

# COMMUNICATION AND NORMS.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS.

1. Introduction.
2. Communication and language agreement: definitions.
3. Additional definitions.
4. Premises of communication and a language agreement.
5. Further observations.
6. Conditional communication.
7. Logical and normative implications of the (basic) language agreement.
8. Freedoms left.
9. Summary, conclusions and discussion.

## 1. INTRODUCTION.

Once one assumes that everything that people say or write is more or less subjective, one is confronted with the question why “objectivity” nevertheless seems to be a useful concept. Since subjectivity is related to room for legitimate disagreement, the question about the relevance of the concept of objectivity is connected to the questions: Is there something people should agree upon, and why? The answer is: People who want to communicate need agreement about the means of communication. Without that agreement communication is impossible.

What does this agreement mean, and what does it imply? This paper is the result of an effort to answer these questions. It presents an investigation of logical aspects of communication in general, and communication with a language in particular. It makes the relevant concepts explicit, and defines or redefines them in a way which is consistent with the ideas expounded in the paper. A central position is reserved for the concept of “language agreement” (LA): the agreement to use a language as defined by dictionaries, grammar, education and use. The paper describes some of the premises of this agreement, and derives some of its normative implications.

The importance of the subject matter follows from the lack of proof of the existence of objective norms. As far as known, one is bound, and only bound, by what one has voluntarily agreed to. There may not be a (logical) need for communication, at least not between people chosen at random. Still, communication may be seen as the most essential characteristic of any society. One could easily defend the proposition “No society without communication”. The importance of a communication agreement is further supported by the finding that a language agreement can be used to distinguish between propositions the truth of which can be established unequivocally, and propositions for which this is impossible. More generally, given a language agreement, one can delineate the boundary between the set of propositions about which people should be able to reach agreement, and the set of propositions for which this need not be possible. Conclusions like these may help to avoid discussions without end, and stimulate the search for other peaceful means to reach agreement and avoid conflict.

As regards the method(s) of this investigation: the results are derived by making explicit and analyzing observational and logical facts, analyzing the results, writing them down in a draft and iteratively correcting and improving it. Where “analyze” is understood as a process of comprehensive and critical investigation directed at derivation or refutation of conclusions relevant to the subject matter.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This activity should be distinguished in particular from efforts to explain phenomena, and the formulation of theories describing and predicting them.

## 2. COMMUNICATION AND LANGUAGE AGREEMENT: DEFINITIONS.

In this paper, a “communication agreement” is defined as the combination of the following two elements:

- a system of definitions of meanings of signs and combinations of signs (messages), and rules to construct messages expressing (mental) notions; and
- the agreement to adhere to this system of definitions.<sup>2</sup>

The first element is called the communication definition, the combination of the first and second the communication agreement. The definition is necessary because messages need not have any a priori relationship with what they are meant to point out. It is the definition that gives them meaning.

The second element requires the system of definitions to include the concept “agreement”.

The two elements should not be seen as a closed definition, but as a compact summary. The explanation and elucidation in this section is meant to be an integral part of the definition.

A message is a combination of signs that conveys a meaningful mental notion.<sup>3</sup> The agreement to adhere to the definition means that the meaning of messages follows from the definition, and that the notion generated by the message in the mind of the receiver by application of the definition agrees with the notion in the mind of the sender. At least as good as the communication definition and the abilities of sender and receiver allow. The notions do not agree if the sender does not express his mental notions (“thoughts”) correctly. Agreement is uncertain if a message is ambiguous. Among other things, adherence to the definition means that by a communication agreement one promises not to lie. Further implications will be considered later.

It follows from the preceding paragraphs that the concept “communication” is only applicable, and that communication only takes place, if the communication definition is adhered to. The emission of messages alone is not communication in the sense of the definition. It takes at least two to communicate. To be useful, a receiver of messages needs to know how to interpret them. (S)he can only interpret them correctly if (s)he can infer the meaning of the messages from the applicable rules and definitions, and if (s)he can trust the sender to adhere to the definition. Otherwise the message, or its interpretation according to the communication definition, is misleading. Use of a means of communication is necessary but not sufficient for communication. For communication in the sense of the definition it is not enough that a message is meaningful in the sense of the communication definition.

Agreement to adhere to the definition is necessary because there is no reason to assume why someone would adhere to the communication definition of her own accord. In other words: why messages would correspond with what they signify according to the definition. Without an agreement (or another kind of guarantee) this is no more than an illusion. More generally, it is not known why people would be bound to anything whatsoever, except by a voluntarily promise or agreement, or, to a certain extent, by force or the threat thereof. (Supposing force may be called a reason). It must therefore be assumed that people are only bound by whatever they agree to by their own volition, either explicitly or implicitly. Where applicable after timely, full and correct information (or rather as timely etc. as possible).

A means of communication, abbreviated M, may be a large and complex whole. Since M has to be defined, at most part of it can be defined through M itself. That is: part of M has to be defined at least in part through other means of communication. For example with the help of gestures and pictures.

According to the definition of the communication agreement, there is one and only one system of definitions. It is shared by all communicants. The definition relates messages to

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<sup>2</sup> An agreement is by definition bilateral or multilateral; a promise is unilateral.

<sup>3</sup> The “combination” may consist of a single sign.

meanings. Communicants are supposed to be able to imagine or represent the meaning of messages; the same message meaning the same for all communicants (if only approximately). The meanings refer to what will henceforth be called “the common reference frame”, with “common” in the sense of “shared”. It consists of the set of things used to teach, learn and define the means of communication (e.g. language). In general with the help of a previously established means of communication. Of course, after having learnt to communicate, communicants may still use the common reference frame to clarify the meaning of specific messages.

It follows from the definitions that adherence to the communication agreement means that- where applicable- the meaning of a message must be in agreement with what the message signifies in the common reference frame.

From now on, most of the discussion will be restricted to the most important means of communication in human societies: language. In the context of language, a message is called an expression. A language definition defines how notions can be expressed as series of words (sounds); and vice versa what is meant by expressions. A language definition establishes a relationship between expressions on the one hand, and activities, objects, phenomena, etc. in a common reference frame (including experience) on the other.

By a language agreement one promises to adhere to a language definition. Among other things, this means that one will not say or write things which, according to the language definition, are not in accordance with this definition. In particular by being incompatible with defined relations between expressions and experience.

The language definition is a set of many elements and rules. There is no book or other single source giving the definition in a complete and unambiguous way. In general dictionaries are incomplete: the words do not define all words without circularities. Dictionary definitions often differ in non-trivial ways. The actual use of languages is again another matter. Languages are not defined formally. They are acquired in a long and imprecise process of education. Which means that everyone uses her or his own variant of a given language.

As regards the present text, the reader is kindly requested to keep in mind that “in accordance with this definition” may mean: “in accordance with a part or parts of this definition”, and that “according to the language definition” may mean: “according to (another) part or (other) parts of the language definition”. Parts of a language definition may actually define viable (“autonomous”) (sub)languages.

In this paper we will only consider languages which are not only a means of communication, but also enable communication about the subjects of this paper. They must contain the relevant concepts. But they need not contain any mathematical or geographical terms. Vice versa one can define languages without any of the concepts of this paper. A recipe book or travel guide need not contain the words “logical” or “normative”. So henceforth in this paper a language will mean a language enabling discussion of the subjects treated in this paper.

The existence of a communication definition means that a distinction can be made between messages which are compatible with the definition, and messages which are not. And possibly messages for which this may be more or less hard to decide. The agreement of point 2 of the definition also means that no message will be sent which is incompatible with the definition.

For communication by means of a language, the existence of a language definition implies that a distinction is made between expressions which are in accordance with the definition, and expressions which are not. Expressions which are in accordance with the definition are said to be correct, those which are not are said to be incorrect. Again, the

distinction need not be sharp. “Bad English” need not be altogether wrong or incomprehensible.

The ability to communicate is not a matter of all or nothing. One may express a given meaning- one’s observations, opinions, etc.- better or worse. The language definition implies not only that some words or expressions are (un)defined or (in)correct, but also that some are better or worse than others to express given meanings in given situations. It may not be incorrect to call a car a vehicle, but for the purpose of efficient and unambiguous communication it may sometimes be better to call it a car, and at other times better to call it a vehicle.

It may be useful or necessary to extend a LA with procedural rules. For example the (proposed) agreement to let a claimant prove supposed objectivity.

