

## Representation in Early Chinese Philosophy of Language

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### 1. Introduction

A common, historically influential view of language and mind is that language is a public, shared medium through which we express inward, mental contents that represent objects or situations in the world. The representational content of language is regarded as deriving from that of mental items—such as concepts, ideas, or impressions—that are assumed to represent objects directly as a result of perception. Roughly this view has been associated with Aristotle’s famous remark that “spoken sounds are symbols of affections in the soul,” the affections being likenesses or images of objects.<sup>1</sup> John Locke seems to present a view along these lines when he claims that “words, in their primary or immediate signification, stand for nothing but the ideas in the mind” of the speaker, which “collects” these ideas “from the things which they are supposed to represent.”<sup>2</sup> To be sure, interpreters of Aristotle and Locke debate to what extent these passages reflect an appeal to direct psychological representationalism as an explanation of the meaning or use of language, and we want to avoid misconstruing historical figures whose views, understood in their context, may have been different from how we might initially interpret them in our own.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, both passages strongly suggest—and have been widely read as presenting—what Simon Blackburn vividly called a “dog-legged” view of language, on which language derives its significance from the content of another medium—in this case mental—that is treated as having inherent representational powers.<sup>4</sup>

Prominent voices in twentieth-century philosophy argued that, as an approach to language, direct psychological representationalism is problematic in various respects. Ludwig Wittgenstein and John Austin showed how an account of language focusing on representation can be misleading, since language is used in

<sup>1</sup> Aristotle, *Categories and De Interpretatione*, J. L. Ackrill, tr. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 16a3–8.

<sup>2</sup> John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Peter H. Nidditch, ed. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1979), III.2.2.

<sup>3</sup> For an overview of interpretive issues arising from these passages, see Anita Kasabova and Vladimir Marinov, “Aristotle on Verbal Communication: The First Chapters of *De Interpretatione*,” *Empedocles: European Journal for the Philosophy of Communication* 7.2 (2016): 239–53, and E. J. Lowe, “Language and Meaning,” in *A Companion to Locke*, Matthew Stuart, ed. (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2015), 279–95.

<sup>4</sup> On “dog-legged” theories of language, see Simon Blackburn, *Spreading the Word* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 40–48.

a variety of practices and acts, some representational, others not.<sup>5</sup> John Dewey and Wilfred Sellars argued that the ability to refer to—and thus attribute representational content to—one’s own thoughts is actually learned from public discourse.<sup>6</sup> W. V. O. Quine derided what he called the “museum myth,” the idea that words function as labels for determinate meanings—such as ideas in the mind—as if the meanings were exhibits in a museum.<sup>7</sup> Following Dewey, Quine contended instead that there are no meanings beyond what is implicit in dispositions to behavior.<sup>8</sup>

Intriguingly, ancient Chinese theorists of language avoided direct psychological representationalism in favor of explanations grounded in social practices. They took an extensional approach to explaining linguistic communication, appealing to practices for fixing reference, rather than to meanings or intensions. They emphasized the action-guiding functions of language, focusing as least as much on the use of language in teachings, instructions, and laws as in reporting facts. This theoretical orientation led Donald Munro to remark, in one early study, that ancient Chinese thinkers’ primary theoretical concern seemed to be with the consequences of a belief or proposition for action, not its truth—and thus, presumably, not its reporting or representational function.<sup>9</sup> In A. C. Graham’s memorable formulation, for pre-Han philosophical discourse “the crucial question” was not “What is the truth?” but “Where is the way?, the way to order the state and conduct personal life.”<sup>10</sup> Discussion revolved around issues related to following *dào* 道 (ways, norms), rather than representing the world. Moreover, as Chad Hansen pointed out, early Chinese conceptions of mind especially emphasized its role in directing action. Accordingly, regulating action was regarded as a central function of language, as reflected in discussions of “correcting names” (*zhèng míng* 正名), for example.<sup>11</sup>

Still, in all but the simplest cases, utterances guide action by employing representational content. When early sources such as the Confucian *Analects*, *Xúnzǐ*, or *The Annals of Lü Buwei* discuss the importance of “correcting names” in directing action, a major implication is that the reference of general terms—and

<sup>5</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, G. E. M. Anscombe, tr. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1958); John Austin, *How to do Things with Words*, second edition (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975).

<sup>6</sup> See John Dewey, *Experience and Nature* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1929), 170, and Wilfrid Sellars, *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), section 59.

<sup>7</sup> W. V. O. Quine, *Ontological Relativity and Other Essays* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969), 27.

<sup>8</sup> Quine, *Ontological*, 29.

<sup>9</sup> Donald Munro, *The Concept of Man in Early China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1969), 55.

