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Words and Objects

I shall talk about words and objects, but at some point it will turn out that I have also been talking about concepts and practices. The concepts and practices I will be talking about, will be the concepts and practices of practical work. I shall be doing so by discussing one example at some length, and since I have spent the last two months in a fishing village in Northern Norway, trying to learn about the world of coastal fishing, I shall take my example from that world. But the scenes I describe are drawn from my first visit to a fishing village, several years ago. And the one long conversation is a construction out of several short ones.

A short exchange

It's a winter morning in a fishing village in Lofoten. There is a gale blowing and it is ten o'clock. I have just come to the place to try to capture the gray winter light with my camera, following in the footsteps of Matti Saanio, in a humble way. I am not a photographer. I am a philosopher and a townsman, and I know very little about fishing villages, except that there is where most of our coastal fishermen live, that most of them fish from boats less than 40 foot long, and that their catches are processed in the village. The drying racks are to be seen all over the place. I also know that the fishermen leave the village harbour early in the morning and return with their catches late in the afternoon or early in the evening. And that is about all I know about fishing villages.

I am in the village shop buying some bread and a few other articles that I shall need for the next couple of days. While I am about to pay for my purchases, an old man manouvres into the shop, fighting with the gale about the door. Walking towards the counter, he darts a quick glance at the dog lying in the corner, wagging its tail at him, and addresses the shopkeeper:

- I see Fidel is already in.
- Yes, it had its mast broken the other night.
- So that was Fidel.

And that is all. What do I make of the short exchange between the old man and the shopkeeper? I take it stepwise, as I hear it, bracketing the second remark while working on the first, etc.

I see Fidel is already in. Who is Fidel? Is it the dog? I noticed that the old man took notice of the dog before he spoke. And what he then said, did seem to have been drawn upon some observation that he had just made. If Fidel is that dog, then that dog does not usually appear in the shop until after 10 o'clock. But Fidel is also a man's name. A few sixty-eighters called their sons and daughters after the revolutionary heroes, such as Fidel, Rosa, etc. So Fidel may well be a young fisherman that the old man had observed between the houses on his way to the shop, a great many hours before any fisherman should be in. But a fisherman will not be back in the harbour before his boat is back in the harbour, so Fidel might also be the name of a boat. Whatever "Fidel" is the name of, be it animate or inanimate, it is the name of some individual mobile something, the has come in, wherever *in* is, from some place without, wherever *out* is, and has done so *somewhat sooner than expected.*

That's all the old man's remark tells me. There is more to be read from the remark about the situation between the old man and the shopkeeper, but not, I think, about whatever the two of them are talking about.

Not knowing who or what the proper name "Fidel" refers to does not perhaps count as not understanding the remark. But it is not only that I have not as yet identified the bearer of that name. I do not even know whether it is the name of a dog, a man, a boat, or what. And not knowing that is an obstacle to knowing what division between *in* and *without* the remark draws on, and therefore also to knowing what manner of movement the movement from *without* to *in* is. And not knowing either does count as not understanding the remark, or as not quite understanding it.

Yes, it had its mast broken the other night. Fidel must be a boat. Of all the mobile objects that I know of, only boats have masts. Sailing boats certainly have masts, but so do many motor boats and most fishing boats, for whatever reason. So the boat Fidel had its one mast broken the other night, and that is why it has *come in sooner than expected*. And so *the harbour* is probably the place where Fidel is *already in*, and *without* is the sea, or more accurately the village fishing grounds, if Fidel is a fishing boat.

The shopkeeper seems to have heard a question in the old man's remark: "I see Fidel is already in. Do you know why?" The shopkeeper knows why and tells him: "*Because* it had its mast broken the other night."

But if Fidel is a motor boat, which it most certainly is at this time and place of the year, why should having its mast broken be a reason for breaking its schedule, whatever that schedule was, and head for the harbour? There obviously was a schedule of some sort, be it a timetable, if it is a ferry, the regularities of the working day,

if it is a fishing boat, or what. But why break it for a broken mast, when the boat is driven by engine? I see no connections. I cannot make head or tail of it, though I understand that the boat Fidel had its mast broken the other night.

So that was Fidel. I take it that the old man has already heard that a boat had had its mast broken the other night, but that he hadn't been told until now that it was Fidel. Which implies that the old man has not himself seen Fidel in the harbour this morning, or at least not enough of it to see its broken mast. But his first remark did present itself as being based on some observation of his own. What he has seen, then, is either just enough of Fidel to identify it as Fidel, or Fidel's owner, about in the village at this unlikely time of the day.

And that is about as far as I come, trying my very best.

I understand each of the three remarks of this short exchange. If I did not quite understand the first remark until I had heard the second, I certainly did upon hearing the second. I know what the talk is about, the boat Fidel, and I understand what is being said about it. There is no single word or phrase, in any of the three remarks, that I do not understand well, and the grammar of each one of them is equally perspicuous. And should there be more to the understanding of a remark, something that cannot be pinned down to grammar or vocabulary, then that something more will surely be present in my ability to translate it into some other language that I also know well. I do not know that I had any trouble, with either of the three remarks, in translating it from Norwegian into English.

And yet I cannot make head or tail of the exchange. What is it that I cannot make head or tail of? I understand that the shopkeeper's remark is in answer to (what I understand he understands to be) the

old man's implied question. I understand that the old man is enlightened by that answer and so, unless he be a fool, that it does answer his question. It is only that I myself do not see how it does so, that is, how it explains why Fidel is already in, and a great many hours before schedule, if Fidel is a fishing boat. (Fidel had had its mast broken the other night. So, if Fidel is a fishing boat, it had been heading for the fishing grounds this very morning, with a broken mast — before it returned because of the broken mast. Either Fidel is not a fishing boat or I am quite lost.)

