Paper in public lecture series on communication in 1989, published by CUP as *Ways of Communicating*.

Not intended for philosophers, but has implications for Gricean theory of communication. I suspect looking at telling from tellee’s rather than teller’s point of view avoids regress objections to Grice. Shan’t say how but maybe deal with in discussion.

First must say something about truth, apart from being great and mighty above all things, to show why we want it told.

Needn’t define it: just need two truisms about it. Both have been proposed as definitions, but all I need is that they’re true of truth, and that’s just obvious.

(1) Aristotle’s truism. ‘To say of what is, that it is, or of what is not, that it is not, is true’.

E.g. to say of what is in fact honey that it is honey, or of what isn’t honey, that it isn’t honey, is true.

This is obviously true, and not only of statements but also of beliefs, which play a crucial role not only in telling the truth but also in an essential preliminary to that, namely finding it out.

Finding out the truth means getting true beliefs oneself. telling it means giving other people our true belief - often of course, though as we shall see by no means always, by making true statements.

So I shall use Aristotle’s truism in the following form, to cover both beliefs and statements: To believe or say truly is to believe or say of what is (e.g. honey) that it is,

slide 1: Truth (top)

and of what is not, that it is not

slide 1: truth (Bottom)

That’s my first truism. My second is one I need to answer the question: why should we want to be told the truth? Or more generally, why do we want to find it out, whether by being told it or otherwise.

I.e. why do we want to get true beliefs rather than false ones? What’s the virtue of truth as a property of belief?

It isn’t a moral virtue. True beliefs aren’t generally better than false ones in any moral sense. There’s nothing inherently wrong in having mistaken beliefs about matters of fact.

The virtue is practical. What is generally and inherently good about having true beliefs is that they’re useful in the following sense:

truth is that property of beliefs which ensures that the actions they make us perform will succeed. That’s my second truism about truth.

This truism, unlike the first one, needs explaining. To explain it, I must say something about how our beliefs cause our actions.

And the first thing to say about that is that, on their own they don’t. A belief of mine will only cause me to act when conjoined with an appropriate desire. E.g.

slide 2: desire + belief causes action

What actions a belief causes will of course depend on what desire they combine with: e.g. Pooh’s desire to avoid being tempted by the sight of honey would cause him not to go to where he believes it is.

But with a given desire, a given belief will cause the same action whether or not the belief is true. E.g. Pooh’s belief that the honey’s in the cupboard will make him go there whether or not his belief is true - i.e. given Aristotle’s truism, whether or not the honey is there.

So the truth of a belief does not effect what actions that belief will combine with various desires to cause. What it does affect is whether those actions succeed.

If Pooh’s belief about where the honey is is true, the action it combines with his desire for honey to cause - going to the cupboard - will succeed. I.e. it will get him the honey he wants.

slide 3: desire + true belief causes successful action (top)

Whereas if his belief about where the honey is is false (i.e. not true), his action will fail: it won’t get him the honey he wants.

slide 3: desire + true belief causes successful action (bottom)

In short, an action succeeds when the object of the desire that combines with some belief to cause that action is achieved. And that’s what the truth of the belief with which that desire combines to cause that action ensures.

that’s why we want true beliefs. We want them because truth is what makes our beliefs useful to us in this precise sense.

Indeed in many cases we need true beliefs simply in order to survive: since our survival depends on our actions achieving the objects of our most basic desires, such as the desire for food, warmth, etc.

Given then that we need and want our beliefs to be true, how should we get them? How should we get the true beliefs we need in order to act successfully to achieve the objects of our desires?

Well obviously we either get them for ourselves or we get them from other people. We get them from other people by communication; and we get them for ourselves by thinking or by observation or both.

True beliefs that we could get just by thinking (beliefs about logic and mathematics) I’m going to ignore. To keep things relatively simple I’l stick to true beliefs that we could get by observation, even if in practice we actually get most of them by being told, i.e. by communication.

How then do we get true beliefs of this sort. And how in particular do we get them by communication? That’s the question. But to answer it I must first digress to say something about how we get these beliefs by observation.