<sup>10</sup> A. C. Graham, *Disputers of the Tao* (La Salle: Open Court, 1989), 3.

<sup>11</sup> See Chad Hansen, *Language and Logic in Early China* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1983), chapter 3.

accordingly their representational content—must be clarified and unified so that speakers and listeners can issue and follow instructions in a consistent, coordinated way. As the *Annals* points out, if one asks for horses when seeking oxen or oxen when seeking horses, disorder will surely follow.<sup>12</sup> Graham himself insisted that even if early Chinese theorists had mainly practical concerns, they still needed to account for the fact-reporting use of language, without which language cannot fulfill basic communicative functions.<sup>13</sup> The action-guiding announcement “dinner is on the table” can reliably guide diners to the table only if they understand that “dinner is on the table” can be acted on if and only if dinner is indeed on the table. To understand this is to grasp a representational relation between the announcement and a situation. Given that the action-guiding functions of speech acts such as announcements, commands, and moral teachings rely on representational content, then, early theorists of language had a theoretical need to explain the basis for such content.

As this article will discuss, the major treatments of language in pre-Han texts—those of the Mohists and Xúnzǐ—directly address the representational functions of language. Both account for the use of words to represent objects and situations by appeal to social practices for distinguishing the same from different kinds of things and for associating names with things of the same kind. For these theorists, pragmatics explains semantics: shared norms governing the use of names fix reference and thus explain how names can represent objects and express thoughts. The relation between language and the world is not explained by appeal to mental representations or to meanings that words stand for. Instead, by virtue of social practices, participants in a discussion or members of a speech community understand that general terms represent things of a certain kind and thus understand what the objects referred to by some general term are like.

For the purposes of this discussion, I will understand linguistic representation as the use of linguistic expressions to stand for objects, situations, or events, “re-presenting” them in the medium of linguistic symbols. Representational content is the property of expressions by which they represent what they do. Representation is intertwined with reference in complex ways. The use of a linguistic expression to refer to something may (partly) determine its representational content, for example, while the content a speech community customarily associates with some linguistic expression may in some contexts determine its reference. The two concepts are distinct, however. Reference is a relation between expressions and objects by which expressions purport to indicate or identify things. This relation provides a means to form linguistic representations, which as the Mohists would say “model” things for some audience.

Section 2 below surveys Mohist views about the functions of language as presented in the early Mohist Triads (books 8–37 of the *Mòzi*) and the Mohist

<sup>12</sup> *The Annals of Lü Buwei* 呂氏春秋, section 17.1. Citations to the *Annals* give section numbers, which are consistent across editions. For comparison, see John Knoblock and Jeffrey Riegel, tr., *The Annals of Lü Buwei* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001).

<sup>13</sup> Graham, *Disputers*, 395.

Dialogues (books 46–49). The Mohists depict *yán* 言 (statements or utterances) as indeed having a reporting and so probably a representational function. However, the most prominent function of *yán* for them is its role in guiding conduct. They seem to see reference as fixed at least partly through the use of language to guide action. Speakers who fail to act appropriately in response to utterances demonstrate a failure to grasp the correct reference of the terms they use.

The ensuing section surveys the detailed account of the representational role of language presented in the Later Mohist Canons. For the Later Mohists, representational content is grounded in social practices by which names refer to groups of objects that are “similar” or “the same” in some respect, such as their features. A name functions roughly as a model for the kind of object it represents. Use of a name to refer to an object informs listeners that the object is similar to other objects of the relevant kind. Names thus enable communication because members of the speech community are familiar with the features they represent.

Section 4 sketches Xúnzǐ’s theory of names. Like the Mohists, Xúnzǐ focuses on the use of names to guide action. Yet he clearly sees action-guiding functions as intertwined with representational functions. His explicit remarks about representation concern how discursive activities can represent the *dào* (way) and thus guide audiences in the practice of proper ethical, social, and political norms.

An intriguing feature of the Mohists’ and Xúnzǐ’s semantic theories is that neither invokes mental ideas, meanings, or representations to explain the use of names. Yet both explicitly state that “declarations” (*cí* 辭), or utterances composed of two or more names, convey *yì* 意, a notion interpretable as thought, intention, or purpose. Are *yì* then mental items corresponding to the meanings of utterances? Section 5 explores the use of *yì* in the early literature and suggests that in contexts pertaining to language, *yì* play at least two theoretical roles, one as a guideline for the use of names, the other as the intention associated with an utterance. Neither role correlates with that of ideas or other mental contents that purport to explain the meaning of words, and indeed in some cases utterances can be understood without knowing the corresponding *yì*.

