



# Meaning, Discourse and Society

WOLFGANG TEUBERT

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## Meaning, Discourse and Society

*Meaning, Discourse and Society* investigates the construction of reality within discourse. When people talk about things such as language, the mind, globalisation or weeds, they are less discussing the outside world than objects they have created collaboratively by talking about them. Wolfgang Teubert shows that meaning cannot be found in mental concepts or neural activity, as implied by the cognitive sciences. He argues instead that meaning is negotiated and knowledge is created by symbolic interaction, thus taking language as a social, rather than a mental, phenomenon. Discourses, Teubert contends, can be viewed as collective minds, enabling the members of discourse communities to make sense of themselves and of the world around them. By taking an active stance in constructing the reality they share, people thus can take part in moulding the world in accordance with their perceived needs.

WOLFGANG TEUBERT is Professor of Corpus Linguistics at the University of Birmingham. His previous book publications include *Corpus Linguistics: A Short Introduction* (2007, with Anna Cermakova), *Text, Discourse and Corpora* (2007, with Michael Hoey, Michael Stubbs and Michaela Mahlberg) and he was co-editor of *Corpus Linguistics: Critical Concepts in Linguistics: A Reader* (2007) and *Text Corpora and Multilingual Lexicography* (2007).



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## Acknowledgements

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The impulse to write this book arose from the quandary of the nature of meaning which had bewildered me for many years. Only when I had moved away from the more navel-gazing disposition of my former research institution in Germany, where I used to look for meaning in the depths of solitary minds, and had been enveloped in a British university's spirit of sociability, did it begin to dawn on me that just as it is meaning that creates society, it is society that gives rise to meaning. Meaning emerges whenever people interact symbolically, negotiating the signs they use to communicate. As long as such interaction continues, meaning keeps evolving. Therefore there can never be a finite answer to the meaning of meaning. Meaning is only in the discourse, not in people's minds, and not in a reality out there. If we want to make sense of this discourse and the realities it has in stock for us, we do it not as monadic entities, but by working together, adding layer after layer of interpretation to all the previous layers of which the discourse consists. While such an approach is contrary to that of nativist linguistics, of the cognitive sciences and of the philosophy of mind, it is certainly not new or original. It draws on ideas developed in corpus linguistics and integrationist linguistics and on pragmatism, hermeneutics, social constructivism/constructionism and various brands of discourse studies, to name some key inspirations.

I would like to thank the University of Birmingham, its School of Humanities, and most of all my colleagues at the Department of English for the warm welcome they extended to me when I arrived here nine years ago. Without this stimulating atmosphere, the constant encouragement and the generous intellectual support I would never have ventured on this book project. As long as I continue to breathe this academic air, I will, I hope, keep changing and developing my outlook. In this sense the ideas presented here are more work in progress than a conclusive perspective.

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# Introduction

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## **No meaning without other people**

This book is about meaning. Probably no society has ever been more concerned with meaning than the one in which we live. Never before have so many people felt such an urge to make sense of the world they live in and of the lives they are leading. They find this sense not so much in themselves as in the discourse, which is the entirety of everything that has been said and written by the members of the discourse community to which they owe their identity. It is communication, this verbal interaction with others, which reassures them about their notions and ideas, and in which they find interpretations they can accept, rework or reject, and in which they can recognise themselves.

In principle, everyone has a voice in the discourse. But in reality we find that our modern society is neatly divided into those who are commissioned to produce texts for the media and the rest of us who consume them. While each of us may say whatever we want, it seems to carry less weight than what we are told by the discourse we find on the shelves of our content merchants: newspapers, magazines, television, much of the web, NHS brochures and similar pamphlets issued by our authorities, instruction manuals and even those old-fashioned things called books. Secondary experiences supplied by the media have taken over the role that a person's own experiences and those of their friends and neighbours had for former generations. Even when we want to find out what our own experiences mean, we trust the texts offered by the content merchants more than our own judgement or that of our friends and neighbours. The media, not the common sense we exercise in conversation with family and friends, will tell me whether feeling fed up with my workload means that I have depression and should take pills. Such a dependence is hardly surprising. Even in the good old days when the media had little power over our thoughts, we always needed a discourse community to make sense of our experiences. Interpretation is inevitably a collaborative act. We do not interpret our experiences for ourselves; we do it for an audience, imagined or otherwise. We want to learn from the interpretations offered by others, and we want others to share our interpretations. There is no meaning without society.

My view is that the world, our lives, the things we do or don't do, and what happens to us, have no meaning at all, in as much as we do not

appropriate them through interpretation. Our experiences only make sense when we reflect on them, or when we share them with others by talking about them, or when we weigh them against other people's experiences as we find them in the media we consume. This is indeed what we do most of the time when we talk with each other: we assign meaning to what we do and what others do. The only reality that counts is the reality we find constructed in the discourse, in this entirety of texts that have been exchanged and shared between the people who make up society. We never cease contributing to this limitless, all-encompassing blog uniting humankind that I call the discourse. The discourse tells us how we experience, how we 'feel', what happens to us and what we do. We have learned how to experience things through the stories other people have told about their experiences. For us, too, the only way to communicate our personal experiences is by contributing them to the discourse. We cannot do that without interpreting them, without assigning meaning to them. It is the discourse that makes our lives meaningful. The discourse tells us how we can view the world, our private lives, the things we do or don't do, and the things that happen to us. Without the discourse, these things, and even life itself, remain devoid of meaning. This is why chimpanzees, lacking language, are not concerned with the meaning of their lives.

The word *life* means what life is for us. The meaning of life is therefore not really different from the meaning of the word *life*. It is all that has been said about it. Google lists c. 229,000 occurrences of the phrase '*the meaning of life is*'. Here are a few citations, taken from the first fifty entries:

*The meaning of life is* that there is no meaning at all.

*The meaning of life is* to live.

*the meaning of life is* what you make of it

*The meaning of life is* to make life meaningful.

*the meaning of life is* to reach Nirvana

*The Meaning of Life is* the title of a 1983 Monty Python film.

The results for '*life means*' are not so different. Among the first entries (of 1,130,000) listed by Google, we find:

Where *Life Means* Getting a Little Sand in Your Shoes

When *Life Means* Life.

*Life means* so much.

*Life means* suffering.

eternal *life means* serenity

*Life Means* Nothing.