As an introduction to the definitions of subjective and objective in section 3, note that many concepts in languages do not refer to specific things- activities, objects, phenomena, etc.- but to classes of things. They are defined in terms of only a part of the characteristics of the members of the class, ignoring other characteristics. Think of concepts like “tree” and “work”. Such concepts are useful and efficient because some characteristics often don’t matter. Moreover, restricting attention to only few characteristics is inevitable if giving different names to all different things is to be avoided. Still, what may sometimes be useful can also be a problem. Especially when communicants suppose that an important concept has an unambiguous meaning, while it actually refers to a class of rather different elements. In discussions about “democracy” and “responsibility” for example, different people may mean very different things with the same words or expressions. They may use different definitions unwittingly. They may agree about the meaning while disagreeing about a text, or disagree about the meaning while agreeing about a text. The many meanings of the verb “to be” to express definitions, facts and opinions can be very misleading, if only because some may suggest objectivity of subjective matters: “That’s unavoidable”.

In general the range of meanings of a concept has no sharp boundaries. A concept may even have opposite meanings. Where vagueness of definition is important for the argument, the expression “open concept” will be used to indicate that the concept has a range of meanings without sharp boundaries.<sup>4</sup>

Specific entities may be given names. Like “the moon”, numbers and people. For concepts signifying classes of things however, vagueness must be assumed to be general and inevitable. One reason being that a closed (as opposed to open) definition requires all relevant knowledge, say of all trees and plant life and possibly more. Otherwise one may encounter things that one would like to call “tree” which do not have the required characteristics.

Both for practical reasons and as a consequence of the ways in which languages are defined, taught and learnt they are full of open concepts. If there were a many-dimensional space of everything that could be signified, the concepts of a language would be represented by clouds with hazy boundaries. Comparison of dictionaries may illustrate this. Though vagueness may be seen as a matter of principle, it’s also a matter of more or less. Furthermore, it need not mean ambiguity in a practical sense. All concepts in the proposition: “There is a rhododendron in my garden” are defined somewhat vaguely. But this does not change the fact that someone denying that there is a rhododendron in my garden runs the risk of being considered as someone impossible to talk with. Theoretical perfection of languages is not only very hard to realize, but isn’t necessary for many practical purposes. Still, the practical requirements may increase the more people affect one another’s lives. Therefore it may be useful to try and improve a language to suit the requirements of a discussion of a given subject. As is tried in the present paper.

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<sup>4</sup> Lack of sharp boundaries should be distinguished from multiple but distinct, non-overlapping, ranges of meanings.

Only names represent specific entities. Concepts represent classes. In general, definitions of concepts have a composite and/or more-dimensional character. Their constituent properties or characteristics have to be listed, together with those properties or characteristics that distinguish them from neighboring concepts. For example “house” from “hut” and “apartment”. Other examples may be found aplenty in a thesaurus.

### 3. ADDITIONAL DEFINITIONS.

For use later in the paper this section will slightly redefine some relevant concepts. This is done in the first place to reduce inconvenient and unnecessary ambiguity and vagueness, and to improve clarity and help understanding. In the second place it is done to obtain a set of complementary concepts, which overlap as little as possible. At the same time, the overlap with common parlance and dictionaries is kept as large possible. The purpose is not to define entirely new concepts, but to improve the set of concepts in the sense indicated. In general the new definition is included in the dictionary definitions and the technical literature (which differ among themselves).

#### SUBJECTIVE.

In order to understand the language definition and its implications, and by implication: in order to communicate more effectively, it is helpful to have an idea of what it defines and what not. A useful concept in this connection is that of subjectivity. In this paper, the use of a concept will be called subjective if and only if both its applicability and the denial of its applicability are compatible with the LA. An expression will be called subjective if and only if it is compatible with the LA, and if the same applies to its denial. Opinions and judgments are examples of classes of subjective expressions. Someone who has bound herself to the LA is not bound by something subjective. Examples of concepts which can be used in a subjective way are: positive, necessary, fine, hard, (im)possible, lazy, and waste. Opinions as to applicability may differ between communicants without there being a logical reason for the possibility of elimination of this difference: “That’s a waste of time”.<sup>5</sup> Applicability of subjective concepts and expressions depends not only on the language definition, but also on the specific speaker or writer.

It follows from the definitions that different communicants may differ in their judgment about the applicability of the concept “ugly” to a given object, and that of “enjoyable” to a given activity. Someone who says “Charles is a nice guy” says that the subjective concept “nice” (or “nice guy”) is applicable to Charles. Someone else may deny this, because he dislikes a trait the first person likes. Since neither statement contradicts the LA, they are subjective. Communicants are taught to recognize expressions as opinions and judgments, and to distinguish them from facts (“Charles is a male”). Unless the procedure by which the judgment is arrived at has been “objectified”, people adhering to the LA may come to opposite conclusions as to desirability, fitness, nicety, softness etc.

When norms seem to be widely shared- as in “high buildings” and “criminal behavior”- one can easily forget their subjective character. However, not all criminals consider their behavior criminal.

#### OBJECTIVE.

Another useful concept in the analysis of (normative) consequences of the LA is that of objectivity. In general, and roughly speaking, the concept “objective” and other concepts formed with “objectiv” will be used for matters which are connected with the LA in such a

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<sup>5</sup> Parallel with the process of learning a language children learn about other people. Among other things, they learn that they have different tastes and opinions.

way that someone who is bound by the LA is bound to agree about the meaning or applicability of everything objective. The possibility to reach agreement about something objective is due to, and only due to, the LA. If the LA allows disagreement about something, then that something isn't objective. There need not be disagreement between communicants about something objective. The LA implies agreement about objectivity (and subjectivity). Examples of the use of the concept are: "objective description" (of an event, a building), "objective measurements" and "objective procedures" (leaving at most insignificant room for different outcomes when performed by different people, and therefore lacking personal judgments). In particular, an expression or series of expressions is called objective if disagreement about what it signifies implies disagreement about the language agreement.

Note that the concept of objectivity is defined in terms of the LA. It is not defined in terms of some hypothetical "reality". It does not have "absolute" meaning, and it does not assume the existence or relevance of these or similar concepts. Through the language definition it assumes a common learning process and reference frame. But it does not assume that the reference frame is "real" in any sense, or exists independent of the communicants. In fact, the concept objective may be applied to a language partly or wholly defined in terms of a virtual game world.

An "objective concept" is a concept which can be described in such a way as to be unambiguously defined by the language definition. An objective procedure for example is executable and reproducible by other communicants, in such a way as to yield results which are the same in every practical sense. The objectivity of a procedure means that the communicants don't have to translate open concepts like "large" or "hot" in a specific number of meters, square feet or degrees Celsius.<sup>6</sup> Recipes may be mentioned as examples.

To mention another, possibly counter-intuitive example: an objective judgment is the product of an objective procedure (expressed as a series of expressions) by which a judgment is generated. The essential point being that agreement about the resulting judgment does not depend on personal judgments, but only on the LA, and that another outcome is only possible by violating this agreement.<sup>7</sup>

Note that a concept like "objective procedure" is an example of use of the word "objective" as adjective, and that the domain of application of the concept is larger than that of propositions and combinations like "objectively true".

By definition, people who have agreed to communicate need not agree about the applicability of subjective concepts, and may deny subjective propositions. But they should, at least in principle, agree with objective propositions and implications of the LA. Objectivity is practically important because it entails obligations for communicants. For this reason it would be useful to extend the LA with the agreement that someone claiming objectivity should prove this.

The form of an expression may suggest objectivity. Expressions of the form of an objective proposition ("It is necessary to...") may actually be subjective, and vice versa. Subjective expressions may hide objective facts, and seemingly objective expressions may be no more than opinions. This may be intentional, but can also be due to sundry human limitations. Including mistakes due to lack of understanding, and difficulties and/or deficiencies in expressing thoughts. In addition, expressions may be ill-defined. An important class of examples of ill-defined subjective propositions in the guise of objective propositions is that of propositions with an anthropomorphism. The statement "Modern society needs big government" may be mentioned as an example. It is ill-defined not only because "big government" is (by ignoring all dimensions except size), but mainly because it is completely unclear how one can establish the supposed needs of "(modern) society" (in an

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<sup>6</sup> Conversely, when executing one and the same subjective procedure, different communicants may obtain substantially different results, due to different interpretations of subjective concepts or expressions.

<sup>7</sup> Of course there may be disagreement about the objective procedure, even if there is agreement about its objectivity.

objective and logically binding way). Besides, where “ill-defined” is an understatement for “an important part of the meaning is not defined”, an ill-defined expression is not even an expression in the sense of the language definition. It is nonsense. The fact that this is only rarely noted can be explained by the rather frequent occurrence of ill-defined expressions (and concepts), insufficient awareness of the needs of communication, and last but not least the hypothesis that by argumentation “reasonable people” should be able to reach agreement even about subjective propositions.<sup>8</sup>

A proposition is said to be true if and only if

- it may or may not agree, in the sense of the language definition, with what it is supposed to correspond with in the (extended) common reference frame (extended by definitions in the form of linguistic expressions); and
- it actually agrees.