And I’m digressing, I should say, not just because observation comes before communication, although it does: since before an observable truth can be communicated, someone somewhere must get that true belief - or something from which it can be inferred - by observation.

nor am I digressing just because observation is a necessary part of communication, though again it obviously is: since communications obviously can’t work if they’re not observed. E.g. I obviously can’t tell you anything if you can’t hear what I’m saying.

No, the real reason for starting with observation is that communication doesn’t merely depend on observation in these two ways. In effect it is observation, of a kind. As we shall see, being told an observable truth is in effect just one way among many of indirectly observing it.

So in order to understand how observable truths are communicated, we must first understand how they are observed: first directly, and then indirectly. Only then will we be able to see what’s so special about observing them by being told them. That’s the reason for this digression.

So: how do we get true beliefs by observation? Well, the simplest way, when it’s feasible, is by direct observation. You just look and see, or hear or touch or smell - or taste:

slide 4: how to get a true belief (1): direct observation

Now the first thing to note about this observation of Pooh’s is that it is, amongst other things, an action: something Pooh does.

And this means, as I’ve already remarked, that it’s caused by some combination of desire and belief: in this case by Pooh’s desire not just for honey but for a true belief about whether what’s in the pot is honey, and his belief that the way to do this is to taste what’s in the pot.

So considered as an action, Pooh’s observation will succeed if this belief of his is true: i.e. if tasting what’s in the pot will in fact make Pooh believe that it’s honey if it is honey and not if it’s not.

If his tasting what’s in the pot will do that, his action will succeed: it will achieve the object of his desire by giving him a true belief about whether what’s in the pot is honey. It will be a good observation.

Now what will make this observation good (if it is) is a causal link between what’s being observed (what’s in the pot) and the belief the observer (Pooh) gets about it.

And what sets up that causal link in this case is the fact that honey has a distinctive taste, which Pooh will recognise. So if what’s in the pot is honey, its taste will cause Pooh to believe that it’s honey.

And if it isn’t honey, the absence of that taste will cause Pooh to believe that it isn’t. So either way he will make a good observation: the belief that he gets will be true, because it will be caused by the very fact (that what’s in the pot is or isn’t honey) which makes it true.

And that in general is what makes direct observations good. The facts that cause the beliefs these observations yield are the very facts that make those beliefs true.

But observations needn’t be direct to be good. Instead of looking directly for something one wants to get a true belief about, one can look instead for a sign.

By ‘sign’ I should say I mean nothing technical. I mean only what anyone would mean by calling clouds a ‘sign’ of rain - or bees a ‘sign’ of honey.

slide 5: how to get a true belief (2): Indirect observation

This is an indirect observation. Pooh’s belief in the presence of honey is caused, not by the honey itself, but by something else - bees - which he takes to be a sign of honey.

What he directly observes are the bees; and since he knows what bees look like, that observation, we may assume, will be a good one: the belief it makes the bees give him, namely that they are bees, will be true.

And it’s from that belief that Pooh gets his belief that there’s honey: by inferring it, via his belief that bees are a sign of honey: in other words, that there’ll be honey if and only if there are bees.

And as in this case so in general. One makes an indirect observation by first making a direct observation of a sign, and then from that, making an inference to what one believes the sign signifies.

slide 6: how to make an indirect observation

For a indirect observation to be good, therefore, both parts of it must be good. The direct observation must be good, and so must the inference. I.e. it must preserve the truth of its premise (that the sign is or isn’t present) in its conclusion (that what the sign signifies is or isn’t present).

And it will do that provided, as a matter of fact, the sign is correlated with what we take it to signify: i.e. provided that, at least in Pooh’s neck of the woods, the bees actually are where, and only where, there’s honey.

If that’s so, then Pooh can get true beliefs about honey just as well by observing bees as he can by observing honey directly. Either way, the beliefs he gets about honey will be true, which is what matters.

And of course we too get many of our beliefs by indirect observation in just this way: either because we don’t want to make a direct observation, or because we can’t.

We might for example want to find out if it’s freezing outside but not want to go outside to feel the cold directly. So instead we make an indirect observation by looking through the windows for signs of freezing, such as frost.

Or we might want to know just how cold it is, to within a degree Celsius; and then we have no choice. We can’t observe that directly, by how cold it makes us feel. We aren’t that good at distinguishing temperatures that close together.