Remarks and explanations

We should perhaps make a cut between the remark and the explanation and say that I understand the remark but not the explanation (that it gives). The *remark* that I understand is "*Fidel had its mast broken the other night.*" (I take it to be a wooden mast, and not an aluminum one, since it is said to have been *broken*, not *bent*. And I take it that it broke at some vital point, and not for example 5 cm. below the top, with only ornamental consequences. That it is a wooden mast, and that it broke at some vital point, I count as parts of what I understand when I understand the remark.) The *explanation* that I do not understand is what that remark implies (or what that remark being given in reply to the old man's implied question implies): *that is why Fidel had to head for the harbour.* And here it is the *that is why* bit that I do not understand, whereas the old man does. But what I do not understand, then, is not those very words, "that is why", or "therefore", or "so", etc., but what it is about *Fidel*, or about *fishing boats*, or about *ferries*, or about *boats*, or about *whatever*, that makes it necessary, or wise, or at least intelligible, that having had its mast broken, Fidel should head for the harbour.

So it is my knowledge of the world that is somewhat lacking, not my mastery of my own language. There is consolation in that, because that short exchange turned out to be only the first of a series of exchanges, between villagers, that I could not make head or tail of. Though I am quite sure that I could have produced a good translation of every single remark of each one of the exchanges.

The cut between (our understanding of) remarks and (our understanding of) explanations seems to parallel the cut between (our knowledge of) language and (our knowledge of) the world. As a speaker of my own language I understand the remarks made in it, not any and every remark, but any remark made in everyday language, with only everyday words in it. But when a remark is made in explanation of something, then I shall not understand the explanation unless I am knowledgeable about those affairs of the world that the explanation draws on. So it seems that explanations make up no part of what I understand when I understand what is said in my own language. Understanding explanations is no part of what I learn when I learn to speak. But in learning about the affairs of the world I also learn to explain and to understand the explanations that others give, as much of it, that is, as I have learnt about the affairs of the world. Learning to speak, though it prepares us for the affairs of the world, is something else. Or so it seems. But is it so?

The basic question of the philosophy of language can be framed like this: What is it that we learn when we learn to speak? (What makes the voices that we are surrounded with, as infants, come alive as talk? What prepares us for that? And for what does it prepare us? I see the whole of Wittgenstein's *Philosophische Untersuchungen* as being addressed to that question.) I shall ask a less basic question. When we have learnt to speak, part of what we have learnt is to

master a stock of everyday words. My question is: When we have learnt to master this or that everyday word, what is it that we have then learnt? That is, what is it that we master when we master a word? I shall only talk about words that refer to objects, in the simple sense of solid objects, though what I say about such words will have implications for any word that can be said to refer to something, be it an object, an action, an activity, a situation, an institution, etc. My examples will be of words that refer to artifacts, whether complete artifacts, such as a boat, or incomplete artifacts, such as a mast or a rudder.

One very everyday word of the fishing village is the word "boat". And the boat that is closest to the 8 or 10 year old child is *the rowing boat*. That's the boat that it can handle all by itself. What has the child learnt when it has learnt to master the word "rowing boat"? It has, for example, learnt to handle that word as a substantive, whatever it is that it has then learnt. It has learnt to distinguish rowing boats from boats that are not rowing boats, and also from rafts, which are not boats, but float on water and high enough to carry people or cargo. That is, the child has learnt to recognize rowing boats, those objects, as the objects that we call "rowing boats". Or (is that the same?) it has learnt to use the word "rowing boat" to refer to such boats and to such boats only.

How does the child recognize a rowing boat when it sees one? By its shape, perhaps, or by its shape being one of three or four distinct shapes. But its shape, then, is not simply the shape of the hull, but also its being equipped with thwarts and rowlocks, at least two of them, one for each oar, and two tholepins for each rowlock. That's how the child tells that it is a rowing boat. Saying that, I take it that the two rowlocks are properly placed relative to the each thwart, that the pair of rowlocks are properly placed relative to the thwart, and

that the arrangement of thwart and rowlocks is properly placed within the frame of the hull. And "properly placed" now means: placed so as to make the boat fit for rowing, with the rower seated on the thwart, each of his two hands on each of the two oars, the oars on place in the rowlocks, etc. So in the child's (or in our) preception of the rowing boat as a rowing boat, with the oarlocks etc. in their proper places, there is an understanding of what it is to row it, and of what it takes to row it.

There is a stage in the building of a rowing boat, where the hull has been completed, but where it has not as yet been fitted with thwarts, rowlocks, etc.. That is, the hull has been completed but not the rowing boat, since it cannot as yet be rown. That is, the child who masters the word "rowing boat", has not only learnt to distinguish rowing boats from other boats, but also to distinguish complete or completed rowing boats from rowing boats that still lack some equipment before it can be rown.

In the child's, and in our, perception of the rowing boat there is an understanding of what it is to row. But there is more to that than understanding how the thwart, the rowlocks, etc., are placed to fit the rower's rowing. There is also this, that if you loose your oars, you cannot row. If the foremost tholepin breaks, you cannot row. If the thwart is not there, rowing will at least be awkward, in calm weather, and impossible in rough weather. If there is a hole in the hull, below the water line, the boat will not sink, if it is a wooden boat, but it will be impossible to row. All this, and more, enter into our understanding of what a rowing boat is, and so order our perception of it, or make us perceive the order that there is to it.