It follows that “true” is an objective concept, and that definitions are propositions which are true.<sup>9</sup>

FACT.

A fact is a true proposition. In other words: a fact is a proposition which cannot be denied without violating the LA. In still other words: an objective proposition constructed by (correct) application of the language definition.

From this definition it follows that facts are objective, and that definitions are facts. Even if common parlance seems to advise that definitions can better not be called “fact”.

As subsets of the set of facts can be mentioned: logical, observational, empirical, and theoretical facts. Logical facts refer to the LA. The definition of a concept may be called a logical fact. The concepts “observational fact” and “empirical fact” both refer to observations which- at least in principle- every communicant can make, since “observation” refers to the common reference frame.<sup>10</sup> A proposition about one’s thoughts, “I think this and that”, may be a fact, but this fact is not logical, observational, empirical or theoretical.

There is a fundamental difference between the propositions “I find this soup excellent” and “This soup is excellent”. The first proposition may be a fact, the second is a subjective proposition which cannot be a fact. By definition, the concept “true” is not applicable to a subjective proposition. Which means that a subjective proposition cannot be true.

Some examples of facts are: “The trees have lost their leaves.”, “These opinions are incompatible.”, “Two times two is four.” but not “This is unacceptable”. Value judgments can be denied without violating the LA, and therefore are not facts.

The proposition “He went home” is definitely vague, since it is entirely unclear how he went, by plane, foot or otherwise. The proposition is nevertheless objective and a fact. It also illustrates that vagueness can be compatible with objectivity.

“Water boils at 100 °C.” This presupposes an agreed method for measuring temperatures,<sup>11</sup> and a definition of the centigrade. When these are given, and when some additional conditions- such as atmospheric pressure- are either made explicit or assumed to agree with a generally accepted standard, the truth of the proposition cannot be denied without violating the LA. For example by saying something that contradicts the definition of “boil”. As noted, propositions like “Water boils at 100 °C.” may not be seen as part of the (general) language, but as part of an extended special language. In this case the language of physics. Indeed, a distinction can be made between general and special parts of languages. A language remains a

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<sup>8</sup> A hypothesis which can be explained from intolerance and the inability to coexist peacefully with different opinions.

<sup>9</sup> Definitions could have been excluded. This has not been done in order to avoid exceptions.

<sup>10</sup> A distinction can be made between observational and empirical, but the distinction need not bother us here.

<sup>11</sup> A method for measuring temperatures can be seen as a definition and an extension of the LA.

language if specialist and/or new concepts are left out of its dictionary. However, it may not be suitable or possible to discuss certain topics with a reduced language.

#### OPINION.

An opinion is here defined as a subjective proposition. Equivalently: a proposition which is compatible with the language agreement, the same being true for its denial. It would help a listener or reader, and avoid misunderstandings, if the LA were extended with the agreement to let an opinion be preceded by an indication of the opinion-character of what follows. For example by “I think...”, “I find...” or “In my opinion...”.

Due to the definition of “objective”, the definition of “opinion” differs somewhat from common parlance. In common parlance, there is no awareness of a relation between communication and (some) norms. Communication and norms are supposed to be independent. Languages are seen as facts, and not as something agreed, and needing agreement. Norms are considered as isolated entities, unrelated to anything one has bound oneself to or is bound to. Communication and unreliability are not seen as contradictory. All norms and values are supposed to be equally subjective, and all propositions about norms and values are considered as opinions.<sup>12</sup> With the definitions given here, there are propositions about normative implications of the LA which are not opinions. For example, the proposition “Agreements are to be kept” is not an opinion, but a fact. In other words: the freedom of opinion of people adhering to the LA is restricted. One is only free to express whatever one likes within the bounds set by the LA. Which means that one cannot be indifferent to lies and cheating, and that one has to be consistent (even) in one’s opinions.

What makes an opinion an opinion? Or: how can one show that a proposition is an opinion if it does not indicate this by the use of an appropriate terminology: “In our opinion/judgment...”? By checking the definition. That is: by showing that denial of the proposition does not yield a contradiction with the LA. For example by showing the use of concepts which indicate that the proposition does not express facts but opinions and/or that the proposition cannot be derived from the LA.<sup>13</sup> For example due to dependence on subjective judgments in expressions like: “There is an urgent need for...”, “It must ...”, “That’s impossible”. The language definition expressly restricts the use of some concepts to the expression of subjective judgments. Knowledge of this is part of the language education. Tastes for food, drink, colors, music, etc. are other examples of such concepts. Related to this are beauty judgments of paintings, of pieces of music, buildings, and the applicability of concepts like “cumbersome” and “nice”. Both assertion of their applicability and denial of applicability are compatible with the LA.

Since it is sometimes hard to prove subjectivity of a proposition by showing that it is not assumed or implied by the LA, it would be useful to extend the LA with a presumption of subjectivity: the agreement that the burden of proving that a proposition is objective- and therefore binding- lies with the person claiming objectivity. Put otherwise: subjectivity may be presumed unless objectivity is shown explicitly; and the burden of proof that an "opinion" is actually a fact lies with the person claiming factuality. (S)he might show for example that the “opinion” is incompatible with the LA or its premises.

About opinions agreement may be possible, but this is not a necessary consequence of the LA.

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<sup>12</sup> For an example see the last section of this paper.

<sup>13</sup> Note that a proposition which cannot be derived from the LA cannot be derived from facts either.



OTHER DEFINITIONS.

The following completes the definition of the set of key concepts of this paper.

- Logical:** according to the LA, what is implied by the LA, without the need of other evidence or arguments. More specifically: what follows from the definitions and rules in the language definition, as shown by an (linguistic) analysis of the premises (data, observations, assumptions etc.). Example: when one hears or reads about wheels, then according to the language definition of “wheel” one may imagine something round and able to rotate, and use these properties in an argument. That cars and houses have a door and a roof is logical.
- Contradictory propositions:** propositions which cannot be true simultaneously. Each of the propositions is said to contradict the other.
- Compatible:** generalization of: fit together, can be combined, can coexist, can work together, do not give rise to problems, is in agreement with. Examples: software written for Linux can be said to be compatible with the computer operating system Linux; both opinions and true propositions are compatible with the language definition.
- Incompatible:** generalization of: not fitting together, not reconcilable, not both possible. Stronger than “do not agree”. Examples: English bolts and continental spanners, trains and railway tracks, files and file systems, rules, legal systems.
- Consistent:** a set of propositions is called consistent if it is without contradictions. This is a specialization of the concept compatible.
- Proof:** a proof of a proposition is a logical reasoning (argument), which shows that the proposition follows logically from the definitions of the concepts and expressions used in the proposition, a set of premises (possibly stated partly at the beginning and partly in the course of the reasoning), and the LA. No other means or information are used. A proof shows explicitly that the conclusions are implied by the meaning of the premises, including the meaning of the concepts therein. Where the meanings are given by the language definition.
- Proposition:** an expression which asserts something that can be denied. Examples: “In the last century taxes and governments have grown tenfold.” “Climates are changing.” “I like kiwis.” Not all expressions are propositions. A household example is that of recipes, which consist of lists of ingredients and instructions for things to be done. Since many phenomena in the world we live in are of great importance to us, and since in general they are most aptly expressed in terms of propositions, this type of expression and their being true or untrue is of great practical importance.

Assumptions may have a hypothetical character. They may be assumed to be true for the sake of the argument. If one or more assumptions are hypothetical, the conclusions may be said to be “conditionally true”, the condition(s) being that the assumptions are true or accepted. The result may be expressed as a proposition of the form “If these assumption are true, then these propositions are true as well”.

#### 4. PREMISES OF COMMUNICATION AND A LANGUAGE AGREEMENT.

One can distinguish two groups of premises: those having to do with physical and mental capabilities of potential communicants, and those having to do with their freedom of action. The premises are described in that order.

##### A COMMON REFERENCE FRAME.

Learning and defining a language require a common reference frame: a set of things, activities, phenomena, experiences or whatever that a potential communicant can refer to in such a way that another communicant understands what (s)he or he is referring to. For example by pointing to something.

The reliance on dictionaries and definitions which only use the language (words), may make people forget the common reference frame as the (initial and final) basis for the definition of the language. The oversight shows up in dictionaries: those using only words (verbal language) cannot avoid circularity. Conversely, the phenomenon of circularity suggests that other means of communication were used in learning and defining at least a part of the language. The problem may be resolved to a large extent by supplementing (web)dictionaries with (3D-)pictures, video's and audio recordings. Definitions may moreover consist of more than one sentence. There simply is no need to call a definition only a definition if it is a single sentence: "X is...".

In order to be able to use a reference frame for the definition, and for the definition to be meaningful, it should not change too much during the time it takes to learn and use the definition. If the reference frame changes faster, neither concept nor definition makes much practical sense.