So we have to observe this indirectly, by directly observing a thermometer, and inferring that the temperature is what the thermometer says it is.

In both these cases we are essentially doing just what Pooh does when he observes honey indirectly, by inferring its presence from that of the bees he observes directly.

There are differences, of course, but they’re really irrelevant. one irrelevant difference is that thermometer reading are caused by the temperatures they signify, whereas with bees and honey it’s the other way round.

What correlates bees with honey is that the bees cause the honey, not vice versa: here it’s the sign that causes what it signifies, not the other way round, as with thermometer readings and temperatures.

This obviously doesn’t matter, because what matters for the goodness of the inference from sign to what it signifies is just that they’re correlated, not how that correlation is produced.

Another and more importantly irrelevant difference is that thermometer readings are linguistic. They say what they’re signs of. I.e. every reading on a good thermometer is correlated with the temperature it names, so that e.g. the reading ‘18˚C’ is correlated with that very temperature.

Whereas bees of course, like frost, aren’t linguistic signs: they don’t say what they’re signs of. But why should they? You can learn to use a sign without its having to remind you every time you use it what it signifies.

Thus Bees needn’t be labelled ‘honey’ any more than honey pots do: all that’s needed in each case is a memorably distinctive sign.

So that difference too is irrelevant. Al we need, in order to make a good indirect observation of something, is a learnable correlation between it and something else we can observe directly.

And that’s also the main thing we need in order to be told the truth. Suppose e.g. that someone tells Pooh that there’s honey. That statement - our first truism about truth - tells us - will be true if and only if there really is honey.

So in order to be true, the statement that there’s honey must be correlated with what it says it signifies: namely, honey. Otherwise it will be false - and so therefore will the belief that there’s honey which Pooh gets by believing what he’s told.

In other words, the relation between Pooh and the statement which tells him that there’s honey is essentially the same as the relation between Pooh and the bees which he uses to observe indirectly that there’s honey.

Indeed from Pooh’s point of view - that of the tellee - being told the truth just is finding it out by a certain kind of indirect observation, as we can see from the next slide:

slide 7: How to get a true belief (3): Ask an informant

Here, Pooh gets Rabbit to say something (‘Yes’) which he hears - i.e. directly observes - and understands - i.e. takes to say as a response to his question, that it’s a sign of honey. And from that Pooh infers that there really is honey.

But this is exactly what he does when he infers the same belief from his observation of bees. And in both cases what really matters is that the sign he observes directly - the bees, or what Rabbit says - should be correlated with honey, so that the belief he infers from the sign will be true.

That’s the bottom line. And therefore Pooh needn’t in fact have his question answered by a communication at all. He needn’t be told that there’s honey: he can just as well be shown that there is, as in the next slide:

slide 8: how to be *shown* the truth

I.e. instead of being told the answer to his question, Pooh can be shown - or told - how to answer it himself by making an observation (direct or indirect, doesn’t matter). And as a way of getting the true belief he’s asked for, that is of course just as good as being told.

So what’s the difference? Why isn’t telling just a kind of showing (or vice versa)? Well, the difference is that, though they both serve the same end - giving someone a true belief - they do it by quite different means.

In particular, when Pooh is shown that there’s honey, he doesn’t get that belief from piglet. In fact Piglet needn’t have that belief: he might have no idea whether there’s honey until they both look.

Whereas when Rabbit tells Pooh whether there’s honey, Pooh does get his belief from rabbit: and specifically, from what Rabbit himself believes.

Because Pooh doesn’t in fact infer the presence or absence of honey directly from what Rabbit says. he infers it indirectly, via what - he believes - Rabbit believes about it.

For example, let’s suppose - for a change - that what Rabbit tells Pooh is that honey’s off:

slide 9: how to be told the truth (1): explicitly

Pooh hears - i.e. directly observes - what Rabbit says (‘Honey’s off’), and understands it: i.e. correctly takes it to say that what it’s a sign of is that honey’s off. And from that he infers first that Rabbit believes that honey’s off; and then from that, that honey really is off.

that’s what distinguishes being told the truth from finding it out by other means. When Pooh infers honey from bees, it’s a direct inference: bees, therefore honey. The bees’ beliefs about the matter - if any - don’t come into it.