To master the word "rowing boat" is to apply that word right, and that implies recognizing a rowing boat when you see one. That, in

turn, implies recognizing the order that there is to it, or enough of it to see that it is in order, ready for rowing, or that it is not in order and not ready for rowing. And the order that I have sketched, if only a fraction of the order that a boatbuilder could tell us about, is perhaps enough for that recognition. It is also enough to make us understand that the recognition of that order is also the recognition of a great many possibilities of explanation. If the rowing boat is in order, it projects the possibility of whatever action or activity that it takes a rowing boat to execute. If it is not in order, some or all of those projections will be severed, depending on the way in which it is not in order. And the recognition of those projections, or of those severed projections, is built into our recognition of a rowing boat as a rowing boat, and so into our mastery of the word "rowing boat", and so into our understanding of remarks where that word is applied.

For example, if someone says, speaking about a particular boat, "Two of the tholepins broke", or "... are broken", then, if you understand that *remark*, you also understand that (with the appropriate context supplied) it works as an *explanation* of either of these situations: The boat came adrift. Peter had to come to the rescue. John is making a new pair of tholepins. Peter could not join the regatta. John had to ring Mary to tell her he would be an hour late. Etc., etc.

In learning to master this or that word, we also learn to recognize the object that the word refers to. If that object is an artefact, but not perhaps a work of art, recognizing that object involves recognizing its place in our activities and what that place requires of it as to its material and design. An oar is not simply a wooden pole that is broadened and flattened towards one end. It is one of a pair, and the pair of them is for rowing with, in a rowing boat. It is only when you know what rowing is and how it is done that you know enough

of what an oar is to recognize an oar when you see one. And then you also know enough to understand that a child may be too weak to handle the oars, that if one oar is lacking you cannot row, that a non-swimmer may keep afloat with one oar under each armpit, etc. That is, if you master the word "oar", you also know enough about oars to make them enter into explanations of this or that.

The distinction between understanding a remark, simpliciter, and understanding the explanation that it gives, still holds. For example, I still do not understand the explanation that the shopkeeper gave, though I understand his remark (the remark that, in that exchange, is that explanation). The parallel distinction between language and the world also holds, for example in the simple sense that the word "rowing boat" is not at rowing boat, that the word "oar" is not an oar, that the remark "One oar is missing" is not itself the situation it describes, etc. But the distinction is not a distinction between two distinct realms, so that we may be at home in one without being at home in the other. We make ourselves at home in language through making ourselves at home in the world. And we learn to explain as we learn to speak. The common understanding that lies beneath our common language is not only a common understanding of the rules of language. It is also a common understanding of the way the world works. That is what the rules of language attach to.

A word and its object

A couple of days after the short exchange, I was still in the village, I came across an advertisement in a newspaper that might well be called a "coastal newspaper". Not only is it printed in a coastal town, it also addresses itself mainly to coastal matters. The advertisement

**TRENGER DU NY
MESAN?**



BESTILL NÅ -FOR LEVERING
NÅR DET PASSER DEG.

FAGMESSIG UTFØRT I
EKSTRA KRAFTIG
PLASTBELAGT NYLONDUK.
HOLDER SEG MYK I KULDE.

PAFØR MALENE OG SEND
HELE ANNONSEN TIL OSS.

NAVN.....

ADR.....

KONTAKT OSS OGSA VED
NYANSKAFFELSE ELLER
REPARASJON AV
PRESENNINGER, SEIL,
KALESJER OG
SILOPRESENNINGER.

UTLEIE AV PRESENNINGER.

Joh. Løvold
1875 WISSENESVEIEN 8000
TOLLBUGT 8 POSTBOKS 762 8001 8002
ENGROS · DETALJ
TLF.081-24080

caught my eyes because it displayed the name of some object in large, capital letters and a picture of that object underneath.

That is how I used to picture objects and their names, the objects below and the names above, and the arrangement showing which object belongs to which name.

The advertisement is an offer, from some firm or workshop, to make a certain article upon request and cut to measure. The word naming the article is "MESAN", and the picture underneath that word is a picture of a MESAN. But now I am really only deleting the quotes from the word naming the word to arrive at the word naming the object (that that word names). I really do not know what a MESAN is, and the picture of it does not help me a lot.

I had not come across this advertisement, or this word even, in any of our national newspapers. So I took it that the word "MESAN" is a word of the coast. And wanting to learn about the coast, I set myself the task of learning that one word, that is, of learning what object it refers to. It is my experience that learning one thing well gives you knowledge of many things. And it does not matter much where you begin.

My question is not: What does the word "MESAN" mean? But: What is a MESAN? That is the more natural question. And at least with words that refer to objects, I do not think there is anything to the first question that an answer to the second question does not answer.

Though the word "MESAN" does not occur in the short exchange between the old man and the shopkeeper, it turned out that when I had learnt that word I understood how the shopkeeper's remark answered the old man's question, and I understood it because I had learnt that word. So a word may well be operative in a remark without occurring there.

Let us see what the text together with the picture can tell us about what a MESAN is. The heading is a question: "Do you need a new MESAN?" Then there is the picture, and it is the black, trapezoid shape that is the picture of a MESAN.

The arrows belong to the text. But all that that black, trapezoid shape tells us about a MESAN, is that it is a (black?) trapezoid shape of something, with that angle to that corner of it. It says nothing about the material of the thing and nothing about its size or sizes. Is the picture drawn in the scale 1: 1, 1: 100, or what? But the question "Do you need a new MESAN?" does indicate that, whatever the thing is, it is subject to wear and tear.

The text below the picture, the first eight lines, says: Order now — for delivery when it suits you. First class workmanship. Made in extra strong, plastic covered nylon cloth. Stays soft in cold weather. Write down the measurements and send the advertisement to us, with your name and address. (The next seven lines of text tell us what else the firm JOH. LØVOLD can do for us.)