## 2. Language in the Mohist Triads and Dialogues

The many references to *yán* 言 (statements or speech) in the early Mohist Triads and the Dialogues illustrate central background assumptions about the purpose of language and the extent to which early Chinese theorists approach language in terms of its representational functions. *Yán* is typically used as a mass noun referring to utterances, pronouncements, or teachings of unspecified length and indeterminate compositional structure. To illustrate, consider several examples of what the text calls “*yán*.” One is the following *yán* of the sage-kings:

This *dào* 道 (way, teaching), if applied on a large scale to govern the world, it will not be insufficient; if applied on a small scale, it will not

produce trouble; if applied as a practice, it will benefit the myriad people to the end of their lives without cease. (9/67–68).<sup>14</sup>

Here “*yán*” refers to a series of three factual claims about the consequences of some *dào*. Another example is the following *yán*:

The business of benevolent persons is surely to devote themselves to seeking to promote the benefit of the world and eliminate harm from the world. (16/1)

In this case, “*yán*” is an ethical teaching, expressed as a generalization about the conduct of exemplary persons. A third example is the lengthy *yán* the Mohists attribute to the fatalists:

If fated to be wealthy, then wealthy; if fated to be poor, then poor. If fated to be many, then many; if fated to be few, then few. If fated to be in order, then in order; if fated to be in disorder, then in disorder. If fated to be long-lived, then a long life; if fated to be short-lived, then a short life. Given fate, even if one devotes great effort, of what advantage is it? (35/3–4)

Here “*yán*” refers to a series of eight factual claims followed by a rhetorical question implying that human effort lacks efficacy. As these examples show, then, *yán* may be pronouncements comprising one or more sentences, which may have descriptive or prescriptive content and can include questions. It seems that nearly any utterance, of any length, can count as *yán*.

One function of *yán* is to report or describe how things are. For example, when reporting the deeds of the sage-kings, Mohist writers use *yán* as a verb:

So these [sources] *yán* (speak of, describe) how the sages unfailingly governed by promoting the worthy and employing the capable. (9/45–46)

In such contexts, the texts describe *yán* as “referring to” or “speaking of” (*wèi* 謂) what is described.

So governing by promoting the worthy and employing the capable and so achieving order, those *yán* refer to (*wèi*) this. Governing by demoting the worthy and so bringing disorder, my *yán* refer to (*wèi*) this. (9/41–42)

To the extent that such referring or “speaking of” relations can be considered representational, arguably these are examples of representational uses of utterances.

Nevertheless, contexts in which *yán* are explicitly mentioned in the texts make it clear that such descriptive or reporting uses are not the function of

<sup>14</sup> Citations to *Mòzǐ* give chapter and line numbers in William Hung, ed., *A Concordance to Mo Tzu* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1956).

language that most attracts the Mohists' attention. The most prominent function of *yán* is its role in guiding conduct, particularly through being “applied” or “used” (*yòng* 用) as “models” (*fǎ* 法) or teachings to guide action, as when utterances are used in ethical doctrines, instructions, or formulations of government policy. “Use” (*yòng*) is the third of the Mohists' three standards for evaluating whether *yán* are right or wrong, beneficial or harmful. To be affirmed as “right” (*shì* 是) and promulgated as guidance to follow, *yán* must prove beneficial when “used” as a basis for government administration and the judicial system, specifically by increasing wealth, population, and social order. One of the Mohists' reasons for rejecting the fatalist *yán* quoted above is that if people used it as a guide to conduct, they contend, officials would neglect their administrative duties and people would neglect their work, resulting in harm to all (35/42–46). The correctness of *yán*—its status as *shì* (right) or *fēi* 非 (wrong)—thus rests as much or more on successful consequences in guiding action as on factual accuracy. Accuracy of representation is at most only a partial criterion for correctness.

Numerous passages in the Dialogues refer to “using” *yán* to guide action, as when Mòzǐ is depicted claiming that “if kings, dukes, and great men use my *yán*, the state will surely be in order; if commoners and the man in the street use my *yán*, their conduct will surely be refined” (49/40–54).<sup>15</sup> Other passages in the Triads refer to “modeling” (*fǎ* 法) on *yán* or taking it as an explicit guide to *dào* (10/27, 25/12). Moreover, the *Mòzǐ* regularly pairs *yán* with conduct (*xíng* 行). In light of the action-guiding function of language, speakers' conduct is expected to match their *yán*, ideally as the two halves of a tally fit together (16/29). An example is a speaker who in his *yán* states that “superior gentlemen” are committed to their friends' welfare as they are to their own and accordingly in his conduct follows through by aiding his friends when they are hungry, cold, or ill (16/27–28). Ethical role models set an example through both their *yán* and their deeds. In the Mohist program for achieving stable political order by unifying people's moral norms, for example, political subordinates are expected to emulate the *yán* and the conduct (*xíng*) of their superiors (11/14–15ff.).