Whereas when Rabbit tells him honey’s off, Pooh’s inference is indirect*.* It goes via Rabbit’s belief. Pooh believes what Rabbit says only because he believes that Rabbit believes it too. In other words, he gets his belief from Rabbit’s.

that’s what makes this a communication: the way the teller’s belief is passed on to the tellee. That’s the difference that matters between Pooh’s believing Rabbit and his believing his bees. The other differences between the two situations are irrelevant.

In particular, it’s quite irrelevant that Rabbit tells Pooh that honey’s off by saying it’s off - i.e. by producing a linguistic sign that it’s off - whereas bees, as I’ve remarked, are a non-linguistic sign.

For that, as we’ve seen, doesn’t make bees any less usable as a sign. And just as indirect observation in general doesn’t need linguistic signs, nor does the special case of communication.

language is in fact in principle, and quite often in practice, unnecessary for communication.

Rabbit doesn’t have to use language to tell Pooh that honey’s off. He needn’t say anything at all to do that. He could just shake his head, or sigh - or do anything in fact which Pooh would rightly take to correlate with Rabbit’s believing that honey’s off.

As for example Eeyore did when Pooh asked him if there were any thistles:

slide 10: how to be told the truth (2): implicitly

Eeyore’s sigh isn’t a linguistic sign. It’s like bees: it doesn’t say what it’s a sign of. But it is a sign nonetheless, and what it signifies is that Eeyore believes he’s out of thistles: simply because he will sigh - when the subject’s raised - if and only if he does believe that.

And because Pooh has learned this correlation - just as he’s learned the correlation between bees and honey - Eeyore can tell Pooh that thistles are off simply by sighing, without using language at all.

In short, it’s not the use of language that distinguishes being told the truth from other ways of finding it out: it’s the fact that when we tell people the truth, we do so by getting them to believe what we believe.

That, I say, is what telling the truth is. But why do we do it? Why do we have this practice of telling the truth by giving other people our beliefs?

Or - a better question to start with - why do we have the practice of getting our beliefs from other people? Why in short do we want to be tellees? And then why, as tellers, when we want to tell other people the truth, do we do so by telling them instead merely what we believe?

The first of these two questions - why do we want to be tellees - is relatively easy to answer. The answer lies basically in the fact that we know that everyone wants their own beliefs to be true: because truth is what makes our own beliefs useful to us in the way I’ve described.

So we all know that other people too will try to get their own beliefs by means that will maximise their chances of being true: like Pooh getting his belief about what’s in his honey pot by tasting it.

So if I believe that you got your belief - about whether there’s honey in the pot - by some such means which I can’t use (because I can’t get at your honey pot) - then I will naturally want to adopt your belief, in order to acquire with it its high chance of being true.

In other words, the fact that we get most of our beliefs from people we believe are better able to get them for themselves, is just a special case of the division of Labour: in this case of epistemic labour, the labour of acquiring knowledge - by which I mean reliable true beliefs, i.e. true beliefs got in a way that gives them a high chance of being true.

And That’s why, when I want to be told something, the belief I want to get is my teller’s belief. There’s no mystery about that. But that doesn’t explain why, when I want to tell other people the truth, I want them to believe what I believe.

Because what I really want, after all, is to give them a true belief; and I know very well that, although I want my own beliefs to be true (because that’s what makes them useful to me), we can all make mistakes.

More to the point, I don’t suppose my own way of getting beliefs to be always more reliable than other people’s: if I did, after all, I should never want to be a tellee.

So I don’t flatter myself that someone who gets my beliefs will automatically get true ones. And yet, when I want to tell people the truth, what I will in fact do is try to get them to believe what I believe. Why?

There’s one very bad answer to this question, which is depressingly common, and goes like this. ‘We can’t really know what actually goes on in the world - like whether there really is honey: all we really know - and therefore all we can really tell other people - is what we believe goes on in the world.’

That’s nonsense. We know far more about what goes on in the world - i.e. we have far more reliable true beliefs about that - than we do about what we believe about all that.