This text tells us that the thing comes in different sizes, but it does not give us the scope of variation. Or is the thing a MESAN whatever the size? The material is nylon cloth, plastic covered nylon cloth. Can it come in other material and still be a MESAN? We are told that with that material the MESAN stays soft in cold weather. So I take it that staying soft in cold weather is a requirement, or at least a virtue. And likewise with the extra strong cloth. But then, perhaps, whatever strong or extra strong cloth that stays soft in cold weather will do. But what is strong or extra strong cloth? A strong thread for sowing may be weaker than a rope that is too weak for climbing. So what counts as a strong cloth depends on what sort of wear and tear a MESAN is subjected to. And that we do not know. Except that its staying soft in cold weather indicates that its use is out-of-doors.

There is a practical air about the advertisement, in particular to the wear and tear bits: extra strong cloth, stays soft in cold weather. So I take it that a MESAN is a practical thing, for practical use. In that case its shape is not simply a geometric shape, that can be folded around any of its edges, or turned any number of degrees around any one of its points, without losing any of its properties. It is a practical shape, that is, it is an oriented shape, that perhaps loses all of its non-geometrical properties upon any such transformation. If so, that oriented shape does look like a sail, and everything that is said about the MESAN, in the advertisement, fits well with its being a sail. But it does not look like the sails I have seen on the sailboats in the town harbour. They are, all of them, rightangled triangles. It looks like a sail from a picture book of nineteenth century sailing crafts. There are a few such sailing crafts still around, but probably less than 10 in the whole of Northern Norway, and most of them are owned by nautical museums, who will have their own sailmaker. There can be no market for sails for old sailing crafts, and if there is

no market for them, they don't exist in the market. And there will be no advertisements offering such product. When it comes to the making of the more utilitarian artifacts, such as sails, we should add a fifth cause to Aristotle's four: *the market*. Such things will not be brought into existence if there is no market for them.

And that is about as far as I come, trying my very best. A MESAN is a trapezoid cloth, a trapezoid of the form shown in the picture, made for some practical use, probably out-of-doors.

It looks like at sail for a nineteenth century sailing craft, but being in production and being advertised, it cannot be that. But if it isn't I don't know what it is.

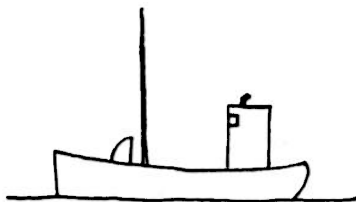
So, mustering my scattered bits of knowledge has not enabled me to identify the thing that the word "MESAN" refers to. It has brought me to an impasse, as did my attempt to understand the short exchange.

Learning about the object

I cut out the advertisement and pocketed it in my wallet. That same evening I found the old man from the short exchange at a table in the coffee house, and I ventured to approach him about the advertisement. He had seen me around with the camera, he told me, and asked what I was doing in life and in the village. I told him, and learnt that he had just pensioned himself off as the skipper of 78 foot netboat. I also learnt that his youngest son had taken over and that his two older sons already had their own boat.

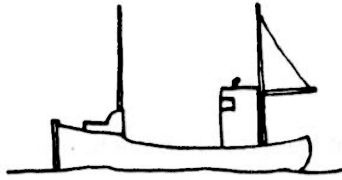
- I don't know what philosophy is, but I do know what a MESAN is. What do you know about fishing boats?
- Not much.
- But you have seen one?
- Yes. I have not been down to the harbour here, but I have seen fishing boats.
- Do you think you could draw one?

He was asking me to show him what I had seen, or what I thought I had seen. I produced my pen and drew a picture on the white space of a newspaper. Like this:

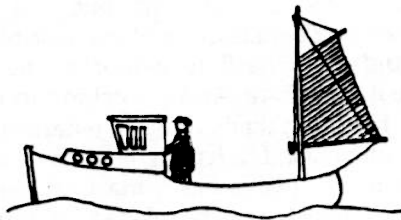


- All right. That's an old type but still around, with the wheelhouse aft. There is the bent exhaust-pipe coming through its roof, and the wheelhouse-door to the starboard, so you cannot see it from here. And the cabin cap is placed before the mast. But that mast, that's roughly where one-masted sailboats have their one mast. If a fishing boat has a foremast, it has two masts, because it always has a mast aft. Also the foremast, if there is a foremast, will be placed on top of the cabin cap, which has a very strong frame for that very reason. That gives you a better working space.

The old man then drew it like this:



- That's the boat you have seen.
- You are right. Now that you have drawn it, I remember.
- Yes, except I haven't drawn the necessary stays, and only one of the necessary ropes. But now that you remember what a fishing boat looks like, I shall draw you a MESAN.
- We already have a drawing of it.
- Right, but that tells you only what it looks like, not what it is.
- All you can draw is what it looks like.
- Let me show you. We begin with a line for the sea and then we place a fishing boat in it, but one of the more recent types this time, with a fore wheelhouse and an aft mast only. Like this:



The wheelhouse has been built in one piece with the cabin roof, and that one piece is made of aluminum. The hull is of wood and so is the mast and its two beams. This boat is, let us say, about 24 foot long, and it is easily handled by one man alone. It is a very common type around here. I am sure you recognize the MESAN.