Beyond its role as a model by which to guide conduct, *yán* is itself a performance and so falls under the norms of the Mohists' consequentialist ethics. *Yán* should be uttered only if doing so benefits “heaven, the ghosts, and the common people” and conforms to the sage-kings' example (47/16–18). *Yán* that guide and improve conduct effectively should be repeated regularly (46/37–38, 47/18–19). By contrast, *yán* that are of no benefit are “empty jabbering” and should be avoided (46/60).

The Triads and Dialogues are thus primarily concerned with the role of language in directing action by expressing and exemplifying teachings and guidelines, not its role as a medium of representation. Nevertheless, as we saw in the Introduction, the use of language to direct action relies on reference relations, which tie bits of language to the world, and reference relations seem central to representational uses of language. In principle, a thinker could be deeply

<sup>15</sup> See too 47/48–53, 47/53–55, and 48/33–40.

interested in action-directing functions of language yet ground an account of these functions in an explanatory approach that places representation front and center.

Hence it is intriguing that, in some places, at least, the Mohists depict reference relations themselves as constitutively intertwined with the action-guiding functions of language. Their implicit view seems to be that reference relations obtain only if members of a speech community generally respond to utterances by acting in certain ways. Accordingly, the action-guiding role of language is crucial to fixing reference.

The Mohist view is formulated in terms of naming, not reference. The only compositional units of *yán* that the Triads and Dialogues mention are “names” (*míng* 名, typically general terms). Names are associated with “objects” (*shí* 實), the things or situations that they name (*mìng* 命, 19/5). The use of names is based on the ability to distinguish, in concrete contexts, objects that properly take the name from those that don’t. To qualify as “knowing the difference” (17/7) between what does or does not take some name, a speaker must be able to distinguish the extension of the name reliably across a range of cases (17/11–12, 28/65–67).

The Mohists and other early Chinese thinkers held that, for language to guide action, members of a speech community must observe shared norms in distinguishing the extensions of the names used in teachings and commands.<sup>16</sup> To respond to a request to pass the salt, we must be able to pick out the salt shaker from other objects on the table in the same way other speakers do. Failure to do so would mean we don’t “know” the salt shaker, in the same way that, according to one *Mòzǐ* passage, the blind don’t “know” white from black because they are unable to follow an instruction to “select” one from the other. Analogously, an ethically significant name such as “benevolence” can guide action only if gentlemen “know” to “select” conduct that is indeed benevolent (47/23–26). *Yán* cannot guide conduct effectively if we don’t “know” the objects named.

A consequence of this point is that, in the Mohist view, names can refer to their objects only if there is a standing practice of “selecting” just those things in response to the name. Without a link to action, reference relations collapse. The blind can use names such as “white” and “black” to utter correct *yán*, such as that “white things are bright,” only because they have learned them from a speech community whose members generally do respond to “white” and “black” by picking out things of the relevant color. Were the community as a whole not to “select” white or black objects in response to these names, no one would “know” the relevant objects, and the names would no longer name anything. As the Mohists understand the use of names, if *yán* do not prompt action, at least by a critical mass of speakers in pertinent contexts, reference relations break down.

<sup>16</sup> Establishing and policing such norms is precisely the point of the widely shared doctrine of “correcting names” (*zhèng míng* 正名).

### 3. Later Mohist Semantic Theory

The Later Mohist dialectical texts explicitly address the representational function of language, embedding it in a theory about how speech enables speakers to communicate because they apply shared norms for distinguishing the referents of names. On the Later Mohist view, norms governing how we distinguish similar from different objects provide the basis for the practice of associating names with groups of objects. These practices in turn explain representational content.

According to the dialectical texts, what we speak about or refer to (*wèi* 謂) is objects or situations (*shí* 實). What we use to speak about or refer to them are “names” (*míng* 名) (A80).<sup>17</sup> All words are considered different types of names, with extensions of varying scope. “All-reaching” names, such as “thing” (*wù* 物), “reach to” or denote anything. “Kind” (*lèi* 類) names, such as “horse,” “proceed to” (*xíng* 行) all things similar to each other in some feature. “Personal” or “private” names, such as the proper noun “Jack,” “stop at” (*zhǐ* 止) one thing only, the individual that bears the name (A78).

Kind names are general terms established by dubbing some group of things that share the same intrinsic features with a name (A78, A86). Upon naming a certain animal “horse,” for example, we commit to applying the same name to all similar objects, in this case objects that share the same shape and appearance (44/33–36). Other general terms may apply to things on the basis of extrinsic similarities, such as “sameness in being united together” in some way (A86).<sup>18</sup> Examples might include items that are the same in being located in the same place (A86), as the residents of a city are all located in that city, or in performing the same function, as hammers might have a variety of shapes while all being used for striking (B58).