Note that there is no need to make assumptions about the "reality" of the common reference frame.

##### MEMORY.

Another basic premise seems to be: the existence of a memory. One needs to remember the language definition and the LA. Memory has quantitative and qualitative aspects. The size of a memory restricts the number and complexity of concepts that can be memorized; qualitative properties determine the speed with which expressions can be remembered, analyzed, constructed, spoken etc. The practical limitations of memories have consequences for the means of communication, for its definition, for reasoning, and for the possibility to abide by the LA.

##### THE ABILITY TO LEARN AND USE COMMUNICATION AND LANGUAGE DEFINITIONS.

In particular the ability to choose appropriate expressions and words to describe (convey) a given feeling, need, situation, phenomenon, etc. Including the ability to evaluate the (in)appropriateness and (in)correctness of words and expressions. Here the concept "correctness" is assumed to be applicable to expressions and to refer to their linguistic properties, while "truth" is assumed to be applicable to objective propositions. It seems unavoidable to learn a language in combination with the concepts (in)correct and (un)true; and if this would be avoidable at all, they certainly make things easier. We will not try to give a proof, but assume that language users can establish:

- that an expression is linguistically (in)correct. In other words: (in)compatible with the language definition;
- whether an expression is a proposition;
- whether a proposition is objective or subjective or neither.

Maybe these assumptions are actually necessary and integral parts of the language-learning process. One can hardly say that one masters a language if one cannot distinguish correct from incorrect expressions, and cannot distinguish opinions from facts.

Due to all kinds of vagueness in language definitions, for each of the three assumptions there may be hard-to-decide and even undecidable cases.

It follows from the above that abilities are important for communication.

A (BASIC) MEANS OF COMMUNICATION THAT DEVELOPS AUTONOMOUSLY, AND/OR AN ABILITY TO LEARN A (BASIC) MEANS OF COMMUNICATION.

So that communicants have something to start with, and can use to define other means of communication. Such as a speaking ability, an ability to point things out with arms and fingers, the ability to understand what is meant by that, and to signify approval and disapproval.

PEOPLE CAN AND DO CHOOSE; CAN AND DO (DIS)AGREE.

From a social point of view, one of the most basic and important premises seems to be that people can and do choose.<sup>14</sup> With respect to some people and organizations they may adhere to the language agreement voluntarily; with respect to other people or organizations they may feel compelled to use the language, or be coerced into using it. For example to declare that they have truthfully filled in a form. They may choose to communicate not about everything but only about specific topics. They may choose to communicate with different groups of people about different sets of subjects. Communication is not a matter of all or nothing. It allows for a spectrum of choices. Of course, these remarks are easily seen to be corroborated by experience.

No logical reasons are known that require people to communicate with given persons against their will. Neither is it known why people, if forced to (quasi-)communicate, should abide by the requirements for (voluntary, true) communication. Except of course for fear of sanctions. Note that coercion implicitly assumes the presence of alternatives and the possibility of choice. If there is no choice, coercion isn't necessary.

PEOPLE MAY CHOOSE TO LIE, MISLEAD ETC.

Even in subtle ways, for example by withholding information which they know is important for understanding the subject of the communication, for argumentation and for drawing conclusions. They can use the language definition to create a notion in other people's minds that differs substantially from what they really think or know to be the full and reliable truth, and/or from the notions that would have been created if the requested information had been given (to yield a reliable picture).

CONDITIONAL COMMUNICATION.

People cannot only choose to communicate or not to communicate, they can also agree to communicate- about specific subjects- conditionally. Communication takes time, and may have unknown and/or harmful consequences. The conditions may be seen as the outcome of negotiations. An essential aspect of the conditions is that they may be personal. Different persons may pose different conditions. Experience shows that this is the general case. Examples abound. Man-woman relations offer a wide range of degrees of (un)willingness to communicate: from the most open communication via communication about "insensitive"

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<sup>14</sup> Note that the fact that people can choose comes quite close to saying that they are autonomous beings.

subjects to the express wish not to have any contact whatsoever. Of course there is a relation between the conditions for communication and what one wants to have to do with another person.

A promise to abide by the LA will in general not be a sufficiently strong incentive for agreeing to start a discussion about whatever a stranger likes. Someone who wants to communicate with somebody in general will want to communicate in order to reach (personal) goals. Experience shows that people only rarely make time freely and unconditionally available for other people. Including time for communication.

Conversely, knowledge or suspicion of lack of respect or one-sided benefits may explain weariness and breakdown of communication. Communication costs time and energy spent applying norms to one's own behavior. Maybe norms which the other party scorns. Of course, the frequent occurrence of non-communication and restricted communication underlines the need of (implicit) voluntary agreement.<sup>15</sup>

More on conditional communication is said in chapter 6.

A final premise is of a different type.

#### THE LA IS CONSISTENT.

It is assumed that the LA is consistent: can be defined in a consistent way and does not contain contradictions. Consistency would seem to be necessary both for communication as such, and for a language to be learnable. This paper, all scientific endeavors, and nearly all non-fiction assume at least one kind of uniqueness: viz. the relevance of the concept truth. Which actually means: a single truth. It is clearly inefficient, and may even be impossible, to learn that yes and no, true and untrue can apply at the same time. It would seem to be impossible to learn that "yes" and "no" are opposites, and also equivalent, without thereby voiding these concepts of their meaning. It seems plausible to the present author that the language definition is unlearnable if it is not consistent.

Quite apart from the question of the necessity of consistency, one may note that in general the language definition is used to define meanings uniquely, even if uniqueness sometimes requires contextual information. In practical circumstances, if an expression happens to be ambiguous, we don't leave it at that, and reply with a question which tries to get the unique meaning. Thereby showing that we suppose at least the possibility of communicating a unique meaning, and/or that we do not always like ambiguity.

Henceforth by LA we mean the "basic LA", that is, without additional agreements, but including agreement about its premises and implications. An LA supplemented by additional agreements could be called "extended LA".

## 5. FURTHER OBSERVATIONS.

#### THE NECESSITY OF AN AGREEMENT.

Part of the preceding sections can be summarized by saying that both experience and reasoning show that communication (in the sense of the definition) is not self-evident, and that a distinction should be made between communication and (mis)use of a means of communication. Without an agreement, where necessary backed up by something like a legal system, there is in general no basis for the assumption that people communicate reliably, as if bound by what they say or write. That they really think what they make you think they

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<sup>15</sup> One may distinguish voluntary communication and willingness to communicate. In the first case communication is valued positively, in the second case it is valued negatively, but less negative than the alternatives.

think. The assumption that they do is simply incompatible with both theory and experience. Since it is often hard or impossible to check timely whether someone is lying, communication cannot always be sufficiently guaranteed by coercion.

Communication makes no sense if one cannot be sure that the meaning of signs or expressions is given by the language definition. Replacing explicit and meaningful agreement by wishful thinking may be costly emotionally, financially and otherwise. In the absence of grounds for belief in the reliability of a communicant or source of information (such as the internet) one can sometimes better try to find out the facts oneself. As soon as one needs to be able to rely on messages of other beings, one needs to be sure that the LA is respected. In general it is no more than an illusion to think that one understands (precisely) what someone means. (Even if that person is honest, able and careful). One can only be sure after mutual comparison of definitions. The fact that in many cases this doesn't seem to be a problem can be explained by the lack of importance of much communication, and by the irrelevance of a measure of vagueness. But the observation also explains the frequency of misunderstandings.

Concluding an agreement is not the same as keeping it. There have to be grounds for believing that an agreement will be kept. Reasons may be: knowledge of the person one communicates with, belief in the effectiveness of her or his convictions, the idea that a good relation is important for both of you, and the awareness that the relation will be harmed by lies, disregard of promises and the like. In business relations it may be commendable to draw up and sign a contract, so as to give the agreement more status, and to be able to make use of the existence of contract law and the judicial system to enforce it.

One can also show the necessity of a LA by asking what it means that someone refuses to subscribe to the LA when asked to do so. (Let alone to promise full and timely information). Is it meaningful to communicate with such a person or organization? Only if one doesn't mind to be misled. The conclusion can only be that communication requires (voluntary) agreement.<sup>16</sup>

#### WEAKNESSES OF THE AVAILABLE MEANS OF COMMUNICATION.

Human means of communication have not been constructed for the purposes for which they are used today. Human beings moreover have limited capabilities. So even if better means of communication exist or could be constructed, it is doubtful whether human beings could use them. The purpose of this paragraph is to note this point and one of its consequences, namely errors in reasoning due to the use of ambiguous concepts and/or metaphors. The example of "to be" was mentioned before. An important example of a metaphor is the anthropomorphic metaphor, where a thing is conceived as a human being. While actually lacking essential characteristics of human beings. Such as their mortality on the one hand, and the impossibility of formal discontinuation on the other. The expressions/metaphors in question implicitly assert that for all practical purposes the thing can be treated as a human being. Which in general is neither proven nor correct, and often leads to misleading conclusions. The "opinion" of a company with thousands of employees possibly being no more than the opinion of the Board or even the CEO. The frequent occurrence of far-reaching use of such models can be seen as an example of the human inability to tackle complexity without undue simplification.

