

Meaning in Language

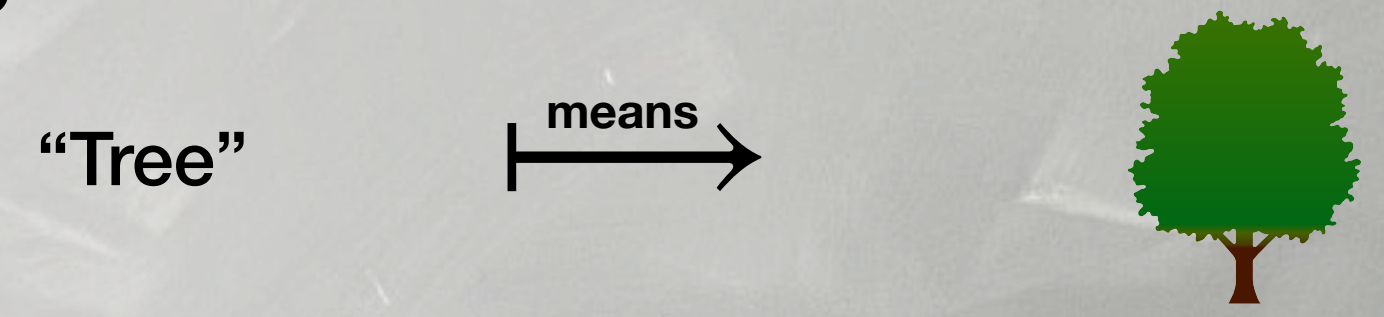
Representation, Structure, and Wittgenstein's Worksite

Representationalism

Linguistic expressions (unlike burps) have meaning because they (unlike burps) represent reality. Accordingly, a theory of meaning is a theory of how language represents reality.

Most philosophy of language has been done as if this (seemingly innocuous) statement were true, at least about the uses of language that we, as philosophers, should care about.