*Life Means* Nothing Behind the Green Wall

It is difficult to imagine that by pondering we would find an answer to the meaning of life/*life* that is not already expressed in the discourse. The same is

true for all the other things our world consists of. We are aware of no other things, concrete or abstract, beyond those which have already been discussed. By reflecting on them we may hope to find something new. But once we take a closer look we find that what we have taken to be new is no more than a recombination, a permutation, a reformulation of what has been said before. This is how new ideas come about. As long as we keep talking to each other, as long as the discourse goes on, there will always be innovation.

*That content needs a discourse is not such a new idea*

The idea that there is nothing ‘really’ new is not new. It has been with us, it seems, since the beginning of time. In Ecclesiastes 1, 9–10, we find it already spelt out:

The thing that has been, it is that which shall be; and that which has been done is that which shall be done: and there is no new thing under the sun. Is there any thing whereof it may be said, See, this is new? it has been already of old time, which was before us.

My book is yet another text, in a world flooded with texts on a scale our ancestors would not have dreamt of. Like most other books, it builds on previous texts. The ideas it presents have been around for a long time. What I try to do in this text is to recombine, permute and rephrase them in such a way that perhaps something slightly new takes shape. We can look at the discourse as the memory of all the hands of a deck of cards that have ever been played, and we can see every new text as a new hand, more or less similar to previous hands but not quite identical to them, made up mostly of the very same cards. Sometimes an author may try to smuggle in a new card, and, if she or he is very lucky, the other players will accept it as long as they do not notice.

Rearranging existing units of meaning is more than playing with words. It is presenting the world to us in a new light. We always have the power to change this discourse-internal world by adding yet another, our own, interpretation onto previous texts. If other people take notice, if it leaves traces in future texts, it will have had an impact.

It is the discourse that turns the stuff of reality out there into objects. As objects of the discourse, they are at our disposition. All we have to do when we want to change things as we find them is to reconstruct them, to assign a new meaning to them. Karl Marx was wrong when he said: ‘The philosophers have only interpreted the world differently, what matters is to change it’ (Marx 1888: 7). The only way to change the world as we encounter it, mediated through the discourse, is to reinterpret it.

When we talk, we never start at point zero. We react to things that have been said before. We praise, or accept, or criticise, or reject what has been said before. Perhaps we proffer a counter-example to the example we were given. Even if we

invent a new story, it will be modelled on existing stories. Indeed, unless we had been talked to we would never say anything. For we learn to speak by reacting to those who speak to us first. Whatever we may say, it is made up from the building blocks provided by the existing discourse. All we do in a new text is to rearrange these elements.

The text that I contribute to this discourse is a reinterpretation of previous texts, which, of course, were also nothing but interpretations of interpretations of interpretations. For us, the interpretive community, symbolic content never refers to anything tangible. All we can see is how it refers to something said before. The first arbitrary sign used by someone to signal something to someone else referred not to something in the world outside but to an object constructed through symbolic interaction. Any new text is always in some way a comment on previous texts, a re-assignment of meaning. Even those who disclaim the plausibility of this assumption, advancing instead the equally convincing idea that we only speak because we have something new to say, show unwillingly that they are, too, treading no uncharted territory but paths already well-trodden. Noam Chomsky provides an excellent example:

The first [creative aspect of language use] is that the normal use of language is innovative, in the sense that much of what we say in the course of normal language use is entirely new, not a repetition of anything that we have heard before and not even similar in pattern – in any useful sense of the terms ‘similar’ and ‘pattern’ – to sentences or discourse that we have heard in the past. *This is a truism*, but an important one, often overlooked and not infrequently denied in the behaviorist period of linguistics, to which I referred earlier, when it was almost universally claimed that a person’s knowledge of language is representable as a stored set of patterns, overlearned through constant repetition and detailed training, with innovation being at most a matter of ‘analogy’. (Chomsky 1972: 11f., my emphasis)

How innovative is this text segment really? According to the Cobuild dictionary, a *truism* is ‘a statement that is generally accepted as obviously true and is *repeated* so often that it has become boring’. What Chomsky had to tell us was, it seems, nothing new; it was no more than a reformulation of what we had been told all along. But as such, it was enormously successful. It was the foundational idea of the paradigm of generative transformational grammar which has dominated much of theoretical linguistics for half a century.

My aim in this book is to look again at what has been said about meaning in various fields of linguistics, social studies and the philosophy of language. I will focus on two perspectives. The goal of Chomskyan linguistics and of cognitive linguistics (two prominent schools of linguistic thinking) has been to build a model of the language system, seen as the mechanism for turning thought into utterances and utterances into thought. The mind, both schools agree, is the seat of this mechanism. This is the perspective that I will show to be defective. Instead, I will propound the view that meaning is only in the discourse. Our

world, to the extent that we can make sense of it, is a world we have constructed for ourselves, or, to be more realistic, that others have constructed for us. What we take to be reality is always mediated by what has been said.

### **The futile quest for a language system**

Is there a language system? This is not a question I am really much concerned with. This book is about meaning, and not about the rules and regularities we find in the field of grammar. The rules we are supposed to observe in a language like English have evolved over centuries. That they are relatively stable and largely accepted wherever English is spoken is on the one hand due to inertia – there is no need to change things as long as they work well. On the other hand, there have been, time and again, efforts to standardise language in cases where we find variants. The rule systems for English and for many other European languages, as we encounter them today, owe much to the creation of the modern nation state in the nineteenth century. A unified school system presupposes not only a unified curriculum, but even more a common language. Every pupil had to be taught an inventory of grammatical rules. To a certain extent, this unification also concerns word usage. While in many English dialects *borrow* and *lend* can still be used interchangeably, we are required to use them as converse correspondences in contemporary standard English. What I lend to you is what you borrow from me. In this process of standardisation, dictionaries have played a major role, not only as repositories of the linguistic heritage, but also as voices of authority for the meaning of words.

We should distinguish between rules and regularities. Rules are what we find written down in grammar books, and what is taught in school. While we may not always be aware of our own rule-following, we can look rules up. Regularities concern practices we normally follow without being explicitly told. In English, we would normally place the modifying adjective in front of the noun. In French, it is often the other way around. This is not something native speakers have to be taught; they pick it up quite ‘naturally’ when they acquire their first language. What is a regularity for a native speaker often has to be learned as an explicit rule by the foreign learner.