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<sup>16</sup> Some people may say that the LA is idealistic or utopian. A review of your personal experiences will tell you that communication in the sense of the definition is both practicable and practised widely. For example among colleagues, friends, and family members. Even if not among all of them, and not always. At the same time it is obvious that there are socially important types of "communication", where the language is mainly used as an instrument of power instead of communication. Analysis of both cases easily shows that the problem is not so much one of theoretical difficulties, but of practical inconvenience.

## COMMUNICATION AND THE LAW.

The promise to adhere to the communication agreement often gives rise to prisoner's dilemma situations. Individuals and organizations may find it profitable to lie or cheat. Legal systems can be understood as a solution of these dilemmas.<sup>17</sup> In the case of a contract for example one may in principle appeal to the legal system to have it enforced. In this and similar cases the legal system establishes the meaning of the contract on the basis of the law (including jurisprudence). The law can be seen as an extension, and therefore part, of the language definition.

In general, part of the legal system gives a practical answer to the question how to react to violations of the language agreement. Both by preventive measures and by providing recovery of damages. It does not however solve the fundamental problem that violation of the language agreement can be interpreted as indication of unreliability. Once an important promise has been broken, one feels one can no longer be sure about any future promise. Including the promise to keep future promises. What has happened once can happen again.<sup>18</sup> The- mostly only partial- recovery for damages as provided by the law doesn't change that simple fact. Therefore the law can only provide a partial solution. "Trust comes by foot and goes by horse". People should be aware of the fact that small things may have large consequences.

## 6. CONDITIONAL COMMUNICATION.

In chapter 4 about premises it was noted that in general people's willingness to communicate is conditional. They may want to be able to rely on what they are told. They may want to be treated respectfully, and to define themselves what is to be understood as "respectful". They may want guarantees that what they say or write will not be used against them. They may want the person or organization requesting or requiring communication to bind itself by what it says or writes. Both communicative behavior and other activities which may affect communicants should take these facts into account, if disruption of communication is to be avoided. Someone who wants to communicate with somebody should not do anything that jeopardizes the other's willingness to communicate. This observation may seem trivial. But is far from that, because the conditions are personal and in principle unlimited. And because they restrict one's freedom of action. The conditions may leave different freedoms for different people, and may exclude communication with very many people (and other beings). For example if people for cultural or religious reasons do not feel bound to anything in any relation with people of other cultures or religions.<sup>19</sup>

These observations are analyzed a bit more systematically in the following.

Suppose a person W wishes to communicate with person M. For clarity of the text, W is supposed to be a woman, and M a man. (Possibly representing organizations or states). The following situations can be distinguished:

1. M agrees to communicate with W about anything W wishes to speak about. In this case W and M are bound only by the LA and its premises and implications;
2. M agrees to communicate with W only about certain topics. He may agree to talk about a movie he has seen recently, but not about his work. In this case W and M are bound by the LA restricted in this way. M may have all kinds of reasons for wishing to restrict communication with W. He may not know W, not trust W, or even know from friends or

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<sup>17</sup> A solution by the way which- under certain conditions- can be accepted with unanimity.

<sup>18</sup> Suppose that sometime in the past a certain type of stone has turned into sponge for a few minutes. Would you use such stone for the foundation of your house?

<sup>19</sup> Note that very many people feel free to do with animals whatever they like.

experience that W cannot be trusted. M may not want to discuss certain topics in order to keep them private, to avoid discord, or in order not to inform W;

3. M and W agree about additional conditions. The conditions may depend on the topics W wants to communicate about, and on the characteristics of the organization represented by W. M may want to communicate in writing, have witnesses present, require services in return, and so on. Because of differences and asymmetries in personalities, circumstances, interests, etc. the conditions need not be the same for W and M.

In each of these three cases the restrictions and other conditions are accepted voluntarily and before there was any contact between the communicants that could endanger communication. The following cases concern situations where at least one of the (potential) communicants has done something or wishes to do something that the other (potential) communicant finds objectionable, or that may violate the premises of the LA, and so hinders or precludes a voluntary LA.

If M finds certain behavior or activities of W harmful, unpleasant or otherwise objectionable, such behavior and activities may reduce M's willingness to communicate with W. He may think it doesn't make much sense to talk with W, unless W accepts conditions which - in her eyes - would seriously reduce her freedom of action. As long as W wants to communicate with M, or sees the possibility of a future wish or need to do so, W will have to be more careful than if (s)he has no wish or need to communicate with M.

One may distinguish objective and subjective effects of behavior and activities. For communicants, the objectivity or subjectivity of effects is indisputable (since denial violates the LA), even though different communicants may value equal effects differently. For the convenience of the discussion, the objective effects by definition exclude the effects due to the physical existence of the communicants.

4. The situation arising from objective effects of people's activities can be considered in relation to 3. W and M could voluntarily agree about a practical definition of "harmful" that respects the opinions of both W and M. Moreover, they may agree not to engage in any activity that is harmful in the agreed sense (and about a way to check compliance if requested, and about sanctions). In other words: if they want to remain "on speaking terms", they will have to accept the LA, and forgo activities which are harmful in the agreed sense.

If this procedure seems desirable and generally acceptable, it is just as clear that many people, organizations and states will not give up activities that are widely considered harmful;

5. Subjective effects can by definition be denied without causing a contradiction with the LA. There need not be any objective effect. Some people nevertheless object to behavior, situations or whatever which has no objective effects on people. In such a way as to prejudice the possibility of communication. Since their objections are based on opinions, and since opinions are arbitrary and boundless, so are the possibilities of imposing restrictions on potential communicants. Shaving every morning may have no objective effect on other persons, but some of them may nevertheless get irritated or shocked when they see a man without a beard. People believing that consumption of chicken meat is forbidden by a Superior Being may try to get anything containing chicken forbidden for everybody, including non-believers. It seems that such prohibitions cannot be based on the LA or its premises, or are outright incompatible with them.

One might say that the wish to communicate creates a negotiation situation. The wish to communicate may arise from the perception of benefits. There may also be costs. The question is: do the (subjective) benefits outweigh the (subjective) costs? In addition, one is not always in a position to choose freely. There are many practically important situations where there is a necessity rather than a wish to use the means of communication. Communication is often necessary to earn one's bread. It may also be necessary to prevent or end harm caused by activities of other people. In such cases there is no voluntary and binding agreement. And if this is supposed to be a matter of more or less rather than of yes or no, then one would be bound less the more one is forced to accept conditions which are not compatible with the LA.

In both 4 and 5 subjective elements may play an important role. In 4 only the value-judgments are subjective, not the effects themselves; in 5 both the value judgments and the effects are subjective. As a consequence, reaching agreement in cases of type 5 will in general be more difficult than in cases of type 4.

It is obvious that someone who wishes to remain on communicative terms with other people is not free to do what (s)he likes. (S)he has to take appropriate care in what (s)he says, writes and does. The situations 3-5 are quite general, and preclude or hamper much communication.<sup>20</sup>

The next chapter investigates normative consequences of the LA. It shows that accepting the LA means accepting important restrictions on one's freedom of action. It shows the boundaries of the domain of communicative norms. Some freedoms remain. Examples are given in chapter 8.

## 7. NORMATIVE IMPLICATIONS OF THE (BASIC) LANGUAGE AGREEMENT.

### 7.1. IMPLICATIONS. WHY THEY ARE BINDING.

Let P signify a proposition or set of propositions. Then the expression "what follows from P" is here considered to be equivalent with "the logical implications of P", or shortly "the implications of P". All of these expressions designate the set of expressions expressing part of the meaning of P according to the definitions, prescriptions etc. which make up the language definition. "Q follows from P" and "P implies Q" both mean that Q is part of the meaning of P. The implications follow from the agreement about the language definition: the definitions of words, concepts, the meaning of expressions and whatever may be used or premised to communicate with a particular language. It follows that agreement about P means agreement about the implications of P, and that (logical) implication is no more than a consequence of its definition and the language agreement.

More generally, somebody who subscribes to the language agreement is bound by the implications of the LA and its premises, and by the implications of the combination of elements of the language agreement and whatever (s)he considers herself bound by.