The reason is of course that most of the time we just have our more or less reliable beliefs about honey, thistles, and so on. We mostly don’t have - if only because we mostly don’t need to have - on top of all that, beliefs about what those beliefs of ours are. Why should we?

So the fact is that, at any one time, most of the many reliable true beliefs we have that constitute our knowledge of the world, are beliefs that we don’t at that moment know we have.

So it’s just not true that we know less about what’s going on than about our own beliefs about what’s going on. It’s absolutely the other way round.

So that can’t be why, when we want to tell people the truth about what’s going on, what we actually do is try to give them our beliefs about what’s going on.

No the real reason is this. Telling the truth about something is an action, caused like all actions by a combination of desire and belief: in this case, of a desire to tell some truth and a belief about what the relevant truth is.

E.g. suppose Rabbit wants to tell Pooh the truth about honey, and believes the relevant truth to be the proposition P, that there is some.

But by our first truism about truth, for it to be true that there’s some honey is just for there to be some honey. So for Rabbit to believe that P is true is just for him to believe P. That’s why his desire to tell Pooh the truth will in fact make him tell Pooh what he himself believes, whether or not that is actually true.

This is almost right, but not quite. Telling the truth is a bit more complicated than this. For Rabbit doesn’t just want to say what’s true: he wants to make Pooh believe it. And as an experienced tellee himself, Rabbit knows that Pooh will only believe what he says if Pooh believes that he believes it too.

So Rabbit’s immediate desire is to give Pooh a true belief about what he, Rabbit, believes. So what Rabbit will tell Pooh is not necessarily what he actually believes but what he believes he believes.

But since - Rabbit believes - Pooh will in fact believe that Rabbit believes what he says, this needn’t make Rabbit say ‘I believe there’s honey’: it need only make him say ‘There’s honey’.

Ditto for the rest of us. When we want to tell the truth by saying things, what we do is say not what we believe but what we believe we believe (which as Freud and others have remarked isn’t always the same thing).

But even so, since we generally expect people to believe that we believe what we say, we just say it: we don’t preface everything we say with ‘I believe’ or ‘I think’ - even though, as Kant remarked, we always can.

That, I’m telling you, is how we tell the truth. But I fear you may not believe me, if only because what I’ve said make the process sound unbelievably (literally unbelievably) complicated.

After all, we all know how often we do tell the truth, and it certainly doesn’t seem as complicated as I’ve implied. But it is.

It only seems simpler because we aren’t conscious of most of the mental processes I’ve been describing. But we have learned from Freud and others that much of our mental life is far more complex than we are ever aware of at the time.

So it’s no objection to what I’ve said that it isn’t immediately confirmed by introspection. And in fact I can give you an introspectible piece of evidence for it.

I remarked earlier that mostly we don’t know what our own beliefs are, because we don’t even have beliefs about them, let alone knowledge.

So when Pooh goes to get honey from the cupboard where he believes it is, he needn’t be conscious of that belief. He can just go, guided by the belief, which he has but needn’t at that instant believe he has.

But if I’m right about what it takes to tell the truth, Pooh can’t tell anyone where the honey is without first becoming conscious of where he believes it is.

And that’s because, according to me, telling the truth means saying - or otherwise conveying, not what you believe but what you believe you believe.

And similarly when you want to lie or to mislead - to give someone a false belief. What you’ll say is not necessarily something you disbelieve but something you believe you disbelieve.

So either way, whether you want to tell the truth or to lie, you need to have beliefs about what your relevant beliefs are. In other words, you have to be aware, i.e. conscious, of them.

And so of course you do. Wanting to tell people things, sincerely or not, does demand consciousness of the beliefs (or disbeliefs) you’re trying to convey - a consciousness that most of the actions (like Pooh’s) beliefs combine with your desires to cause don’t demand at all.

That’s just a fact - indeed an introspectible fact, which we can therefore all directly observe for ourselves. So I’m not really trying to tell you that fact at all: I’m just trying to show you it, by drawing it to your attention.

All I’ve had to tell you is how what I have said, about how we tell the truth, explains that fact, which simpler accounts of telling the truth don’t do. And that fact, I believe, provides significant support for my story.