This also holds for the vocabulary. We tend to take for granted that words are the ‘natural’ elements of any language. Language acquisition, whether learning one’s mother tongue or a second language, seems to be first of all learning the meaning of words. Dictionaries tell us how they are to be used. Even more than the more loquacious monolingual dictionary, its bilingual cousin fosters the illusion that there is a system behind word meanings. But in spite of all attempts to pin down the accurate meaning(s) of a word, word meanings have a tendency to remain fuzzy. Most frequent words can mean many a thing, but dictionaries rarely agree on the number of word senses and their definitions for any

given word. The reason it is quite impossible to standardise the meaning of words is that many single words in isolation have no fixed meanings. It very much depends on the contexts in which they are embedded, on the words we find to the left and right of the word in question, as to how they contribute to the meaning of a sentence. Indeed, from a semantic perspective, the word as the basic unit of language has been shown to be a rather poor choice. Single words are notoriously ambiguous. Yet we language users normally have no problems with them, as the contexts in which they are embedded tend to tell us how we should read them. The unambiguous units of meaning that we intuitively make out, when we listen to someone speaking or read a text, are often larger than this chain of letters between spaces, often consisting of two or more words, which do not even have to be adjacent. Even though many of these units have never found their way into dictionaries, we use them intuitively as elements of the discourse that we have encountered before, in the same or a similar form. These units of meaning create their own regularities, but not a system. A few lines above I have used the phrase *quite impossible*. Originally I had written *sheer impossible*. There is no rule that tells me that one does not use this phrase. After a friend pointed out my ‘mistake’, I checked it on Google. There are about 2,000 hits for it (as compared to c. 600,000 for *quite impossible*), and most of them are translated from other languages. There is no rule, and certainly no law, that tells me *sheer impossible* is wrong. How systematic is language?

While the founder of the modern discipline of linguistics, the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, did not distinguish explicitly between rules and laws, the discovery of language laws has been the main objective of much of theoretical linguistics since the second half of the twentieth century. These laws would have to be universal and valid for all languages; we would have to follow them, largely unaware of them, just as the apple knows nothing about the law of gravity that makes it fall to the ground. Like the apple, we language users would be in no position to violate the rules. I am somewhat unconvinced concerning such laws. Apart from the (obvious) truism that language, at least spoken language, is organised in a linear fashion, there seem to be few candidates for universal language laws that cannot be violated. The jury is still out on this fascinating question. I will revisit it in greater detail in the [next chapter](#).

There are few rules concerning the meaning of words or phrases, or what I call units of meaning. Of course, as all academic teachers keep complaining, students often misuse words, particularly rarer words that are part of a specifically academic register. It seems that students are not aware of how these words are normally, perhaps even regularly, used. They may have previously encountered them only a few times, and hardly ever in a situation where it would have been feasible to ask the speaker for a paraphrase. Just encountering a word once or twice, or even more often, is rarely enough to understand its meaning. The user has to be told how to use a word and what it means (which is not always the same).



There are a number of language theoreticians who would disagree with me concerning these ideas. This is why a discussion is needed. This book is intended as a contribution to a dialogue on meaning. The different points of view allow us, in an exchange of ideas, to pick and choose among the notions that have been used by either side. By recombining and rearranging the elements of which they consist, we will find formulations that will differ more or less from what was there before. The result will be innovation, a new way to look at meaning. It is only possible if the disputants focus on the differences between existing views more than on what may link them together. Only if the dialogue on meaning speaks in many voices and clearly expresses differences, only if it is truly plurivocal, can we hope to achieve some progress.

### *Language in the mind?*

In the [first part](#) of this book I will try to point out what is wrong with a theory which claims that the meaning of a word (or a phrase) is the mental concept to which it corresponds. This is, as I see it, the foundational stance of all cognitive linguistics, in spite of the fact that some varieties of this theoretical framework are more interested in the construction of ‘cognitive’ models and less in the factuality these models claim for themselves. Other ‘cognitive’ schools increasingly delegate the responsibility for the ‘true’ nature of these concepts to the neural sciences. But mental, or cognitive, concepts, or representations, are a staple fare of many twentieth-century language theories that proclaim that there is a mind endowed with a mechanism that processes linguistic input and generates linguistic output. Against this view, I raise two objections. Firstly I insist that meaning is symbolic. What a word, a phrase or a text (segment) means is something that has to be negotiated between the members of a discourse community. Unless I am told, a word means nothing; it is not a sign. Meaning is not what happens in our individual, monadic minds; it is something that is constructed within the discourse. Of course, each of us has individually learnt what words mean. But unless we actually use them in our contributions to the discourse, this passive knowledge will leave no traces. Second, we know nothing about the mind, and there is no way to access what may be in it. Nobody has ever seen a mind. A mind is something we have successfully constructed as an object of the discourse, and as such it serves many good purposes. But we have no way to find out whether minds occur as objects of the reality outside of the discourse, and they are not even objects of a discourse-internal reality shared by everyone. We use the construct ‘mind’ to give a name to a virtual interface between our body and our symbolic, meaningful behaviour. Mental concepts, even if they existed, would not be accessible to any empirical investigation of meaning. Of course we can build one model after another of mental concepts. But they will never be more than models.

*Language in the discourse community*

In the [second part](#) of this book I want to develop my view that meaning can be found nowhere else but in the discourse. I do not want to distinguish between meaning and knowledge. The word *globalisation* means all that has ever been said about the discourse object ‘globalisation’. Meaning and knowledge are public. Public knowledge, as I see it, does not have to be true. ‘Truth’ refers to a reality out there, outside of the discourse. But globalisation is not something that we can see, hear or otherwise feel. What I experience is that I can now access my email in an internet café in almost any remote valley in Papua New Guinea, and equally that the gap between the poor and the rich is constantly growing. We can agree to calling it globalisation. But would such an agreement make it a ‘true’ statement? Whatever people say about globalisation, it is neither true nor false. Other people may like it or find it stupid. If it is repeated by others, it will become part of the meaning of the lexical item *globalisation*. Thus meaning, unlike ‘truth’, is never final; it is always provisional. Whenever we are unhappy with the way someone uses a word or a phrase, or with a longer piece of text, we will open a discussion about its meaning or, more often, about the discourse object for which it stands. We may not be able to convince our interlocutor of our view. But by talking about the word, or the object (which is the same for me), we will jointly come up with a new interpretation of it that will be added to its meaning or our knowledge about the object, and thus modify it. The discourse is the place where new texts react to existing texts, by discussing, questioning or averring what has been said. The discourse has a diachronic dimension and it goes on forever. New interpretations reinterpret earlier interpretations, and new knowledge is constructed in addition to existing knowledge. We are not at the mercy of the reality the discourse presents to us. Together, we have the power to change it.