- So a MESAN is a sail.
- Of a sort, yes.
- But why does an engine-driven boat need a sail?
- Well, the MESAN is not for sailing. With only one sail and in that position, there isn't much you can do, sailingwise.
- I am afraid you have me confused. I know now that a MEASAN is a sail, or a sail "of a sort" as you said. So it needs a mast and a couple of beams. I can also see the point of two of the ropes. The upper short rope is to hold the upper beam in position, and the long rope is to hold the lower beam in position.
- The lower short rope is to fasten the lower beam to the stern. Without that rope, the lower beam would be swinging to and fro, sidewise, as the wind blows, and the whole construction would be of no use.
- That's what confuses me. If that sail is not for sailing then what is the use of that whole construction?
- Remember this is a fishing boat, and it lies still when fishing. Say there is a strong breeze blowing, and that's still fair weather, but it's enough to turn your boat sideways as soon as you stop to fish, if you have no MESAN. And lying side-ways to the waves, there will be a great deal of sideways rolling, which makes for quite uncomfortable fishing, even if it's only a strong breeze.
- That I understand.

- Perhaps you do. Think of yourself seated at your writing desk writing a letter, but with the floor and everything on it heaving to and fro. That's about the situation of the fisher-man at work in a strong breeze without a MESAN.
- Then he better not be without it. But how does it help?
- I'm not quite sure how it does it, but I know what it does. It prevents the waves from turning the boat sideways.
- Is it the waves that do it? I thought it was the wind, the strong breeze.
- It's the waves, helped by the wind. We use the same words, "strong breeze", "small gale", etc., to describe both the force of the wind and the size and manner of the waves. In fact, it's from the manner of the waves that we read off the force of the wind. When there are strong breeze waves, there is a strong breeze wind. In the old days, in the days of the sailing boats, it was the force of the wind that was important. Nowadays, with boats like this, it is the manner of the waves that matters. So I don't know why we still speak about reading off the wind from the waves.
- Thank you, you just gave me a fine example.
- I'm not sure that I know what I gave you a fine example of, but you are welcome to it.
- But how does the MESAN prevent the waves from turning the boat sideways?
- When you stop to fish, or when you are about to do so, you point the boat straight against the wind and the waves. The bow will then cleave the waves and they will affect the boat the same on each side of it. With the boat in that position, the wind will just pass the MESAN on each side of it. Like this:



As the effect on the boat, by the waves, is only roughly the same on each side of it, the boat will soon be turned towards one side or the other. And as the boat is turned towards one side, the MESAN will be edged into the wind, so that there will be a weather side to it and a lee side. Like this:



And now comes the bit I'm not sure about. Some say that the wind on the weather side will push the MESAN back again and so turn the boat up against the wind. Remember that the MESAN is held in a fixed position. This is the explanation that I understand, and well enough to see that that is not how it works. If this were the true story, the MESAN should have been made of cardboard, that stays flat, and not of cloth, that curves and so weakens the pushing of the wind. It is not the pushing that straightens the boat, though it does slow down its turning towards sideways. The other story is about pulling rather than pushing. It tells us that the wind rushing along the lee side of the MESAN creates a vacuum there, which sucks the MESAN towards lee, and so turns the boat up against the waves again. The way the boat suddenly gains momentum and straightens itself fits well with this story. The trouble about it is that I don't quite understand it. If a "vacuum" means no air or very little air, I don't understand how that can come about. So there you are. The story that I don't believe in, that's the one I understand. And the story I believe in, that's the story I don't understand.

But whatever the explanation, this movement to and fro will go on for as long as you are lying still, but with the MESAN up the boat will always straighten itself and never be brought into the very awkward sideways position.

- That story about the vacuum on the lee side, that's the story I have been told about sailing against the wind. Like you, I don't quite understand it, but the man who tried to instruct me is very knowledgeable about such matters. So the MESAN is a sail after all. At least it works as a sail each time it straightens the boat.
- Yes, it works as a sail for a few seconds, and then again five minutes later, and so on. That's why I spoke of it as a sail "of a sort". And now you know what a MESAN is, don't you? The English word, by the way, is "mizzen".
- Yes, now I know what a mizzen is. You have taught me thoroughly. I have one more question though, if you permit me.
- Go ahead.
- When the boat stops to lie still, will it not then be driven backwards by the wind and the waves? And the more so since the mizzen prevents it from being turned sideways?
- It's the boat that you stop, not the engine. The propeller is still working, just enough to keep the boat in position.
- Thank you. I now see what the contribution of the mizzen is, to this type of fishing. The engine, or the propeller, keeps the boat in position, while the mizzen secures the boat's orientation in that position, so that it will keep its bow headed against the waves, or roughly so.
- Right. And without a mizzen, fishing will not only be uncomfortable, it will be dangerous, and certainly in a gale. You were in the shop yesterday, when I asked the shopkeeper about Fidel. May I ask if you understood our short exchange.

- I understood every word of it and yet I couldn't make head or tail of it.
- I thought perhaps that was so. I have noticed that townspeople often know less than eight year old children about fishing and fishing boats, less than eight year old children of a fishing village, I mean. And so often you don't understand the simplest remark about such matters.
- So it is.
- It must be quite strange to hear your own language spoken and not understand it. In my youth, I worked on a Scottish netboat from Ayr. I didn't know five words of English when I first came on board, but two weeks later I was a native speaker of netboat-English, I mean the English that you speak when working on a netboat. When we were seated in the mess room, and not working, the talk could be about anything and everything, and then I was lost, for a long time. But not on deck. For the same first two weeks we had man from Glasgow on board, as a tourist. He was a bank clerk, if I remember rightly. He was often on deck, standing aside so as not to be in the way, but looking at us working. I wonder what he saw. I should have liked to hear him try to describe it, though he couldn't have done so in netboat English. He told the skipper that he couldn't make head or tail of what we were saying. That was on his first day, but he wasn't much better off on his last day. Of course we didn't have time to teach him, but then I didn't receive any instruction either. So there he was, among his own countrymen, and after two weeks he still didn't understand much of what we were saying, while on deck, working. I have thought about that. What I think is that you cannot learn the name of a thing if you don't know the thing it is the name of. He knew nothing about the gear and how to work it, and so he didn't know what our words were about, or what there was to say. I knew the gear and the work as soon as I set my eyes on the deck. A Scottish netboat is not so different from a Norwegian netboat, not on the West coast of Scotland it isn't. So I knew what there was for the words to be about and what there was to say. I didn't know one English netboat word when I first came on board, but they rushed into their right places as soon as I heard them spoken. At least, that

is how I remember it now. When I was told to do something, to tighten a rope, to look up for something, etc. I knew at once what I was told to do, or not to do. It would have worked as well had they said "hey" each time. But then I wouldn't have learnt the language.