### 7.2. NORMATIVE IMPLICATIONS. INTRODUCTION: THE LANGUAGE AGREEMENT AS A NORM.

It is not known why beings who do not communicate and are not under any threat would be bound by any norm. But the agreement to communicate is both a complex norm by itself, and implies other norms. It is a norm by itself since it is an agreement. To wit: the agreement to apply and comply with the language definition. The language definition defines correct

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<sup>20</sup> Even between people who are competent to communicate about the given topic.



communicative behavior. In other words: a norm. The LA presupposes important premises about the communicants, and includes agreement about binding logic, deduction and argumentation. By these and similar means it implies other norms. The LA delineates the set of expressions communicants should be able to agree on, and may only temporarily disagree on; and it delineates the set of expressions they need not agree on (see below, section 8). By virtue of a language agreement communicants must, possibly after explanation and argumentation, agree about the (in)correctness of every proposition (or expression, for that matter) which is part of, or deducible from, the language agreement, either or not in conjunction with observations about the common reference frame. Whether they see the deducibility or not. Due to personal limitations it may take time and effort to see it, or be impossible.

In accordance with the definition of “objective” given earlier, a norm will be called objective if and only if it is implied by the LA (and/or its premises). Since normative implications of the language agreement are implications of the language agreement they may also be called “logical norms”. A “subjective norm” is a norm that is not objective and may be seen differently by different (groups of) individuals.

An objective norm is a norm which one cannot deny without lying.

Example of an objective norm: to keep promises.

Example of a subjective norm: a speed limit.

Note that one cannot say that violations of the LA are permissible without becoming inconsistent. Speaking and writing make sense only in the framework of the LA. Saying or writing that one does not feel bound by the LA is therefore self-contradictory. And should be distinguished from criticism of (parts of) the language definition and proposals to improve it.

### 7.3. REASONING AND DEDUCTION.

Logical reasoning or (formal logical) deduction can be defined and understood as the process of generating a sequence of expressions which present:

- premises;
- observations about the LA and/or the common reference frame;
- implications of combinations of the LA, premises, observations and implications mentioned earlier.

Shortly: the process of finding and/or deriving implications of given (sets of) propositions. Often the last implication(s) of the series is/are called conclusion(s).

The two preceding sections explain the use and importance of reasoning for (dis)proving propositions, and, with a minor generalization,<sup>21</sup> for understanding expressions.

It follows from the definitions that deduction does not yield new information or meanings. It only produces new, or rather: different, propositions. It may however uncover unexpressed (and unseen) meanings. The meaning of a deduced proposition is included in the meaning of the premise(s). Since expressions are symbolic representations of possibly complex meanings, and since human beings have limited mental capabilities, parts of meanings may not always be easily discernable. When reasoning about people, one may use the fact that they have legs, brains, feelings, parents, need food and drink and have many other properties, even if these are never once mentioned. Therefore the derivation of implications may be useful, both because of their independent significance, and to better understand the set of propositions which is investigated.

Since an implication is part of the meaning of its premises (possibly including observations), it is impossible to deny an implication without denying at least part of the premises.

It follows furthermore that a proposition is proven (has to be accepted by communicants) once it has been shown that its meaning is included in the meaning of

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<sup>21</sup> Every proposition is an expression, but there are expressions which are not a proposition.

premises which have been proven (accepted) earlier. In other words: that it (only) expresses part of the meaning of the premises.

Especially in mathematical proofs one can easily see that they consist of little more (formally speaking!) than (re)defining concepts, analyses of definitions of concepts used in the premises, and exploration of the implications of the premises. As explained, there is nothing strictly mathematical about this method. It is a method of proof accepted by everyone who communicates.

#### 7.4. COMMUNICATION REQUIRES HONESTY AND RELIABILITY.

Due to their abstract nature, it may not be immediately clear what the preceding subsections have to do with behavior. To see the connection, note that:

- communication is not (not only) about messages, but also about their meaning;
- the communication agreement is an agreement.

The language definition concerns the way meanings are expressed in spoken or written language. Words and expressions convey specific meanings or ranges of meanings. Meanings which can be inferred from the language definition. The inference only yields the notions which the speaker or writer believes, intends to do, etc. if the speaker or writer correctly and truthfully applied the definition. By accepting the LA the freedom to lie has been given up. Adherence to the language agreement means that by saying “yes” one means what is expressed by “yes” according to the language definition: approval, agreement. Since part of the meaning of “promise” is that it is something to be kept, one has to do what one has promised. A promise to come is an expression by which, according to the language agreement, one binds oneself to the specified behavior. One should neither call a fact “opinion”, nor suggest that an opinion is a “fact”. Similarly, no “difference of opinion” is allowed about true propositions that can be deduced from the LA (such as: “A wheel is round.”). Where “difference of opinion” is placed between quotation marks to indicate that what is disputed is actually not an opinion.

The examples show that and how the agreement about the language implies agreement about (some) behavioral norms. In general about norms:

- with respect to communicative behavior, implied by the language agreement;
- which follow from the combination of this agreement with the premises of communication.

The obligation to use words like “promise” correctly is equivalent to the obligation to keep promises. Which shows how the LA translates into behavioral norms.

From the fact that communication is inextricably wound up with a set of norms it follows that communication and this set of norms are not independent. Once one has declared or made clear the wish to communicate, one is no longer free to choose whatever behavioral norms one wishes. One is free to communicate or not, but once one communicates one is bound by whatever communication requires and presupposes.

The communication agreement implies that communicants cannot deny the non-logical and non-binding character of norms which they cannot deduce from the language agreement.<sup>22, 23</sup> They cannot deny that such norms lack the (logical) basis of logical norms. Since apart from compulsion no other binding basis is known, and has in any case not been agreed to voluntarily, such norms are simply without any binding basis. However, as noted before, the voluntary agreement to communicate does create such a basis, but only for the norms implied by the LA.

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<sup>22</sup> A denial is an expression, and to deny is to use the language agreement.

<sup>23</sup> Of course one can deny whatever one likes. “Cannot do X” in the present paper means: cannot do X without violating the language agreement.

#### 7.5. AGREEMENTS, COMMITMENTS, CONTRACTS, ETC. SHOULD BE HONOURED.

This follows from the combination of the definitions of these concepts with the set of expressions by which agreements etc. are made (Q: “Shall we travel together?”; A: “Yes, O.K.”). The definitions are part of the LA. The LA also defines the meaning of the expressions using these concepts. Of course, due to limitations of every means of communication, up to a certain extent. Differences of interpretation need not be very important. But if they are, and if parties have doubts about the possibility of reaching agreement, they may agree beforehand on a method of resolving conflicts. For example by submitting the problem to a third party, which is to provide them with a binding interpretation. Such a method of solution can be included in the agreement.

#### 7.6. CONTRADICTIONS AND INCONSISTENCY VIOLATE THE LANGUAGE AGREEMENT.

Two propositions which contradict one another (given the LA) are said to be inconsistent.<sup>24</sup> Contradiction is contradiction in the sense of the LA. In other words: that propositions are contradictory can be shown with the help of definitions, prescriptions and other elements of the LA. By definition the concept “contradiction” is indissolubly connected with the LA.

It follows that someone accepting the LA will not defend contradictory opinions.

These observations imply that any text or mutually overlapping body of texts that is to be binding on the basis of voluntary agreement should be consistent, consistent with the LA (including its premises), and consistent with the common frame of reference. An important example of a body of texts is the law.

Even if the LA does not forbid inconsistent non-communicative activities just because they are inconsistent, it does mean that the inconsistent activities cannot be explained and justified (consistently, though consistency is inherent in explanation and justification).<sup>25</sup> Inconsistent activities can be shown to be inconsistent by reasoning. Note also that the (basic, unrestricted) LA allows communicants to discuss behavior, and ask for explanations.

#### 7.7. A SPECIAL CASE: NO PROPOSITION, TEXT ETC. SHOULD BE UNTRUE, OR INCOMPATIBLE WITH THE COMMON REFERENCE FRAME (OBSERVATIONS, EXPERIENCE).

“Untrue”, “incompatible with the common reference frame, observation or experience” all mean that the proposition, text etc. referred to cannot be reconciled with the LA. “Incompatible with the common reference frame” means that there exists a true proposition about the common reference frame which contradicts the given proposition, text etc. It follows that the language definition has not been applied properly. This is an infraction of the LA. A text which is inconsistent with the common reference frame must contain one or more untrue propositions, and for that reason violates the language agreement.

#### 7.8. FACTS AND AGREEMENT ABOUT FACTS AMONG COMMUNICANTS.

Knowing from experience that concepts like objective and subjective are practically useful and sometimes even important, one may ask for a description of :

- the set of propositions language users should be able to reach agreement about; and

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<sup>24</sup> Taken separately, inconsistent propositions A and B need not refer to the common reference frame. But the proposition “Both A and B are true” does. To find out whether both A and B can be true or not one needs no more than the LA. If “A and B cannot be true simultaneously” and “A and B are true”, then the concept “true” cannot have the meaning it was given by the language definition. (Or an LA with these concepts is impossible).