This is why I want to look at the discourse as the collective mind of the discourse community. Unlike the monadic minds of individual people, it is open to our investigation. Linguists are in no way privileged. The discourse is at the disposal of all of us. We all can at least check what Google kindly lists as the meaning of ‘life’ or of *life*. Linguists are not experts in meaning or knowledge. They do not know more about the meaning of a lexical item than any other member of a discourse community.

Since antiquity, it was the *trivium* of the *artes liberales* (grammar, rhetoric and logic) that was seen as dealing with language. In the course of the Continental university reforms at the turn of the nineteenth century, the home of these language studies was seen as part of the *sciences humaines*, or the *Geisteswissenschaften*. David Hume called them the ‘moral sciences’. But this categorisation was to change. Ever since the end of the nineteenth century, linguistics (like psychology) has been keen to be counted among the hard sciences and to lose its stigma of

belonging to the human sciences. As the positivists saw it, only the hard sciences, such as chemistry or physics, could lay claim to ‘true’ knowledge, based on brute ‘facts’. Only the hard sciences were seen to be dealing with the reality out there. They were considered important because what they discovered could make a valuable contribution to society; they embodied ‘progress’. A new interpretation of Shakespeare, a new dictionary of ancient Greek, a new look at a painting by Piero della Francesca might enchant a few connoisseurs but could not contribute to the technical revolution.

While it is true that some philologists in the nineteenth century professed to have discovered laws of the language system which could match the laws their colleagues in the natural sciences kept discovering, the majority of them set out to interpret the textual remnants of bygone ages, in all their diversity, inconsistency and unruliness. They were discourse linguists *avant la lettre*. In their thesauri of Sanskrit, Hebrew, Greek and Latin they showed how much the meaning of a word depended on the context in which it was situated. They were more interested in interpreting texts than in language laws as stringent as the second law of thermodynamics. It was this interpretive agenda that Ferdinand de Saussure opposed so fervently. To demonstrate the relevance of linguistics, he set out to rebrand it.

### **Should the mind be an object of scientific enquiry?**

To establish linguistics as a hard science, however, required one important move. It necessitated the exclusion from the research agenda of people’s intentionalities, of their experience of reality and of their interpretation of what their reality was about. In order to be accepted, linguists had to present their object of study as a system that was independent of unpredictable human intervention. ‘In their [Saussure’s immediate predecessors]’ eagerness to achieve scientific status for their linguistic studies by assimilating the discovery of linguistic patterns to the discovery of laws of Nature, they were more than content to sacrifice any distinction between rules and regularities’ (Harris 1987: 109). But there is a categorical difference between language as a system and the kind of systems we find in the natural sciences. As far as the latter are concerned, we observe and describe them from the outside. The entities and their interrelationships that make up the Newtonian system of gravity, the apple and the force that makes it fall to the ground, are not affected by our observation, our deliberations, our scientific discourse, our interpretations. Mainstream linguists in the twentieth century, in their quest for the language system and in their yearning for recognition, insisted on studying language as a zoologist would study the communication system of ants. They postulated an unbridgeable abyss between the object of observation and the observer. For Chomskyan and cognitive linguistics, the language system is something outside of the

reach of language users. But we as linguists can never escape the fact that we ourselves are language users. All language users engage in the generation and interpretation of utterances. Meaning is an integral part of language. Once we take meaning away, language ceases to be symbolic, to be language. Without intentionality, without the property of an utterance to be about some content that can be discussed, language is no longer language. Apples do not have intentionality. They do not mean. Gravity is a force independent of what we say about it. But language is different. We can never escape the discourse in which we are imprisoned whenever we negotiate the meaning of what is said. All we say becomes meaningful only through the discourse. Thus all we say has an impact on the discourse. The discourse is self-referential. This makes language something that belongs to a category different from that of gravity. There is no Archimedean point, no discourse-independent vantage point, from which we can describe language, as we can describe a falling apple.

It is true that we will never gain access to another person's individual experiences. Yet we do not fare better with our own experiences. I experience myself and the world in which I am, the things I do or don't do, directly and immediately, unmediated. But this immediacy is lost once the moment has passed. Not only am I unable to recall a past experience at will in some future situation, I also cannot let someone else share it. All I can do is to reflect on it, or to give testimony of it, to myself or to other people. This involves, however, translating, or rather re-creating, such an immediate experience into symbolic content, into a representation of an experience, into something that I can recall on a future occasion, and into something whose meaning can be collectively negotiated, something that has inexorably become an indirect and mediated account of my 'raw' experience. Intentionality, as I see it, leads us away from 'raw' experience; it can be described as being conscious of having experiences. Intentionality is the conscious creation of symbolic content, and the reflection on such content through the act of interpretation. The way in which I re-create my experience, turn it into symbolic content, and interpret it, is unpredictable. There is no mechanism for doing it. Language is not a system for turning my perception of myself or of the world outside into a representation. There are no rules that I follow without being aware of them, as the apple follows the law of gravity. Intentionality is outside of the remit of the hard sciences.

We will never be able to say anything about anyone's immediate, unreflected experiences, not even if they are our own. But there is another way to look at intentionality. The way in which a person transforms their experience into symbolic content will always remain hidden. But how we talk about experiences, assign meaning to them and interpret them, is something that happens inside a discourse, whether an imaginary one in our heads or a real one within a

discourse community. It is the intentionality of this community that we can study, by analysing this discourse, namely the entirety of texts that have been exchanged and shared between the members of the community. The discourse is real, and we are not prevented from viewing it as a system. It is not a mechanism, though, delivering predictable results, telling us what can be said and what not. Rather it is a system that keeps creating itself, an autopoietic system, a system like Darwinian evolution. This is not what de Saussure or Chomsky had in mind. For them, the mind is an engine that can generate correct, grammatical, sentences whose meaning is equivalent to their semantic representations. While we have to give up the hope of ever gaining access to the working of the individual mind, we can without too much difficulty examine the collective mind in the form of discourse. We can interpret what others have said. Linguistics belongs to the human sciences as much as to the hard sciences.

