The Autonomy of the Linguistic Sign

1. Utterance and sign row

Suppose that, in a prehistoric burial chamber in south-west Cornwall, I discover the following marks carved on one of the granite slabs which hold up the roof:

\[ \text{\(\mathcal{M} = \mathcal{Y} = \mathcal{L}\)} \]

I ask myself: are they merely marks made at random by a stonemason testing a chisel, or do they collectively make up an utterance in a language whose script this is? To ask this is to ask a question about history. But it is a question which implicitly suggests a prior question of a different and philosophically puzzling sort. What is it for a sequence of marks, or for that matter a sequence of vocal noises, to ‘be’ or to ‘constitute’ an utterance in a language?

This, it seems to me, is the central question of the philosophy of language. On the face of it it may not appear a very ‘philosophical’ question. Indeed, to anyone with an ordinary capacity to smell a rat, it may seem that such a question demands to be answered not by a philosopher but by some species of natural scientist; by a linguist, perhaps, or a psychologist. There are two reasons why this apparently sound and progressive proposal ought to be resisted. The first is that
our question is a very abstract and general one: so abstract and general, in fact, that linguists and psychologists, who must, understandably enough, conduct themselves as practical people responsible for the advancement of reasonably well defined bodies of concrete and detailed knowledge, spend very little time discussing it. (It may occur to an especially perspicacious critic that this may be because they know the answer to it. It would be nice if this were so, but it is not.) This leaves it by default to the philosopher, in his hereditary role of Curator of the Department of Foolish (but also, sometimes, fundamental) Questions. The second, and better, reason is that it is a question of fundamental interest and importance for philosophy itself, and one upon which very little direct light can be obtained from linguistics or psychology as they are at present constituted — which is not, of course, to say that linguistics and psychology may not provide, incidentally, a good deal of information which needs to be taken into account in philosophical discussion. English-language philosophy since the turn of the century has been quite largely a meditation upon the nature of language, so there is a sense in which all other philosophical questions have become or been made secondary to this fundamental question. I shall try to sketch in some, at least, of these connections as we go along.

2. The autonomy of language

Recent, and for that matter traditional, philosophy offers us a number of direct and fairly elaborately worked-out answers to our primary question. I shall go on to consider some of these in the next few chapters. Before doing so it will be worth spending a little time on a possible answer which will no doubt seem so trivial as scarcely to count as philosophy, although it has the advantage of being true, or, rather, truistic. It is not as trivial as it seems, however, and in discussing it we can uncover some important conditions which must be met by any proposed solution to our central problem, if it is to stand any chance of being a successful solution.

The answer I have in mind is this. The marks (or any subset of them) constitute an utterance in a language just in case some person or other, if he were now living and were to be presented with the marks, would recognise them as constituting an utterance in his language.