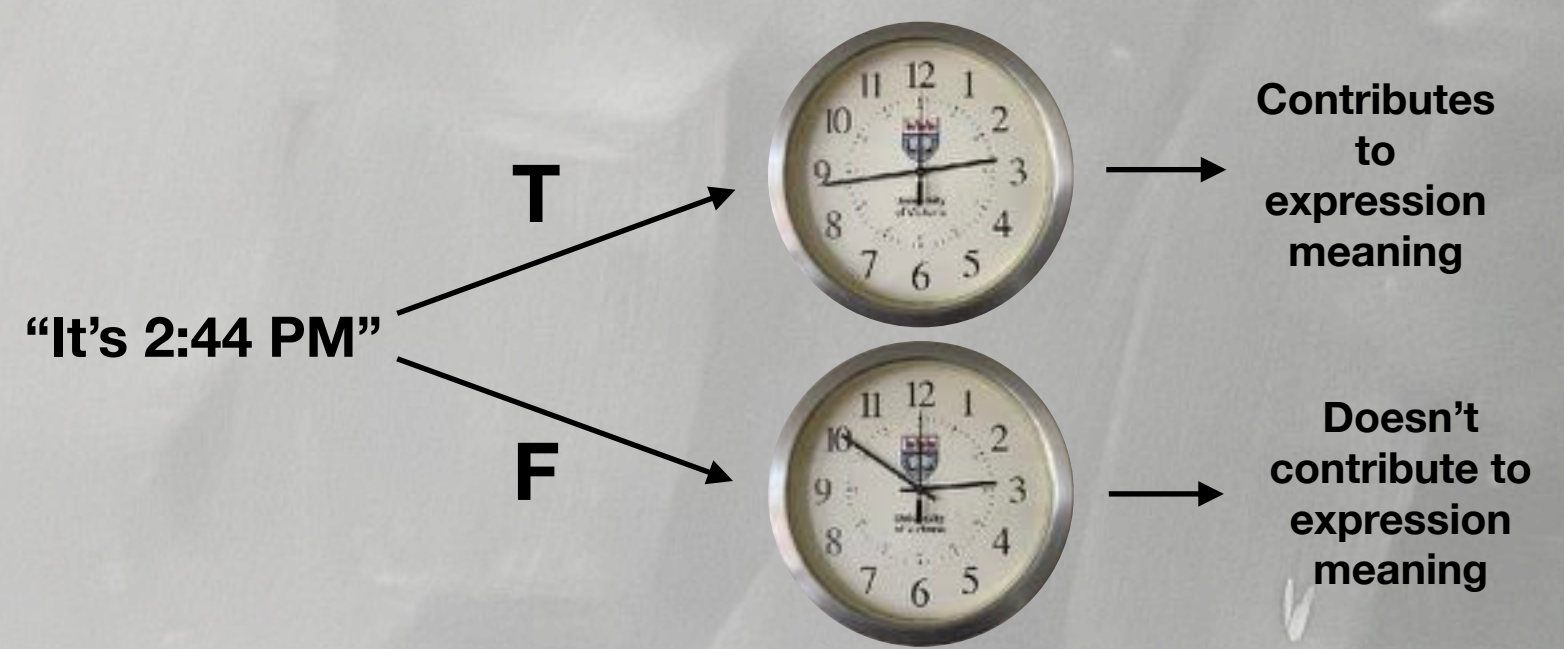
E.g. Referentialism



Referentialism is the doctrine that the meaning of a linguistic expression is something that it *refers* to—we can gloss this view as trying to understand all linguistic meaning on the model of nouns.

E.g. Truth-Conditional Semantics

A more sophisticated representationalist theory, which retains support today, is called *truth-conditional semantics*. On this view, the meaning of an expression is fixed by the set of conditions under which it is true:



Wittgenstein and structure

"The term "language-game" is used here to emphasize the fact that the speaking of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life."
 – Wittgenstein (PI §23)

Wittgenstein's worksite

- Language users: a builder and his labourers
- Vocabulary words: "BRICK," "PILLAR," "SLAB," "BEAM"
- When the builder yells "BRICK!" one of the labourers brings him a brick, and likewise for the other words



Fig. 1: Wittgenstein's worksite. Created with an image in the public domain.

What does "BRICK!" mean in this language? Is it a noun, a command, or something else? Wittgenstein's stance is that *we have already answered this question*, by describing the language-game.

Structure and meaning

The way a given word is spelled or pronounced is not intrinsically connected to its meaning. So what an expression means must be a *relational* fact (one pertaining to how the expression relates to other things), making meaning a highly *structural* phenomenon. What Wittgenstein disagrees with the representationalists on, most essentially, is which relations count as relevant to meaning, and what kinds of structures account for the meaningfulness of language.

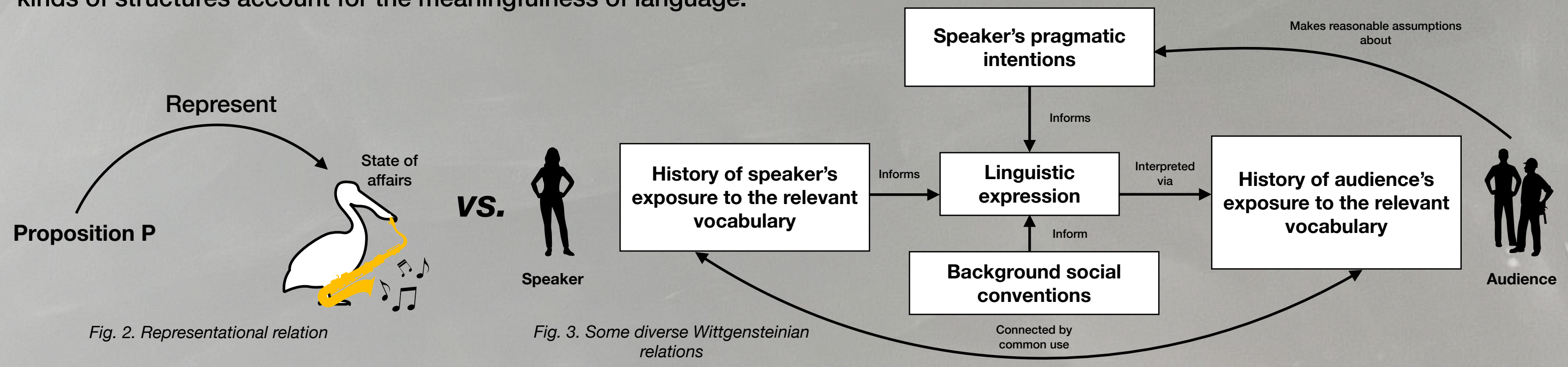


Fig. 2. Representational relation

Fig. 3. Some diverse Wittgensteinian relations

Core insight from Wittgenstein: which relations are "constitutive of meaning" is *highly dependent* on what kind of information is being sought after under the mantle of "meaning"—the diagram above (R) is not exhaustive or universal.