### **The discourse community constructs reality**

The reality we experience is not unmediated reality itself but the reality constructed in the discourse. The colour red I see is not the colour red as it may or may not exist in reality out there. It is the colour 'red' as it is constructed in the discourse of the English-language community, and this red is in some ways different from the 'erythros' of the ancient Greeks or the 'chi' of Mandarin. The discourse object 'globalisation', which can make life so hard for us, is not something that really exists out there in some discourse-external reality. It is a discourse construct that works well as an argument when we are told why we have to tighten our belts. Only by reading newspapers, not by looking at the world outside, will we find out who belongs to the discourse object called the 'civilised world' and who does not. When we look up to the elevation over there it does not indicate whether it is a hill or a mountain. Nature does not come with categories. We have to check our travel guide. The only reality we have at our disposal is a reality which is thoroughly mediated by what has been said in the discourse.

For die-hard realists this amounts to unreconstructed relativism. For them, such a constructionist view implies a desire to force others to see the world through our tainted glasses. For John Searle, the American philosopher who seeks to integrate the realism of analytic philosophy with the realism of the philosophy of mind, the case is clear:

I have to confess, however, that I think there is a much deeper reason for the persistent appeal of all forms of anti-realism, and this has become obvious in the 20<sup>th</sup> century: it satisfies a basic urge to power. It just seems too disgusting, somehow, that we should have to be at the mercy of the 'real world.' ... This is why people who hold contemporary versions of antirealism and reject the correspondence theory of truth typically sneer at the opposing view ... [T]he motivation for denying realism is a kind of will to power, and it

manifests itself in a number of ways ... [F]orms of postmodernism, deconstruction and so on, are easily developed, having been completely turned loose from the tiresome moorings and constraints of having to confront the world. If the real world is just an invention – a social construct designed to oppress the marginalised elements of society – then let's get rid of the real world and construct the world we want. (Searle 1998: 17ff.)

Indeed this is the conclusion that I will arrive at. Like John Searle's real world, the worlds of all the other realists are, as I see it, hardly more than a figment of imagination. We experience it, but even our raw experience of it is already formed by the discourse, by the view it provides of reality, by categories, such as 'hill' and 'mountain'. Thus we can only communicate our experiences in the representations offered to us by the discourse. The only objects available to us, the only objects on which we can exchange our views, are the objects we find constructed in the discourse. But we are not voiceless. This discourse is, at least in principle, at our disposal. Though the media want to make us think otherwise, there is no 'right' or 'wrong' way to talk about discourse objects. We do not have to obey an authoritative, impenetrable and unchangeable discourse system telling us what we are allowed to say and what we are not. We are, at least ideally, the masters of our discourse and the reality it presents to us. Nothing can prevent us from negotiating and renegotiating this reality. As soon as we refuse to accept the reality we are fed by the content merchants and their text producers, we are free to collectively design a reality that serves our interests and not the interests of those who want to exercise power over us. Totalitarian societies may not want us to publicly question the orthodoxy of the system. But censorship can always be circumvented. The only healthy discourse is a plural-vocal and anarchic one. There will, I hope, always be a clash of views. As John Stuart Mill argued in *On Liberty*, progress and innovation need an unrestrained discourse.

Whatever their intentions may be, language theorists committed to the cognitive agenda present us with a blueprint that excludes our collective intentionality from a role in the construction of meaning, reduces meaning to the workings of a mental language mechanism over which we have no control, and replaces our unfettered creativity by forcing language into a straitjacket of (their) rules. Strange as it may seem, it is the 'antirealist' view of social constructionism, a view that our reality is what we have constructed (or find constructed) in the discourse, that empowers us to construct a world we may find worth living in.

### **The sixteen topics of this book**

This book has sixteen chapters and a conclusion. [Part I](#) consists of the first seven chapters. [Chapters 8 to 16](#) make up [Part II](#). Here is a short preview of the content.

Chapter 1 reminds us of the cognitive turn, as it took place in the middle of the twentieth century, following the demise of the previously prevalent paradigm of behaviourism with its impenetrable black box. A key reason for behaviourism's sudden if untimely demise, and the unstoppable success of the cognitive paradigm, was the appearance of the computer, an electronic brain that would, we were told, soon learn to think and, perhaps not much later, surpass human beings with its superior problem-solving faculties. As I will show, the cognitive sciences used the computer as the blueprint for their model of the mind. They envisaged the mind as comprising both a hard-wired (innate) system of laws, and (acquired) programs containing commands or rules. Minds and computers were seen as functionally equivalent mechanisms that could carry out similar complicated and highly sophisticated tasks. How closely the cognitivists were following the developments in computer technology became evident when the first neural networks were implemented. Suddenly all cognitive scientists became convinced that the human mind likewise had a connectionist structure. Interestingly, the relationship between the computer scientists and the cognitivists also worked the other way around, too. The cognitive models of the mind with their mental concepts were soon sold back to the computer scientists as recipes for the expert systems of artificial intelligence and for machine translation.

The early success of the cognitive approach is frequently attributed to Noam Chomsky, the charismatic prodigy of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. His agenda was the reification of a language faculty as a key component of the mind. He owes his breakthrough to his 1959 philippic against B.F. Skinner's behaviourism, in which he convinced the larger part of his audience that learning a language cannot be explained by the workings of stimulus and response. In the normal course of language acquisition, there would never be enough input to account for the speed with which young children master a complex syntax plus a huge vocabulary. Instead we have to assume some more or less hard-wired mechanism in our minds, he claimed, a mechanism everyone is born with, that is turned on by verbal interaction in early childhood. This mechanism triggers the release of hard-wired, innate conceptual knowledge. Chomsky's agenda promised to give us, for the first time, access to the impenetrable black box which the mind was for the behaviourists.

The mind quickly became the central arena not only for Chomskyan linguistics but also for other cognitive approaches to the study of language. The models that these newly founded schools were keen to develop were to reflect the workings of the human mind, or even to be more or less isomorphic replicas of them. Common to these models was the idea that the words of natural languages, different as they may be, such as English *apple*, French *pomme* or Spanish *manzana*, all correspond to a mental concept that is the same for all human beings, that is, in a word, universal. It is a view that disregards entirely



the role the discourse plays. In the cognitive paradigm, *apple*, *pomme* or *manzana* are natural language expressions of an innate mental concept. Negotiations of the meanings of these words have no impact on the mental concept, which is predetermined by the innate organisation of the mind. What the cognitive turn brought about was the hypostatising of a mechanism that turns thought (represented by mental concepts) into language and language into thought.