- You said you didn't know what philosophy is. You have just given a lecture in philosophy. And a fine lecture it was, you don't mind my saying so.
- I don't mind. I enjoy talking to people who enjoy listening. When I come home, I shall read what my dictionary says about philosophy.
- If it says anything about the philosophy of language, then that is what you have lectured on, with that story about you and the bank clerk.
- Well, I have met a few bank clerks since then. You are only the last in a long series. I sometimes feel like that bank clerk myself, when I listen to the young people talking.
- I am a little less of a bank clerk now than before you explained the mizzen to me. Now that I know what a mizzen is, I understand why Fidel had to return to harbour before time. There was a gale yesterday. But why did Fidel set out for the fishing grounds in the first place, with a broken mast?
- I am not sure why he did it, but there was no gale when he set out, at 6 o'clock, only a moderate breeze. The gale blew up all of a sudden around 8 o'clock.

At this point, but only at this point, did I congratulate myself upon having understood, at last, the short exchange from the day before. My understanding of what it is to fish in a gale, in a 24 foot boat, and alone, was still somewhat lacking. But I counted my understanding of that particular exchange as complete.

To honour my teacher, the only gesture at hand, in that coffee house, was to offer him another cup of coffee. But two weeks later I was able to send him a few of my twilight pictures from that fishing village, together with two lucky shots of Fidel's mizzen at work in a gale, as seen from its weather side.

Concluding remarks

When Arild Utaker asked me to talk to this seminar, he also told me that he wanted me to expand on a particular point that I make in the essay *The two Landscapes of Northern Norway* (Inquiry; no.3, 1988) I make that point in examining the constitution of the concept of a *natural harbour*, or perhaps of that object. The concept of a *natural harbour* is the concept of a particular landscape formation, like the concept of an *island*, or that of a *bay*, but it is not quite on a par with them. Whereas we can teach someone the concept of an *island* by pointing to a few islands, and to a few non-islands such as promontories and skerries, we cannot teach someone the concept of a *natural harbour* without introducing ships and boats. In a world where there are no boats, or only boats that can easily be drawn ashore by their own crews, there is nothing to yield the concept of a harbour. Though nothing is lacking of that which, in our world, goes to make up so many natural harbours.

After a short discussion of the concept of a *natural harbour*, I write, in *The Two Landscapes*:

The method of investigating *the concept* of a harbour, therefore, is this: Situate yourself within the practice that this *object* belongs to, and then investigate *the object* and *its* contribution to that *practice*.

.....

Of a *word* that refers to such an object, there is not much to say beyond that it refers to *that* object, pointing to it.

I apologize for quoting from my own writing, but those are the lines that Arild Utaker wanted me to expand on.

As I understand myself, I have already complied with Arild Utaker's request. I first did it, in a negative way, in my analysis of the short exchange between the two villagers. (The style of that exercise is at least reminiscent of the style of Arne Næss' exercises in what he calls "occurrence analysis", in *Interpretation & Preciseness*.) The point of that first exercise is to show that our *everyday language* does not constitute a realm of its own. It is in every bit of its existence tied to our *everyday world*, with its diverse activities, artifacts, weather, terrain, etc.

To the understanding of a remark, there belongs both an understanding of the situation in which it is made, the occasion for its making, etc., and an understanding of that which the remark is about. In all four of my examples, I speak about our understanding of that which a remark is about, when it is about an artefact. If, for example, the remark is about a coastal fishing boat, then my understanding of that remark is no better than my understanding of coastal fishing boats, that is, of their design, the point of this or that piece of equipment, etc., which, in turn, draws on my understanding, or knowledge, of the world within which they operate, the world of coastal fishing. I make that point in each of the four examples.

It is not grammatical to speak about understanding, or not understanding, a stone. And yet I speak about our understanding, or not understanding of a coastal fishing boat, which, grammatically, is on a par with a stone. But an artefact, such as a coastal fishing boat,

or its mizzen, is not only for something. That which it is for is embodied in its very design, as its *raison d'être*, in its material, in the equipment attached to it, etc. The point of an artefact, that which it is for, is internal to it. It is that which is recognized in the recognition of it. So, when I speak about our understanding of a tholepin, that is awkward only if you are not able to see *the point* of the tholepin embodied in the tholepin. If you still find it awkward, there is a simple way out. Every place where I write "our understanding of x", where x is an artefact, you just take it as a shorthand for "our understanding of the point of x".