<sup>25</sup> Inconsistent activities can be defined as activities having opposite effects. It is assumed that activities are undertaken to realize these effects.

- the set about which they need not agree on, and about which argumentation or other means need not yield agreement.<sup>26</sup>

And, of course, to show why they should agree or need not agree about propositions with the given characteristics.

People who have bound themselves to a LA must for that reason be able to agree about whatever can be shown to be implied by the LA. In particular about the binding character of a proof and an implication (both in the logical sense defined earlier). Rejection of a proof or an implication is incompatible with the LA. The set of mathematical theorems is an example of a set of propositions language users should be able to reach agreement about.<sup>27</sup>

From the definition of “subjective” and other concepts represented by words composed with “subjectiv” it follows that people who have bound themselves to a LA must be able to agree about the subjectivity of whatever is subjective, and need never agree about for example subjective propositions, subjective norms and subjective values.

In combination with the definition of objective, the definition of “fact” implies that communicants cannot deny them, and should be able to reach agreement about them. Note furthermore that an expression which is not compatible with a fact is not compatible with the language agreement.

#### 7.9. THE NORMS APPLY TO BEHAVIOUR WITH RESPECT TO PEOPLE ONE HAS CHOSEN TO COMMUNICATE WITH.

The language agreement is binding only for people who have concluded this agreement voluntarily. It follows that the norms implied by the language agreement are binding only for people who communicate voluntarily, and only with respect to the people they have chosen to communicate with. Someone who communicates voluntarily with family and friends is not for that reason bound by the implications of the language agreement when forced to communicate with others. On the other hand, people who use the media to address as many people as possible are bound by the norms implied and presupposed by the language agreement. For example by writing articles or books, giving interviews or press releases, or decreeing laws.

#### 8. FREEDOMS LEFT.

Understanding of the normative implications of communication may be helped by understanding of the freedoms which are left after one has bound oneself to a language agreement. This section tries to find and describe some of these freedoms.

In principle the LA leaves communicants free in everything that it leaves free, open, or unspecified by definition. Among other things this leaves freedom of taste and many other value judgments. Such as “beautiful” and “fast”. That the LA does not specify or restrict the applicability of such concepts can be seen as recognition of the observational fact that different people have different tastes and norms and values, and as a consequence of the (subsequent) failure to define them in an unambiguous way. In contrast to concepts like steel and swim.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> It follows that the present paper does not assume that “reasonable people” can reach agreement about everything by proper argumentation, as assumed for example by K-O Apel (*Transformation der Philosophie* Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt a. M., 1<sup>e</sup> Auflage 1973), and F.H. van Eemeren & R. Grootendorst (*A systematic theory of argumentation: the pragma-dialectical approach*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge U.K, 2004, ISBN 0521830753),

<sup>27</sup> The theorems are supposed to be formulated as “If..., then...”-propositions, that is: to include a list of their premises.

<sup>28</sup> Even if “steel” and “swim” are both quite open: there are many kinds of steel and several different strokes in swimming.

In the second place it can be noted that both the LA and the need or willingness to communicate in principle leave communicants free to do anything that does not affect the other communicants (directly or indirectly) in a way they find harmful, unpleasant or something similar. Such behavior does not interfere with the LA or its premises.

The last “in principle” refers to the observation, already made in chapter 6, that “does not affect” depends on acceptance of differences of opinion, norms and values which are independent of the LA, its premises and implications. Whether something affects someone not only depends on objective facts, but also on convictions and feelings. For people who have subscribed to the LA these convictions and feelings are free only to some extent. The LA requires consistency. Not only in discussions or other utterances, but also- since the LA requires that one means what one says or writes- in opinion and thinking. The LA consequently prohibits arbitrariness. This can be a strong and important restriction.<sup>29</sup>

Insults put communication at risk, since they may reduce or eliminate the willingness to communicate. But the LA is an agreement with specific persons. One remains free with respect to other persons. But note that the same holds for these other persons. One may be free, but so are other people. One may be free to insult, harm or whatever, but so is everyone else, and the person hurt may retaliate in kind, or as (s)he likes. Which suggests that many people would agree, if not with some kind of LA, then at least with a judicial system able to resolve the sketched prisoner’s dilemma “game”.

Although the restrictions that may have to be imposed if subjective harm were prohibited are endless, the class of freedoms left by the combination of the LA and the prohibition of objective harm is both large and practically important.

One of the best known examples of a freedom in this class is the Freedom of Speech. That is (at least): the freedom to express opinions publicly. If “opinion” is understood in the sense of the definition, this freedom exists due to the LA, since the LA is meant to create the possibility of communication, i.e. the exchange of thoughts, and since an opinion is by definition compatible with the LA. Denial of the right to have an opinion is incompatible with the premises of the LA. Some people may nevertheless feel that other people do not have the right to have or express particular opinions. They may distinguish between “having” and “expressing” opinions. Denial of the right to have an opinion is incompatible with the LA, because the existence of mental notions and the ability to develop them is part of the premises of every LA. Prohibition to express certain opinions means prohibiting some types of communication. This is not equivalent with a denial of their existence. Therefore it may seem not to conflict with a restricted LA. But when important topics are excluded from communication, it is rather doubtful whether people would voluntarily agree with it.

Communicants may hold different opinions about everything they can show not to be objective, and not to affect the possibility of communication. This also applies to norms: communicants may favor different norms, as long as these are compatible with the LA. However, they are bound by all norms which can be shown to be part of, or implied by, the LA.

After having explored the boundaries of the freedom left by the LA, it may be useful to give some examples of groups of freedoms:

- Choosing schools (for one’s children);
- Choosing education programs (field of study, profession; for oneself, one’s children);
- Choosing a job, employer (from what is available);
- Choosing the way one spends one’s free time (time not covered by obligations);
- Choosing the way one spends the part of one’s income left after taxation (including having or not-having a TV or whatever);
- Freedom of association;
- (Other) personal habits and rules: choosing one’s food and clothes; wearing a beard,

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<sup>29</sup> See J.F.C. van Velsen, *Het recht van de logica*, Eburon, Delft, 2003.

moustache, tie, hat, their colors, material etc.  
(where applicable, compatible with the LA).

Some or most of these freedoms are incomplete. One needs food and other things to stay alive, and food etc. costs money. Which does not fall from the sky or grow on trees. One has to do something to get money. One has a large choice of foods, but some food is necessary. This situation is quite general and important. One has to choose from a limited range of schools and jobs. Obviously these limitations are independent of the LA. And even where the LA imposes restrictions such as (some) consistency, it leaves a lot of choice.

In the following cases the choice of one person or group unavoidably affects the possibilities of others, and may even harm them. It is however plausible that ensuing incompatibilities can sometimes be solved by some kind of (informal) regulation, and that this regulation can be accepted with consensus:

- Living where one wants;
- Using roads;
- Getting a job;
- Choosing a seat in a bus or train;
- Elections.

Problems arising from the fact that only one person can occupy a given position at any one time can (but need not) be solved by acknowledging that a certain practice is the best possible solution of a problem, and/or by agreement. For example to keep left and give way to all vehicles coming straight through from your right.<sup>30</sup>

Where regulation is lacking or seems to be biased, the perceived harm may reduce people's willingness to communicate.

To find examples of norms not included in or implied by the LA, one may find it helpful to consider habits in the historical past, other countries, other organizations etc. Such as:

- The rules of the road code, such as the rules for giving way;
- Rules for shop closing times;
- Legal procedures;
- External and internal design of buildings and utensils;
- Clothing habits. Such as wearing a wig or breeches;
- Rules for letters: ways to begin and end them;
- Etiquette.

The most important freedom left by the LA is of course the freedom of communication. The LA creates the possibility of communication, and the norms it implies have no other function than to make and keep meaningful communication possible.

## 9. SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION.

### SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS.

A communication agreement is defined as the combination of a definition of a means of communication and an agreement to use the means of communication according to the definition. Communication assumes a set of premises about communicants and about the possibility to define the communication agreement in an unambiguous way. The premises about the communicants concern their mental capabilities and a minimum of mutual respect, including a freedom of choice. Agreement is by definition voluntary agreement.

Discussion of the subjects of this paper is helped by the use of concepts like objective, subjective, fact, opinion, and logic. These concepts have been redefined in terms of the

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<sup>30</sup> Moreover, it is always useful to review premises. It is no more than a fiction that there can only be one boss. For several prosperous generations, Sparta had two kings and Rome two consuls.

language agreement. No assumption is made about the existence of things like “objective reality”. Where necessary, concepts are defined in terms of something that is well-defined and known, and that communicants have bound themselves to.