In [Chapter 2](#), I will dig into the history of the idea that the mind is the seat of meaning and the arbiter of knowledge. For this axiom is not as new as cognitive linguists tend to believe. It has been around for a long time, even before René Descartes firmly institutionalised it as the one item that makes people uniquely human. As always, the tradition started with the ancient Greeks. For Aristotle, the words of spoken language already referred to mental concepts. This was reiterated time and again through the Middle Ages, after the Arabs in Spain had given their Christian brothers access to the ancient texts. I will refer to Anselm of Canterbury as a medieval representative of this tradition. More interesting was William of Ockham, who actually developed this tradition further. He tried to find solutions to some of the problems that the theory of a *lingua mentis* inherently poses. A contentious point was whether we would find synonyms among the mental concepts. It separated Platonists, who believed that concepts correspond to ‘natural’ ideas, from the nominalists, who held that the way in which we cut up the world into things is arbitrary. These were questions that again, after the cognitive turn, began to be discussed in the suddenly very popular philosophy of mind.

In [Chapter 3](#), I will explore in more detail some conceptualisations of mental concepts as we find them in the philosophy of mind. The starting point is, of course, Jerry Fodor’s very influential book *The Language of Thought* that, when it appeared in 1975, inspired a huge amount of subsequent work. As he sees it, there has to be a corresponding concept for practically every word, with the sole exception of compounds. Fodor had been a student of Noam Chomsky, and indeed their views on mental concepts were then largely indistinguishable. However, Chomsky was more focused on the question of the innateness of these concepts, and he discussed at great length with the philosopher Hilary Putnam whether we are really to assume that even the concepts for words such as *bureaucracy* and *carburettor* were somehow from the very beginning present in the make-up of the human mind. For Putnam such an idea was outlandish, while Chomsky saw it as a serious possibility. While Fodor did not contribute to this discussion directly, his claim that we could not acquire our first language unless we were born with a hard-wired language of thought puts him safely in Chomsky’s camp. His idea of a language of thought has more recently been popularised by Steven Pinker’s 1994 book *The Language Instinct*, where it is called mentalese and otherwise shows a remarkable similarity to basic English.



For Anna Wierzbicka, on the other hand, different languages have their own mental concepts. What is innate for her is merely a small set of some fifty basic building blocks, so-called semantic primes, that can be used to configure all the mental concepts we find in any language. Implausible as such a claim seems, there are also the questions that concern not only her semantic primes but all the concepts of any language of thought: how can we find out about them, if they exist only in a form that is independent of any of the natural languages on which we have to rely if we want to communicate? If they embody content, is that content symbolic? If yes, it must have been negotiated; if not, then it begs the question whether it makes any sense to talk about non-symbolic content.

European structuralists had also been developing models for turning the meanings of words into concepts represented by neat formulae. As I will show in [Chapter 4](#), structuralist theories developed, for instance, by Algirdas Julien Greimas, and somewhat later by Bernard Pottier, had word senses (*sémemes*) broken down into distinctive traits called *sémes*. But these concepts were no more than abstractions, ways to represent the semantic differences between word senses, without any ontological claims. In the work of Manfred Bierwisch we can see how these semantic features gradually morphed in to something real: he began to see in them ‘rather deep seated, innate properties of the human organism’. Without this claim, without the reification of mental concepts as something actually residing in the mind, cognitive linguistics would indeed cease to be cognitive and just be uncontroversially structuralist.

The interplay between the study of the mind and the computational work on information processing is also visible in the role concepts play in both environments. One of the early pioneers in machine translation, Alan Melby, eventually came to see the futility of this approach. In [Chapter 5](#), I will discuss my contention that ‘concepts’ can never fully match the meaning of what is said, whether they are constructs in the realm of mind or in the realm of language processing. One problem is that up to this day, concepts are still seen as entities that retain their function (meaning) in isolation, only connected to each other by the relationships between all concepts, as they obtain within a conceptual ontology. But these entities do not map the meaning of the words of which an utterance is made up. For what these words mean is to a large extent determined by the context in which they are embedded. Semantic representations based on single concepts in isolation are never adequate.

A more serious problem is that these concepts, whether mental or terminological, are supposed to be language independent, but translatable into all natural languages. But can this idea work? The French equivalent of *globalisation* is either *mondialisation* or *globalisation*, depending on the context. It is hard to see how a language-neutral conceptual representation would take this into account. For our modern language engineers, who are increasingly replacing the traditional linguists in what is sometimes called human language

engineering, concepts are the pure essence of word senses, without contextual contaminations, fuzziness or ambiguity. They are seen to represent ‘the abstract meanings of words, whatever those may be’. It would be stupid not to admit that this approach actually works in environments in which natural language is replaced by a controlled language in which each ‘word’ can be used only as a term, that is in one unequivocally defined way, and in which sentences can contain only one conjunction and sentence length is strictly limited. Aircraft maintenance manuals are successfully translated by machine translation systems. Unfortunately these systems do not fare quite as well when translating Shakespeare.

In [Chapter 6](#), I present in detail what has been said about mental concepts in different camps of cognitive linguistics. In particular, I explore the kind of two-level semantics underlying Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson’s relevance theory. For them, hearers have in their minds a mechanism that allows them to infer, from the highly ambiguous and fuzzy meaning that they ascribe to verbal utterances, what the speaker really wanted to say. Many mental concepts, they claim, are ineffable and therefore have to be filled in by this mechanism. More recently, Sperber goes as far as implying that understanding an utterance correctly involves some sort of mind-reading. Stephen Levinson, too, is interested in the difference between our thoughts and how we express them. He wants to find the line that separates what he considers a universal mental representation of a thought from what is determined by contingent language-specific rules for encoding it, rules that have to be learned in the process of language acquisition. For him it could well be an accidental idiosyncrasy that the Mayan language Tzeltal has only one word for the two concepts ‘blue’ and ‘green’, and that French has introduced the complication of *tu* and *vous* for the straightforward concept of ‘you’, while English is in these respects more a mirror of universal mental representations. This shows, I believe, a basic dilemma common to all work on mental concepts. Linguists tend to take the way in which their native language cuts up the world out there as basic and universal, while other languages show certain distortions. The third example I present will be the school of Ronald Langacker. For him, the task of linguists is to provide structural analyses and explicit descriptions of thoughts and concepts. Semantics has to ‘elucidate the structure of the complex conceptualizations evoked by linguistic expressions’. In the end, however, these representations do not have to be visited in the mind, but have to be understood as ‘neurological adjustments’ of which the language user is unconscious. Like all the other cognitive linguists and philosophers of mind, Langacker, too, fails to come up with a single example of a mental concept.