In the case of kind names, whether an object falls within the extension of a name, such as “round,” is determined by comparing the thing with a “model” or “standard” (*fǎ* 法)—a paradigm, exemplar, or measurement tool—to see whether they are relevantly similar (A70). Examples of models for “round” include concrete round objects, a wheelwright’s compass, and the thought or intention (*yì* 意) of a round thing (A70). The texts do not specify what such thoughts are, but from B57 (see section 5 below) they are probably remembered or imagined features associated with the name “round.” Particular round objects are “so,” and thus take the name “round,” if their features are similar to a relevant model (A71). When measured with the compass, for example, different points along their circumference are indeed equidistant from their center.

The Later Mohists identify at least four sorts of speech acts that fall under the general category of *wèi* 謂, “speaking,” “asserting,” or “referring” (A77, A79). One is to name things (*mìng* 命), as when we name dogs “hounds.” Another is to

<sup>17</sup> References to the Later Mohist canons follow the numbering system in A. C. Graham, *Later Mohist Logic, Ethics, and Science* (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1978).

<sup>18</sup> Regarding the difference between names for kinds and names for objects “united together,” see Chris Fraser, “Realism about Kinds in Later Mohism,” *Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy*, forthcoming.

apply (*jiā* 加) a term of praise or criticism to a person or thing. A third is to command, thereby making a person do something (*lìng* 令). The fourth is to use a name to “mention” or “bring up” (*jǔ* 舉) something, typically in the course of making a statement (*yán* 言). Using a name such as “dog” or “hound” to talk about an object is “mentioning” it or “bringing it up” (A79). “Stating” (*yán*) consists of uttering such “mentionings” (*jǔ*) (A32).

The explanation of “mentioning” explicitly attributes a representational function to speech: “mentioning” something is “emulating” or “presenting a model for” it (A31). The verb translated “emulate” here, *nǐ* 擬, typically refers to emulating or imitating the object of the verb. The implication, then, is that in using a name to mention something, we are imitating that thing by employing the name as a model or representation of it. The Mohist view seems to be that names function as models of their referents, in effect showing listeners, by means of a representation, what the speaker is talking about. This parallel between naming and showing is explicit in B53, which contrasts showing others something by pointing at it with showing them by using a name:

...in some cases one uses names to show people, in some cases one uses objects to show people. Mentioning one’s friend as a wealthy merchant, this is using names to show people. Pointing to this as a crane, this is using objects to show people. (B53)

One way to inform listeners about cranes is to point to a particular bird so that they can see for themselves. One way to inform them about wealthy merchants to use a name to mention a mutual friend as an example. According to the text, this “showing” function of names is what enables us to cite the historical sage-kings as moral paragons, even though we can no longer physically point to them (B53). The modeling function of names is reflected again in the explanation to A32, which indicates that in using names to mention things in *yán* (statements), we are “uttering their features” (*chū mào* 出貌), a speech act the text compares to representing something by drawing a picture (A32).<sup>19</sup>

The Mohist account of the semantics of names for kinds directly explains how names obtain the representational content by which they model or depict objects. As we have seen, the Mohists assume that some objects share intrinsically similar features that relate them as members of kinds. Speakers dub one or more exemplars of a kind, such as horses, with a name, such as “horse.” All objects that share similar relevant features—such as the shape and visual appearance of horses—then take that name. The name thus obtains its representational content through a practice of associating it with the group of similar objects that constitute the kind.

To clarify use of the name, a speech community can establish models (*fǎ* 法) against which to compare objects to distinguish whether they are indeed

<sup>19</sup> I follow Graham in emending two instances of *mín* 民 in A32 to a variant of *mào* 貌, on grounds of scribal misreading of an unfamiliar graph. See Graham, *Later Mohist Logic*, A32.

relevantly similar. These models could include concrete exemplars of horses, for example, or perhaps pictures or sculptures. If controversy arises over whether a particular object takes a name, then interlocutors should settle the “basis” or “criteria” (*yīn* 因) by which the name is used (A97). If we are distinguishing horses from non-horses, we might specify these as body shape, hair, hooves, and tail, for example, because horses’ equine frame, mane, single hooves, and skirted tail distinguish them from other livestock. Moreover, any particular object potentially belongs to numerous kinds. A horse might be a member of the kind *horse* but also of *quadruped* and *animal*, among other possibilities. Hence in some contexts we may need to clarify what the relevant kind is when we cite similarity to a model as a basis for judgment (B1). If we cite a particular horse as a model, are we taking it to exemplify the kind *horse* or perhaps the kind *quadruped*? In the latter case, we would need to clarify that having four legs, not a mane or skirted tail, is the relevant “basis” to consider in comparing things to the model.

