invitations. Levels, tracks, and layers are ways of representing these tacit understandings.

What is language?

The study of language is often divided into the study of language structure and the study of language use. To study language structure is to analyze the phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics of conventional languages like English, Dakota, Japanese, and American Sign Language, but the study of language use hasn't been so easy to characterize. It has often been equated with linguistic pragmatics, a branch of linguistics, but there is little agreement on what that is (Davis, 1991; Gazdar, 1979; Levinson, 1983; Lyons, 1977). Pragmatics generally includes the study of linguistic utterances in context, but excludes nonlinguistic signals and phenomena of "mere" performance. The trouble is that nonlinguistic signals and performance phenomena have figured prominently in the accounts of language use in this book.

The tack I have taken is to identify language use with the use of *signals* – acts by which one person means something for another. There are, I have argued, three basic methods of signaling: describing-as, indicating, and demonstrating (Chapter 6). We *describe* something *as* a fish when we present the word *fish*. We *indicate* an individual fish when we point at it. And we *demonstrate* the size of a fish when we hold our hands so far apart. Most signals are composites of the three methods. The signals created by these methods form a coherent category of human action, whereas linguistic utterances do not.

Almost all so-called linguistic utterances are really composite signals (Chapter 6). When Barbara says "That book is mine" while pointing at a book, her reference to the book is a composite of describing-as and indicating: It requires both her words and her gesture. We cannot account for what she means without appealing to both. And when Alan says "At the baseball game today, one guy got so mad at the umpire that he went

[rude gesture] and yelled 'Go back where you came from' [imitating an angry voice and cupping his hands around his mouth]," his utterance contains *as constituents* two demonstrations of what the fan did – the rude gesture and the quotation. We cannot begin to account for what Alan means without appealing to both. Indicating and demonstrating are nonlinguistic methods of signaling, yet most utterances employ indicating, and a great many also employ demonstrating.

Nonlinguistic signals are important in their own right (Chapters 7, 8, 9). When Alan asks Barbara, "Want some coffee?" she can say "yes" or nod, while smiling or not smiling, performed with or without enthusiasm. Because "yes" and the nod are alternatives, Barbara means something by her choice of "yes" over the nod, a point we would miss if we excluded nonlinguistic signals. She also means something by her choice of smile vs. nonsmile, and by the presence vs. absence of enthusiasm. And when Linda says "en I'm getting a sun tan" pointing first at her left cheek and then at her right (Chapter 9), we would fail to account for what she means if we ignored her concurrent gesture. Nods, smiles, gestures – these are all necessary to understanding ordinary *linguistic* communication.

And what about the signals in track 2 (Chapter 9)? Are *uh* and *um* and word elongation part of linguistic utterances? What are we to do with *uh huh*, smiles, and nods as signals of acknowledgment? What about eye gaze, turn restarts, and recycled turn beginnings as signals about attention? No account of language use can be complete without these signals, the linguistic and nonlinguistic together.

The "language" of language use, $language_u$, is therefore not the same as the "language" of language structure, $language_s$. Traditionally, $language_s$ is the system of symbols of a language like Japanese, Dakota, or American Sign Language, but $language_u$ is the system of signals, both linguistic and nonlinguistic, created by all three methods of signaling. I fear there will always be difficulty in keeping the two straight, and we will have to continue to use the circumlocution "language in its extended sense" for $language_u$. But keep them straight we must. To limit the study of language use to $language_s$ would undermine the enterprise entirely. For language use, we must continue to study language in its extended sense.