In [Chapter 7](#), I will briefly recapitulate two concepts of the mind as we find them in the philosophy of mind. One is the mind that we owe to the spirit of the Enlightenment: the mind that turns us into autonomous, moral and rational

human beings who can recognise truth and act morally. This is the intentional mind, the mind that experiences itself and the mind that reflects. It is the mind that bridges the gap between a monadic, non-symbolic ‘feel’ and its symbolic interactions with other minds. In cognitive linguistics (and in the cognitive sciences generally) this model plays only a very minor role, if any. The standard model of the mind is still very much the mind that is analogous to a computer, in which there are certain hard-wired laws that correspond, for instance, to Chomsky’s universal grammar and semantic universals, things that we find in all languages and over which language users exercise no control. There are also things like computer programs that are responsible for translating universal grammar into the respective language-specific surface structures of natural languages. Together they are the language system, realised in a mechanism that processes thought into utterances, and utterances into thought. But this model of the mind as such a computational device has two flaws. It cannot deal with meaning, because intentionality, aboutness, the awareness of the content of what is said, is excluded from the model as a merely ‘supervenient’ feature. Instead, it reduces semantics to algorithmic operations, disregarding the symbolic content of language signs, i.e. the need to interpret them. The other, even graver, problem is that the mechanism cannot successfully be made an object of ‘scientific’ investigation. We have no direct access to the mind, and indirect conclusions (based on psychological tests) are notoriously arbitrary.

In this situation, more and more philosophers of mind and cognitive scientists turn to the neural sciences, linguists being no exception. But there are, I think, strong arguments showing why neurolinguistics will not lead us to a better understanding of meaning. I will analyse Vittorio Gallese’s and George Lakoff’s paper on a neurolinguistic take on the concept of ‘grasp’, and show that the meaning of *grasp*, its symbolic content, is irreducible to non-symbolic neuron clusters. I will then take a close look at some of the arguments between the neuroscientist Maxwell Bennett and the Wittgenstein expert Peter Hacker on the one side, and the American philosophers of mind Daniel Dennett and John Searle on the other. The conclusion that I draw from their exchange is that the neurosciences cannot provide the answer to the conundrum of meaning. No matter how much we zoom in on the neuronal tissue, or how exactly we can determine which synaptic connections are charged when clusters of neurons are firing, none of these investigations will enlighten us about the meaning of *grasp*. The brain is not symbolic. It is related to brain-external stuff by physical or chemical, that is causal and material, features. It can store symbolic content, but it does not interpret it.

Chapter 8 introduces the second part of the book, in which I attempt to sketch a solution to the two main problems: how we can know what a word, a phrase, a brief text segment or a full text means, and how we can provide the evidence for what we take to be this meaning, in such a way that it can be accepted by others.

This will also necessitate a discussion of the relationship between the discourse-external reality and what is said in the discourse. The main part of this chapter will be devoted to a discussion of the notion of discourse. This has been no doubt one of the most overused words in the intellectual discourse of the last fifty years or so. For Michel Foucault, discursive formations had little to do with their linguistic surface. For him, it was all content held together by the laws, rules and regularities he saw at work in the discursive practice. It is this inherent order that maintains the unity of the discourse. A similar concept of discourse is found in the relatively new field of critical discourse analysis. Here, the discourse is viewed as a social practice that transmits ideology, as a distorted view of reality, because it reflects the power relationships obtaining in a given society.

For me, the discourse, and not the world out there, is the only reality to which we have direct, unmediated access. It is the entirety of spoken, signed or written utterances which have at least one addressee. What I say when I am alone has no effect on others. It is not something other people can react to. The discourse at large is the entirety of all the contributions made ever since people started communicating with each other using language, indeed any language. This all-encompassing discourse is not only infinite in size but also largely unavailable (because lost and forgotten), and therefore, of course, not a suitable object of inquiry. We can only have access to texts that have not been lost. Practically all spoken language disappears as soon as it is uttered. Only the few samples that have been recorded can be revisited. Most of the texts that are available for our investigation are written texts. Some of the texts may be handwritten or typed, while many of the texts we will end up scrutinising will have been printed and/or have been entered in electronic form. The web is a tiny section of this written discourse, and most of what we find there is no older than a few years. Increasingly it gives us access to recorded speech, as well. It also covers many languages. But, in spite of its shortcomings, the texts we find there (or in traditional archives and libraries, or in a box in the attic) are real. They are original documents, or copied versions of original documents. These texts are real language data. They are available for our investigation. They can be exchanged and shared.

For most practical purposes of both linguists and lay people, this discourse at large will be cut up into smaller, specific discourses pretty much *ad libitum* and in line with our research question. We can define a discourse that consists only of English texts, written or otherwise recorded, in the year 1992. We can exclude non-British texts. All kinds of decisions have to be made for a full definition of such a special discourse, a definition that tells us unequivocally for each text if it belongs there or not. What about texts written in Britain by non-British authors? What about texts written abroad by British authors? What about English translations of foreign texts? Even such discourses will be too large to make them a reasonable object of research. Samples of them need to be compiled, in so-called text corpora.

More interesting are special discourses of texts that have a common topic, although these also tend to be infinitely large. We might, for instance, want to find out about global warming. Thus we can decide that we only want to look at newspaper texts, and we may choose, say, three British, three American and three Indian English-language quality national newspapers. We can agree that we select texts from between 1997 and 2007 in which there is at least one occurrence of *global warming* and/or *climate change*. The question is now how many discourses this will give us. That is up to the investigators, but not only to them. The selected texts themselves will also have their say. We have to take into consideration to which other texts they refer, and if they accept or reject what is said in them. In any case, discourses can overlap. A given text can be relevant for any number of them.