The texts thus describe a discursive, social enterprise in which the representational role of a kind name is specified by citing a model, agreeing on what kind of object the model exemplifies, and jointly settling which features of the model are relevant to distinguishing that kind. The basis for the representational content of kind names is a shared practice of distinguishing similarities and differences by comparison to conventionally adopted models for various kinds of things.<sup>20</sup> Representational content is constructed through social practices that associate names with collections of similar objects or situations. Names represent things by virtue of indicating what the thing a speaker mentions is “similar to” (*ruò* 若, A70–71) or “the same as” (*tóng* 同, A86). They can indicate this because of background practices by which speakers jointly distinguish the kind of similar thing denoted by the name.

These practices for distinguishing objects that are or are not similar to standard exemplars denoted by a name provide a compact explanation of how names—here understood to be general terms—enable communication. Provided members of the speech community share a background competence in practices for distinguishing the similar objects associated with a name, speakers’ use of that name to “mention” (*jǔ*) something tells them what that thing is “similar to” (*ruò*) and thus enables them to know the thing. When a speaker uses a name to mention an object, listeners know the object is similar to other things denoted by that name. Hence using names is a process of “using what people understand to correct what they don’t know...like using a ruler to measure an unknown length” (B70). We can use a ruler to measure length because we know the length of the marks on the ruler and we see that the thing measured is the same length as one of the marks. Analogously, through language, we use what listeners are familiar with—the models associated with a name—to inform them about what they don’t know—another object we refer to using the name. Referring to an object by

<sup>20</sup> I limit discussion here to general terms for kinds, aggregates of objects sharing intrinsically similar features. Presumably the Mohists could develop a parallel, suitably modified account for other general terms, such as names for things that share a similar function.

means of a name is analogous to presenting a model of it or giving a measurement for it. In doing so, we indicate that the object is the same as other objects conventionally denoted by that name—that is, that model or measurement. When we refer to something as a “horse,” then, we are using the name “horse” as a model for it while indicating that it is the same kind of object as the exemplars we take as models in learning to distinguish horses from non-horses.

To sum up, the Mohist dialectical texts present a theory in which the representational function of language is explained by practices through which speakers associate names with kinds of similar objects or situations. Communication is explained by language users’ familiarity with the kinds of similar things referred to by names, which represent those things. An intriguing feature of the theory is that it is purely extensional, the use of names being explained by appeal to practices that establish reference relations. No role is assigned to a conception of intension or meaning. Nor does the theory appeal to mental representations to explain the representational content of names and speech.

#### 4. Xúnzǐ on Names and Representation

Xúnzǐ’s views on language follow those of the Mohists in several prominent respects. Like them, he emphasizes the action-guiding role of utterances. He also explicitly holds that names represent objects, their representational content deriving from similarity relations identified through social practices. His explanation of communication is extensional, as theirs is, appealing to reference relations and not to meanings or intensions. Also like them, he makes no appeal to mental representation to explain linguistic representation.

For Xúnzǐ, the use of names is a social practice to be regulated as part of the political project of leading society to follow the *dào* 道 (way). Controlling names is a pivotal responsibility of a king, who seeks to fix their use such that the objects they refer to are clearly distinguished, the king’s *dào* (way) is carried out, and his intents—his purposes or aims—are communicated. In this way, the king leads the people to unity (22/7).<sup>21</sup> Names are analogous to standard measures and to split tallies, the two pieces of which fit together to record accounts or contracts (22/8). They correspond to distinct groups of objects and hence can be used to guide the performance of practical tasks, as a standard weight or length measure does. Like the Mohists, then, Xúnzǐ sees the use of a name as analogous to giving a measurement of something. Just as the state needs to regulate the use of measures and contracts, it should regulate the correct use of names by ensuring that the speech community picks out the objects referred to by names according to unified, stable distinctions.

Xúnzǐ explicitly states that the purpose of having names is twofold: to clarify social ranks—and accordingly roles and responsibilities—and to

<sup>21</sup> Citations to *Xúnzǐ* give chapter and line numbers in William Hung, ed., *A Concordance to Hsun Tzu* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1966).

distinguish the same from the different. Fulfilling these purposes removes obstacles to speakers expressing their intent or purpose (*zhì* 志) and so accomplishing practical tasks (22/14–15). His theoretical focus is thus specifically on the use of language to guide action for practical purposes. Toward this end, however, he clearly sees language as having referential and representational functions. Names “indicate” (*zhǐ* 指, literally “point to”) objects or situations (22/14), and their function is for hearing them to communicate the objects or situations indicated (22/38).