Next, I complied with Arild Utaker's request in my analysis of what it takes to recognize a rowing boat as a rowing boat, and so what it takes to master the word "rowing boat" (after you have already learnt to speak). When I speak about an artefact, such as a rowing boat, then I speak about an object that has its own, internal ramifications to artifacts and activities that the remark is not about. There will be the inward ramifications to tholepins, thwarts, etc., and the outward ramifications to rowing, rowable water, landing places, etc.. if I say about a rowing boat, for example that it lacks a tholepin, I do not then speak about its thwarts, or about its oars, or about rowing it. And yet, you will not understand what my remark is about if you do not know what rowing is, that you need oars to row, a thwart in its proper place, etc. So in the very recognition of that which a remark is about, when it is about some artefact, there is a recognition of its standard place in our activities, of what we can do, if it is in order, or of what we cannot do, with that particular exemplar, if it is not in order. That is, in the very recognition of the object, there is a recognition of a great many explanatory schemes, The object is loaded with them, with its being made of that material, its being of that design, in that position, etc.

We are about to launch the rowing boat when I notice that there is a tholepin lacking, and say so: "There is a tholepin lacking". In

saying that I say, or imply, that we cannot row that boat (until we have found another tholepin (to replace the one that is lacking). I also imply that otherwise that boat is in order (or enough so for us to launch it and row). The last implication is of the sort Grice calls a "conversational implicature". It is detachable. But the first implication is not. We are about to launch that boat, but I cut short my launching motions with the remark "There is a tholepin lacking". That remark explains why there is no point in launching that boat. It cannot be rowed, not for as long as there is that tholepin lacking. If you don't see that that is what I am saying, or that that is implied by what I am saying, then you don't understand what I am saying. That is, if that remark of mine is not understood as that explanation, then it isn't understood. That is, with no understanding of the world of rowing, with its network of implications between its gears and its activities, and between gear and gear, there is no understanding of that remark either.

Can the existence of one object imply the existence of another? Oars come in pairs and the existence of one of a pair implies the existence of the other. If the other has been destroyed, it must be replaced. If not, the one that is left will lose its existence as an oar. Within a given rowing technology, the existence of one tholepin implies the existence of three more. It takes four tholepins to make up the necessary pair of pairs, one pair to each side of the gunwale of a rowing boat (and in their proper position with respect to rowing the boat, etc.) In that way, the existence of one tholepin implies the existence of a rowing boat, and so of a boatbuilder with a boatbuilder's tools and materials, and so, within a given technology, of trees. That one tholepin also implies the existence of rowing, and so of a rower. If there are none of these things, within that world, then that tholepin-looking object is not a tholepin, not within that world.

Within a given realm of human activities, or within a given practice, there is a network of implications between activities and activities, between activities and artifacts, between artifacts and their natural surroundings, and between artifacts and artifacts. Within that realm,

each such implication exhibits a necessary truth. What is not necessary, is the existence of that realm. But that contingency does not disturb any of the local necessities within that realm. There might have been no rowing boats. Yes. And then that network of implications teaches you what else there would not have been, and what else there might not have been.

Are these necessary truths truths of language? That is, truths by definition? Only if you incorporate a good understanding of what a rowing boat is, and of what it is to row one, into our understanding of the words in question, "rowing boat", "oars", "rowing", etc. We can do that. But that is not what lies behind the standard examples of truths of language, or behind any of the standard analyses of such truths. So, within a standard understanding of what a truth of language is, they are not truths of language.

Third, I complied with Arild Utaker's request when I reported to you how I learnt what a mizzen is (as far as i learnt it, that is) or what I had to learn to learn that. When philosophers of language speak about the meaning of a word, they don't say, or not anymore, that it is what the word stands for. Perhaps because that formula has (been thought to have) lured us into searching for objects where there are none, or worse, into finding objects where there are none. But also because, even when the objects are there, such as mizzens, we don't seem to be on the right track if we say, for example when I am hoisting the mizzen, that I am hoisting the meaning of the word "mizzen". Meanings are not made of for example cloth, not even of cloth that stays soft in cold weather. The standard formula, nowadays, is that the meaning of a word is its contribution to the sentences in which it is applied. I have not applied this formula, though, and I am not sure that I know how I could have let that formula guide me in my search for the meaning of the word "MESAN", or the word "mizzen".

In the *Blue Book* Wittgenstein replaces the question "What is the meaning of a word?" with the question "What is an explanation of

the meaning of a word?" For any particular word, Wittgenstein's question is, I think, "How do we teach someone the meaning of that word?" And for a particular teaching situation that question should, in turn, be taken to say; for example: "What do I have to teach him to teach him the meaning of that word?" The answer to that is, it depends on what he knows already. It also depends on what word it is, and on what he needs it for.

Fidel is in the harbour, together with most of the other fishing boats. You are looking for Fidel but you are not quite sure what it looks like. I tell you it's the only one with a yellow mizzen, but you don't know what a mizzen is, and I tell you it's the sail on the aft mast. And that's enough for you to find Fidel. It is perhaps also enough for you to think that you have learnt a new word. And so you have, since now you know what the object called by that name looks like, or what that object is called. But you may still be lost in most conversations involving that word, at least in the fishing village. That's because you still don't know what a mizzen is. So many remarks will draw on implications that do not float from that object as you know it. Your mizzen is still too much of a stray object. It has not as yet found its place within its proper network of implications.

There isn't more to be said about *the word* "mizzen" than: "*that* is what that word refers to" — pointing to a mizzen, or perhaps drawing one, in the manner of the old skipper. If that does not bring you far, it is your understanding of *that object* that is lacking. And so it is with all the words that refer to artifacts.

Explaining such words, the very first move is to point to their objects. That may not achieve much, not even a clear delineation of the object. Never mind, the work has just begun. The real task is to teach you about that object. Wittgenstein's question about explaining

the meaning of a word must be transformed into a question about explaining the point of an artefact, the artefact that the word refers to: What do I have to teach you to teach you the point of that artefact? And the question about the point of an artefact, is the question: What does that artefact contribute to the activities in which it is applied?