In [Chapter 9](#), I will try to argue the case that it is language that turns a group of people into a society. Of course, primates and other animals also behave in ways that we can compare to human interaction. But what distinguishes, for instance, grooming within human society from grooming among chimpanzees is that people who groom and who are groomed can make themselves aware that what they are doing is grooming. Labelling a kind of behaviour as grooming requires the availability of categories only language can supply. Humans alone among primates can discuss if what they are doing is grooming or perhaps cuddling. This is not something chimpanzees are known to do. Discourse can assign a meaning to interpersonal behaviour, can make it symbolic. This means that if people behave in a certain way, they can normally tell us what it is they are doing. It is true that primates as well as humans can distinguish ‘us’ from ‘them’. But for primates such a differentiation is part of their immediate experience and not something up for negotiation. Members of the British middle class, on the other hand, can discuss who they regard as ‘them’: the hedge-fund managers who deplete their pension funds, the French who indulge in a 35-hour week, or the asylum seekers who live on the taxes they pay.

The ways in which we interact with each other become symbolic by our assigning a meaning to them. It is this ‘sense’ that is the essential characteristic of society. Society is what happens between people and has a meaning. The people themselves, with their individual minds and their individual experiences, however, are not part of society. They are outside, loosely connected to society through the symbolic input they provide, through the texts they contribute to the discourse, and through the effects these contributions have on them. Whatever may be happening inside these individual, monadic minds, is not what explains the ‘sense’ that is continually created inside and through the discourse. As long as ‘sense’ is not expressed, it has no impact. There is no reason to be interested in it in our individual quest for meaning. Indeed, when we try to find out what a particular contribution means, we will not find it in the minds of the speaker or their audience. We will only find it in the intertextual links that connect any

contributions to the other contributions of the discourse. This is how I interpret the systems theory of the German sociologist Niklas Luhmann. For him the discourse is an autopoietic machine that generates ‘sense’ through its self-referentiality, through the ways the texts refer to each other.

Luhmann’s ‘sense’ is what I call the intentionality of the discourse as the collective mind of a discourse community. A person’s individual intentionality only concerns that person, and has an effect on society only if turned into a symbolic act. But while we have no direct access to our intentionality, to the way we experience ourselves, society has its own, even if derived, intentionality, namely the symbolic content of its discourse. This intentionality matters because it is tangible and it can be discussed. Once we replace the individual mind of the monadic person with the collective mind of society, the meaning of the contributions to the discourse is at our disposal, whether we are linguists or other members of society. When it comes to meaning, linguists are not in a privileged position.

In [Chapter 10](#), I will discuss the relationship between the reality out there, the shared reality, and the primordial speech situation. The way we use the discourse to come to terms with the world outside is the primordial speech situation. There is a group of people, and they engage in verbal interaction. They are in a specific situation, for instance enjoying the calmness of the evening, sitting around the fireplace in front of their cave. Suddenly one of the older men cries: ‘Look, a mammoth!’ None of the young lads has ever seen one. As a result of extensive hunting in previous generations, they are pretty much extinct. ‘Where?’ they ask, and the old man points to a kind of dark spot out there at what they have all learned to interpret as the edge of the forest, half hidden by leaves. ‘Over there, at the edge of the forest’, he says, and points to it. One of the forward young men asks the white-haired gentleman: ‘How can you be so sure it’s not an elephant?’ ‘Because it’s woolly’, says our old friend. What has happened? Using their sense of vision, they registered the stuff out there, the discourse-external reality. But this stuff had already been structured in previous primordial speech situations. All members of the group have already learnt to distinguish edges, including edges of the forest. They have even learnt how to distinguish woolly things from things that are not woolly, though I have no idea how they could have learnt it in the absence of sheep. They have learnt that in the reality presented to them in the discourse it is assumed that stuff normally does exist even if hidden from their view. They have also had elephants pointed out to them on several occasions. And they know that ‘over there’ can mean relatively far away in the direction in which a hand is pointing.

What they now add to their knowledge in this specific primordial speech situation is a visual image which they can attach to the word *mammoth*, which they have heard old people talk about but which they never have seen. There were no paintings in the caves they knew. What they have learned in this

situation is to distinguish elephant-stuff from mammoth-stuff. Mammoth-stuff is a lot like elephant-stuff, only more woolly. Certainly the mammoth has been an object of their discourse before, just as angels ('real' angels, not angel images) are objects of our discourse. They have heard stories about how good a young mammoth used to taste and how much more tender it was than the meat of a young elephant. But so far mammoths have only been objects of their discourse, objects that came up in what old people said, as virtual as dragons. Before their first sighting of such a specimen, it had not yet been pointed out to them as a part of their shared reality. It is this shared reality that allows us to move and behave inside the discourse-external reality without constantly getting into trouble. It teaches us that it hurts to kick a rock. Of course, primates and feral children also do not kick rocks. But they do not know that there is a discourse object 'rock', a discourse state 'hurt', and a discourse act 'kick' (what Bishop Berkeley calls ideas), and that it is entirely conventional to say that kicking a rock hurts. Of course, Dr Johnson is right, too: there is a reality out there. But the only reality we can negotiate in our verbal interactions is not the reality out there but the shared reality, constructed within primordial speech situations.

Chapter 11 explores the differences between oral and literate societies. It was when people first started to communicate by signs that the discourse began to evolve. They may have communicated previously by non-symbolic behaviour, by involuntary facial expressions, by grooming and by involuntary gestures. Signs are different. Signs presuppose someone who signs and an addressee. Signer and addressee believe they have to come to agree on the meaning of the sign. Time and again people have been told the meanings of words and phrases. But we do not have to accept what we are told. At any moment, we are free to renegotiate meaning. As long as we find others to side with us, a new twist has been added. Meaning is always provisional.

Writing had a profound effect on the discourse, as the collective mind of society. Only writing makes us aware of the fact that there is a discourse, and thus it brings about a fundamental change in the discourse. Writing makes it possible to refer to something that has not been said in our presence but written by someone we do not know at some undisclosed location and potentially a long time ago. Only what is written can be preserved. Writing makes it possible and advisable to note down clever ideas and to let other people know about them. Complicated ways of thinking could evolve because suddenly it made cultural or economic sense to have these thoughts. Writing enabled us to revisit thoughts we had jotted down. We could even start thinking about what we had read. Reflection ceased to be seen as a waste of time and began to be regarded as the foundation of all progress. It was the invention of writing that made the production of ideas marketable. Once we were surrounded by written texts it became more obvious that we were not just bringing to light things hidden in