The main point of the paper is that (meaningful) communication is possible only between people who accept a (restricted) set of norms. There may not exist norms which are objective in any sense compatible with common parlance. But once one has agreed to communicate, one cannot avoid acceptance of the norms implicit in the communication agreement and its premises. In this way, communication induces a division of norms in two sets: those which are necessary for, and implied by, the communication agreement, and those that are not.

These norms include consistency, honesty and reliability. Communicants should not contradict themselves consciously, should not lie, and should keep promises. The norms are binding for everyone who communicates voluntarily, and for that reason. They apply to all means of communication, including publications. Such as the law. In other words: the law should be consistent, in particular with the norms premised and implied by the LA.

Every form of communication requires compliance with the norms embodied in the LA and its premises. This compliance is necessary for communication, but not sufficient. Not everybody is willing to communicate with everybody. Not even if the person or organization requesting communication promises to respect the LA. In general people will only communicate if they have a reason to. They may want to be sure it will not harm them, or that they benefit in one way or another. In other words: they will in general only agree conditionally. Since the requirements of the LA do not depend on choice or negotiations, the conditions can only be additional to the requirements of the LA. Because of the LA they have to be compatible with them.

People may take offence at the behavior or activities of people or organizations who want to communicate with them. They may require change of this behavior or reduction of the activities before resumption of communication. For convenience, the following will only mention activities, with the understanding that offending behavior can be treated similarly.

People who only take offence at objective effects of activities of other people will only set conditions regarding these activities. They will leave people many freedoms. Generally speaking they leave them free to do anything that does not harm them objectively, directly or indirectly. Despite the “objective”, this leaves room for discussion, for example when the activities cause physical changes in ones neighborhood. However, there need not be discussion about activities not causing harm and not affecting the neighborhood.

People who take offence at subjective effects of activities of other people may set conditions without limit. Examples are reduction of the freedoms of speech, publication, movement, foodstuffs, and of personal habits regarding clothing and hair dress. Depending on the degree of (religious) tolerance, the reduction of freedom may be small, but can also be suffocating, as the examples show. Depending on the cost-benefit ratio, conditions of this type may be acceptable to a certain extent- allowing trade- but may also preclude all communication except about the most elementary matters. Since subjective effects can be denied without infraction of the LA, the conditions cannot be justified on the basis of the LA alone. Being illogical, negotiation about such conditions may be much more difficult than those regarding objective effects.

The present paper provides support and an explanation for the conjecture that there is a wide gap between the situation of “being on speaking terms” and not being on speaking terms. The paper has not only shown that communication implies norms, but also that these norms embody important generally recognized values. So even if the difference between speaking and not speaking may seem rather small or unimportant, it is equivalent with acceptance of a very fundamental set of norms on the one hand, and the complete absence of norms on the other. There is no middle course between speaking and not speaking.

The concept of “communicative group” (society) can be defined as a group in which every member accepts the LA with respect to every other member, at least as regards topics

of mutual interest. Where "interest" is to be understood in the subjective sense: something is of interest to a person if (s)he thinks so. That a person can only decide this for her/himself, and not for somebody else, is part of the agreement.<sup>31</sup> The LA means readiness to communicate about these topics, and therefore to be spoken to and asked questions. For example when one has said or done something that affects someone else, one has both the right and duty to answer. From chapter 7 it follows that a communicative group accepts reasoning as an instrument for explanation and for demonstration of inconsistency. From chapter 6 it furthermore follows that without agreement about the need of consensus, free or unrestricted communication about topics of mutual interest is impossible. Less agreement means less mutual respect, and less communication.

The paper has shown that a communicative group has an objective law.<sup>32</sup>

#### COMPARISON WITH WITTGENSTEIN AND APEL.

Understanding of the paper may be helped by looking at some of the propositions and arguments of Wittgenstein about ethics and language. In his *Tractatus* he states:

«6.4 All propositions are of equal value.

6.41 The sense of the world must lie outside the world. In the world everything is as it is and happens as it does happen. In it there is no value—and if there were, it would be of no value.

If there is a value which is of value, it must lie outside all happening and being-so. For all happening and being-so is accidental.

What makes it non-accidental cannot lie in the world, for otherwise this would again be accidental.

It must lie outside the world.

6.42 Hence also there can be no ethical propositions.

Propositions cannot express anything higher.

6.421 It is clear that ethics cannot be expressed.

Ethics are transcendental.

(Ethics and aesthetic are one.)»<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Which can be seen as a redefined "social contract".

<sup>32</sup> And it has defined what this means. The objective law defined by the LA and its premises is the sum of what the Romans called *ius naturalis* and *ius gentium*. See the *Institutes* of the *Corpus Iuris Civilis*, the introduction of 1.2, and 1.2.1 and 1.2.2.

<sup>33</sup> L. Wittgenstein *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* Ed. C.K. Ogden, Project Gutenberg, [www.gutenberg.org](http://www.gutenberg.org). This edition contains the original German text and an English translation. What follows is the original of the cited paragraphs:

6.4 Alle Sätze sind gleichwertig.

6.41 Der Sinn der Welt muss ausserhalb ihrer liegen. In der Welt ist alles wie es ist und geschieht alles wie es geschieht; es gibt in ihr keinen Wert—and wenn es ihn gäbe, so hätte er keinen Wert.

Wenn es einen Wert gibt, der Wert hat, so muss er ausserhalb alles Geschehens und So-Seins liegen. Denn alles Geschehen und So-Sein ist zufällig.

Was es nicht-zufällig macht, kann nicht in der Welt liegen, denn sonst wäre dies wieder zufällig.

Es muss ausserhalb der Welt liegen.

6.42 Darum kann es auch keine Sätze der Ethik geben.

Sätze können nichts Höheres ausdrücken.

6.421 Es ist klar, dass sich die Ethik nicht aussprechen lässt.

Die Ethik ist transcendental.

(Ethik und Aesthetik sind Eins.)



One thing that is ignored in these citations is that once a language is defined, one has also defined inconsistency. Not only inconsistency between propositions about the world, but between any two well-defined propositions. Including propositions of ethics. So even if there exists no logical or other basis for any norm whatsoever, one may still be able to show (in)consistency of propositions about norms. Another thing that is ignored is the possibility and relevance of true “If..., then...” propositions. Such as: “If one wants to communicate, then one has to abide by a communication agreement”, and: “If one agrees with a communication agreement, then one has to accept the set of norms which is implied by the agreement”. Wittgenstein could object that these propositions are not propositions of ethics. If so, the concept “propositions of ethics” would seem to lose most of its significance. Otherwise the conclusion that there cannot be propositions of ethics is incorrect.<sup>34</sup>

The concept of communicative society defined in the preceding section differs from that of Apel.<sup>35</sup> In the present paper it is defined in terms of voluntary agreement. Apel ignores or doesn't recognize the need of agreement, or the possibility and right of choice. According to Apel, one becomes a member of a communicative society through a “process of socialization” by which the (future) members learn to communicate.<sup>36</sup> According to Apel, people are bound through a process they have undergone involuntarily. They are not given a choice. Apel does not show why this a priori is binding.

July 2009.

Corrected and slightly revised in April 2011 and October 2015.

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<sup>34</sup> There are more problems with the cited text. To mention a few:

1. In the preceding text of the *Tractatus* neither “high”, “higher”, nor “ethics” are mentioned;
2. The argument which concludes that propositions of ethics are impossible does not use anything specifically ethical. It therefore seems to be applicable to propositions of philosophy too. Including the propositions 6.4-6.421;
3. 6.41 seems to use the concept “value” in the sense of “importance”. It does not seem to use the concept in the mathematical sense of “value of a function  $f$  for argument  $x$  ( $fx$ )” as hitherto in the *Tractatus*. If the applicable definition would stipulate the subjective character of the concept, then the argument of 6.41 would not be necessary. If it did not, Wittgenstein could have concluded: “This shows that “value” is a subjective concept”;
4. It is not explained why one should believe that someone who denies the existence of ethical norms means what he says. Wittgenstein ignores the presupposition that he adheres to the language definition.

<sup>35</sup> See note 25.

<sup>36</sup> «Die angedeutete Grundnorm gewinnt ihre Verbindlichkeit nicht etwa erst durch die faktischen Anerkennung derer, die eine Übereinkunft treffen, („Vertragsmodelle“), sondern sie verpflichtet alle, die durch den Sozialisationsprozess „kommunikativen Kompetenz“ erworben haben, in jeder Angelegenheit, welche die Interessen (die virtuellen Ansprüche) Anderer berührt, eine Übereinkunft zwecks solidarischer Willensbildung anzustreben; und nur diese Grundnorm- und nicht etwa das Factum einer bestimmten Übereinkunft- sichert den einzelnen normberechtigten Übereinkünften moralische Verbindlichkeit.» (Band 2, p. 426). Without argumentation.