With the mizzen, and a little more than halfway through my lesson, I tried to sum up its contribution in this way: "The engine, or the propeller, keeps the boat in position, while the mizzen secures the boat's orientation in that position, so that it will keep its bow headed against the waves, or roughly so." When we have understood how the mizzen secures that orientation, and the point of its being so secured, then we have understood what the mizzen contributes to that type of fishing. And only then have we recognized that object in its place within its proper network of implications. Only then do we see that object as the repository of possible explanations that it is, i.e. among the fishermen, i.e. in reality.

Permit me one last question. Someone asks you about the word "mizzen", about what it means or what it refers to. What do you have to teach him to teach him the meaning of that word? Part of the answer is, of course: It depends on what he knows already.

Setting out to teach me, the old skipper's first move was to find out what I already knew, and that's where he began. With a five year old girl from some inland town, he might have had to begin with teaching her about boats, about the fish that swim in the sea, about various ways of catching fish and why we try to catch them, etc. They might both have a long way to go, passing a great many words and a great many explanations, before they arrive at the point where the skipper can teach her what a mizzen is, or the meaning of the

word "mizzen". What, then, is the meaning of the word "mizzen", if it is what you have to teach someone to teach that someone that meaning?

Does all that the skipper has to teach the child to teach her the meaning of the word "mizzen", belong to the meaning of that word? Or should we make a cut somewhere, between that part of the teaching that *prepares* the child for being taught the meaning of the word "mizzen" and that part which is the very teaching of it? If you say *yes*, clearly we must make that cut, then where do we make it? I am not sure that we need to answer that question, or that we need to ask it.

Whatever the child has already learnt about the sea, about objects that float and objects that sink, and perhaps about swimming and drowning, *she brings all that with her* when the skipper teaches her about rowing boats, sailing boats and motor boats, in that order, and she brings *all that* with her when she learns about fish, fishing, fishing boats, etc. But what is it that she will bring with her, from one chapter to the next, if all that she has to go by is what the skipper has told her? How do we learn what it is that she has learnt, if all we have to go by is what she can reproduce of what the skipper has told her? To secure her knowledge of what a rowing boat is, for example, and to secure his own knowledge of her knowledge, the skipper had better teach her to row – first in calm weather and then in a moderate breeze, so that she will learn what the wind and the waves do to a rowing boat, about her own strength and so about the strength of the wind, etc. One day, when she is rowing against the wind and the waves, the skipper should ask her to pull in the oars. That will teach her about sideways rolling, and with a little explanation, the skipper will teach her how the boat is turned sideways. Etc. And even the smallest of rowing boats can be

equipped with a mast and a sail. Etc. The skipper will now be teaching the inland town child the same way as the children of the fishing village are being taught. He will learn from seeing her at work what she has learnt and what she has yet to learn, and he will know what skills and understanding she has to bring with her to the next stage.

There will be an interplay of contingencies and necessities in this story, and as the child gets a firmer hand with the oars and a sharper eye for the space of handling them, some of the contingencies will transform into necessities. E.g. the oars, the oarlocks and the thwart will connect into one group of objects and places, internally connected via the activity of rowing. That group is hardly detachable from the rowing boat, or the rowing boat from the sea, etc. With what she learns when she learns to row, the child will also learn to recognize such internal connections. Objects will connect with their proper activities into groups, and groups will connect with groups. She will learn such truths as: You cannot row with one oarlock missing. It is stupid to place the thwart on line with the oarlocks. The boat must be in the sea before you can row it. Etc. She will perhaps learn some such truths Meno-wise, so that it may take a Socrates to teach her some of what she already knows.

When she comes to the mizzen, the mizzen will connect with the mizzen mast, with the position of the mizzen mast within the construction of the boat, with the sort of weather and the sort of fishing that requires a mizzen in that sort of weather, etc. With the mizzen securely placed within its proper network of internal relations, and a few strong contingencies, why try to detach it from that network, in order to get a simple, one-piece object for the word "mizzen" to refer to, or to mean? Cut loose from its proper network, that object is not a mizzen. It cannot, cut loose, work as a mizzen,

and it is not, cut loose, intelligible as one. That object derives all its intelligibility from that network. As that intelligible object, the mizzen implies its proper network and is implied by it.

The geometrical terms "point", "line", "angle", etc., may be said to be defined by the axioms pertaining to points, lines, angles, etc., and so also by the theorems that we derive from those axioms. We may perhaps venture an analogous view of words that refer to artifacts. For example, that the word "mizzen" is defined by the necessary truths pertaining to mizzens. Only it is through our experience with mizzens, in our working life at sea, that we learn the truths about mizzens. After several years of fishing we may still discover new truths about mizzens. (It hasn't been in *that* weather before.) As we understand more about what the mizzen contributes to what, and about what it takes for a mizzen to do so, some of the truths we have learnt transform into necessary truths. Those truths, that is my proposal, go to define the word "mizzen", or rather, the object that that word refers to.

The realm of those truths is identical with the network of internal relations within which the mizzen has its place. As it takes a great deal of experience to come to see those truths, and to see them as necessary truths, it takes a great deal of experience to come to see the mizzen for what it is. And so all that we have to learn to learn what a mizzen is, belongs to the concept of a mizzen, or to that object.

But the very first step, learning about the word "mizzen", is simple: you just point to a mizzen and say: that's what the word "mizzen" refers to. That's all you have to do to introduce *the word*. And that's all we can do by way of explaining a *word*: introduce it. It does not take you far, either in your understanding of what a mizzen is or in

your understanding of exchanges about mizzens, among fishermen. But now that you know what object that word refers to, you can go on from there to learn about that object.