Xúnzǐ agrees with the Mohists that naming is based on judgments of sameness and difference. All things relevantly the same take the same name; different kinds of things take different names (22/21–23). The Mohists seem to assume that things of the same kind share an intrinsic sameness (A86), which conventionally chosen models (*fǎ* 法) help us to identify. Xúnzǐ’s view is that the samenesses and differences relevant to naming are determined by conventions of the speech community. These conventions are based on a natural convergence in how human sense organs perceive sameness and difference, given that we are members of the same species (22/15–17). So for Xúnzǐ convention dictates not only the names a speech community chooses to use and the distinctions it recognizes, but the underlying relations of sameness and difference on which the use of names is based.

A crucial feature of Xúnzǐ’s view about sameness and difference is that the perceptual process by which human sense organs distinguish the same from different features assigns no role to a concept akin to mental representations, Lockean ideas, or Humean impressions. The sense organs are described as “attending to” or “assessing” things,<sup>22</sup> by which they differentiate features relevant to each organ—shapes, colors, and patterns for the eyes, notes and tones for the ears, and so forth. The mind then uses its faculty of cognition to recognize sounds through the ears, shapes through the eyes, and so on. No role is assigned to any mental representation or intermediary.<sup>23</sup> The theoretical framework comprises only features of things, the sense organs, which differentiate these features, and the mind, which recognizes them. The basis for the representational content of names, then, is not mental representations that are associated with names. It is social practices that establish reference relations between names and collections of objects deemed the same or different. The judgments of sameness or difference are in turn causally grounded in the differential response dispositions of human sense organs.

Xúnzǐ presents an account of argumentative discourse that illustrates how he understands such referential relations to be fixed and how the representational

<sup>22</sup> The text uses the verbal phrase *yì wù* 意物. I take the connotation of *yì* 意 here to be similar to that of 臆 (detect, assess) or to the compound 測意 (measure, evaluate), which appears at *Xúnzǐ* 26/14. *Yì* does not refer to forming mental ideas or representations of objects of perception, because it plays no role in the process of perception as described in the paragraph immediately following (22/17–21).

<sup>23</sup> On this point, I concur with Jane Geaney, *On the Epistemology of the Senses in Early Chinese Thought* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2002), 201, n. 83.

content they establish functions. Argumentative discourse involves a series of four major activities: naming, specifying, explaining, and disputing (22/36–42, cf. 18/103–104). If some object or situation is not successfully conveyed to listeners, speakers explicitly name it (*mìng* 命) for them. Naming alone may be insufficient for communication, however, because speaker and listener may lack a shared understanding of exactly what objects are being named. In that case, the interlocutors seek agreement in specifying (*qí* 期) what the name denotes. In this context, *qí* (“specifying”) appears to be a technical term that combines two distinct functions, in some contexts concurrently. On the one hand, *qí* seems to refer to successful communication following from agreement on the reference of names.<sup>24</sup> For example, *Xúnzǐ* depicts *qí* as the outcome of sharing conventionally determined names (22/16–17) or of correcting names (22/41). This use of *qí* also appears in the *Annals*, which says that “without *cí* 辭 (linguistic expressions), there is no means to *qí* (specify things to, communicate with) each other” (18.5). On the other hand, *qí* also seems to denote referential or “indicating” relations between names and objects.<sup>25</sup> Hence we find *Xúnzǐ* also explaining that names are what we use to specify (*qí*) objects—and thus refer to and communicate about them (22/39).

Two examples from the *Zhuāngzǐ* help to illustrate the import of *qí*. One passage explains that words for size, such as “thin” and “thick,” *qí* (specify, indicate) only what has physical form (17/22).<sup>26</sup> It seems, then, that besides interlocutors seeking to *qí* with each other concerning the names they use—that is, to share an understanding of what the names specify—the names themselves can be said to *qí* what they refer to. In the other passage, an interlocutor responds to the claim that *dào* (the way) is present everywhere by asking the speaker to “*qí*,” or specify examples of what he is talking about (22/44). This exchange seems to illustrate *Xúnzǐ*’s conception of *qí* as a discursive activity aimed at reaching shared understanding by specifying the objects mentioned.