So much for telling the truth. What, since I’ve brought it up, about lying? Suppose Rabbit doesn’t in fact believe he’s out of honey (and believes he doesn’t believe that). So when he says ‘Honey’s off’, he’s lying, saying something he believes to be false - presumably to protect his stocks.

But not suppose eeyore does the same. Suppose he sighs because, despite believing (he believes) there are thistles left, he too wants to protect his stocks. Has he lied to Pooh or just misled him.

After all, he hasn’t said anything false, because he hasn’t said anything at all: all he’s done is sigh. And some people think that make a difference - that when it’s wrong to mislead people (which it usually is), then it’s not quite as bad if you do it without actually saying anything you believe to be false.

I think that’s nonsense. The only thing that’s ever wrong with saying something you believe to be false is that you do it in order to mislead someone you think will believe what you say.

There is after all nothing wrong with quoting fiction - with saying for example that Baker Street once housed a detective called Sherlock Holmes - so long as you don’t mislead anyone by palming it off as fact.

And if you did palm it off, it would be no excuse that you did not by saying something - e.g. by quoting Dr Watson as if he were a real biographer - but by some non-linguistic means, like inserting clips from old Holmes movies into newsreel clips.

What matters about lying is giving people false beliefs, just as giving them true ones is what matters about telling the truth. Whether that’s done by saying things or not is irrelevant. So I’d say Eeyore was lying, just like Rabbit.

But how can you tell when people are lying? Well, sometimes it’s easy, because you know independently, not only whether what they’re saying is true but whether they believe it.

That, for instance, is how I’d know that someone who isn’t blind whom I overhear saying on the phone that it’s dark is lying: because I can see, not only that it isn’t dark but that they too can see that it isn’t dark.

Now of course it isn’t always as easy as that. And when it isn’t, one maxim that’s often used as a lie detector is the maxim that actions speak louder than words. And I’d like to end by saying why that’s often though not always true.

One might for instance use the maxim to infer that because Eeyore’s sigh is a non-linguistic action, it’s a better sign that he believes he’s out of thistles than Rabbit’s words - ‘Honey’s off’ - are that he is out of honey.

But I say is that if that’s true, it’s not because sighs aren’t words. It will be because Eeyore isn’t trying to communicate. His sigh may for example not be a voluntary action at all. It may be an involuntary reaction - which any mention of thistles always produces in Eeyore whenever he believes he’s out of them.

And if it is, then its correlation with that belief - that he’s out of thistles - will not depend on his wanting anything (other than thistles, of course) - and so in particular it won’t depend on his wanting to tell Pooh - or anyone else the truth.

And that would make Pooh’s inference from Eeyore’s sigh to what Eeyore believes safer than his inference from Rabbit’s words to what he believes: because that inference does depend on Rabbit’s wanting to tell Pooh the truth - which of course he may not want to do: he may, as I’ve remarked, be lying.

But then, as I’ve also remarked, so may Eeyore be lying. He too may be trying to mislead Pooh by deliberately sighing when - he believes - he’s by no means out of thistles.

So the point of the maxim - that actions speak louder than words - is not that people never use non-linguistic actions to communicate - which is when they may be deliberately misleading - but that language is much less often used to do anything else.

So while you might well overhear Eeyore sighing to himself, and know therefore that he isn’t trying to mislead anyone, it’s much less likely - though not of course impossible - that you’ll overhear Rabbit muttering ‘Honey’s off’ to himself.

And that I think is why in general, though by no means always - non-linguistic actions do speak louder than words: simply because - oddly enough - most of them aren’t meant to ‘speak’ at all, and a fortiori aren’t meant to speak what’s false.

Well, that’s all I have to tell you about how you tell the truth. Or rather about how you try to tell it: since whether any such action of yours succeeds in doing what you want - namely giving your tellee a true belief - will depend (as always) on the truth of all the beliefs which you also need in order to make you tell the truth.

And I don’t just mean the belief you’re trying to communicate. There’s also your belief about what the belief you’re trying to communicate is: that’s what will determine what you’ll actually say (or do). And finally of course there’s your belief that your tellee will believe what you say.

If all those beliefs of yours are true, your action will succeed. You will give your tellee a true belief: you really will tell the truth. If they’re not all true, you’ll probably fail. But at least you’ll have tried - as I have done.