If neither naming nor specifying succeeds in allowing the two sides to communicate smoothly, interlocutors try “explaining” (*shuō* 說), or giving reasons for how they distinguish sameness and difference and thus apply certain names to certain objects. If explaining too fails—presumably because one side rejects the other’s explanation—they move on to disputation (*biàn* 辯), through which they attempt to settle the use of names by debating how to draw the relevant distinctions. The function of disputation and explanation, *Xúnzǐ* explains, is specifying and naming (22/40). That is, the last two activities in the series function to settle the outcome of the first two, specifying what things are referred

<sup>24</sup> Interpreters widely concur on this aspect of *qí* 期. See, for example, Xióng Gōngzhé, *Xúnzǐ: Contemporary Notes and Paraphrase* (Taipei: Commercial Press, 1995), 461, 467; Lǐ Díshēng, *Collected Explications of Xúnzǐ* (Taipei: Xuesheng, 1979), 513, 522; and Antonio Cua, *Ethical Argumentation* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1985), 43.

<sup>25</sup> This aspect of *qí* is less widely remarked. Lǐ notices it, proposing that *qí* refers to “joining together” names and objects (*Collected Explications*, 513, 522).

<sup>26</sup> Citations give chapter and line numbers in William Hung, ed., *A Concordance to Chuang Tzu* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1956),

to and what names are used of them. By settling name-object relations in this way, disputation and explanation can express the *dào* of when and how to act. Hence, says Xúnzǐ, disputation and explanation are the mind's means of "representing *dào*" (*xiàng dào* 象道)—that is, representing the Ruist ethical way. The mind seeks to represent *dào* insofar as it is the "work supervisor" of *dào*—the organ in charge of guiding the work of following *dào* (22/40).

When Xúnzǐ speaks explicitly of linguistic representation, then, his central concern is with how discursive activities represent *dào*. The chief purpose of representation is not to map reality in language or thought but to guide audiences in the practice of the way—that is, proper ethical, social, and political norms. The primary function of the mind is not to represent the world and accumulate knowledge of descriptive truths but to manage our performance of the *dào*. The mind can use utterances to represent *dào*—by giving instructions, for instance—because of the community's shared understanding of name-object reference relations. These relations are fixed through discursive social practices aimed at settling what objects will be treated as of the same kind, and thus taking the same name, or of different kinds, and thus taking different names.

## 5. Thought and Communication

Both the Later Mohists and Xúnzǐ explain linguistic communication by appeal to practices through which speakers associate names with groups of objects distinguished as "the same." Names represent objects by informing listeners what the objects referred to are "the same as" or "similar to," against a backdrop of practices that associate the name with features shared by objects of that kind. Neither the Mohists nor Xúnzǐ appeal to mental meanings, intensions, or ideas to explain how speakers are able to communicate. However, as we saw when introducing the concept of models (*fǎ* 法), the Mohists do employ a notion of thought or intention—*yì* 意—in their semantic theory. *Yì* (thoughts) are among the models speakers can use to distinguish whether an object takes a name. Xúnzǐ's theory too mentions *yì*: names for different things can be combined to form "declarations" or "expressions" (*cí* 辭, a near synonym for *yán* 言), by which speakers can discuss a single *yì* (22/39). The Later Mohist "Lesser Selection" similarly explains that while names are used to mention objects, declarations (*cí*) are used to express *yì* (45/2–3). We should consider, then, what role these early theorists see *yì* as playing in linguistic communication, and in particular whether they regard *yì* as having representational content or as determining the content or meaning of names or utterances.

Remarks in the Later Mohist writings, the *Xúnzǐ*, and also *The Annals of Lü Buwei* suggest that, in regard to language, *yì* have two theoretical roles. For the Later Mohists, *yì* count among the models speakers can apply to guide the use of names. More broadly, for all three texts, they may express thoughts or intentions that utterances aim to convey. They most likely have representational content, but this content is probably inherited from that of names, rather than determining it.

As models, *yì* may be remembered or imagined features of the objects denoted by some name. A contrast drawn in canons B57–58 between the *yì* of a column and that of a hammer suggests that, at least in some contexts, *yì* are imagined representations of perceivable features.<sup>27</sup> Columns are cylindrical, and the Mohists apparently included their shape as part of the “basis” (*yīn* 因)—the characteristic features—for applying the name “column.” Hence, according to B57, from something’s being deemed a column, we have an *yì* of it as being cylindrical. By contrast, according to B58, simply from something’s being deemed a hammer, we cannot know its *yì*. The canon is obscure, so any interpretation is tentative. But the gist seems to be that hammers are distinguished by their function, not shape or appearance. A range of tools or weapons, of different sizes and shapes, can be called “hammer.” From the name “hammer” alone we do not know the *yì* of the object, because we do not know its specific purpose or how to visualize it.<sup>28</sup>

It seems likely, then, that when used as a model, the *yì* of a column (B57) or a round object (A70) is an imagined or a remembered shape, which can guide us in distinguishing whether an object at hand is relevantly similar to other objects that take some name, such as “column.” The concept of *yì* thus explains how speakers can apply a model without having a concrete exemplar at hand: they can imagine or remember the features of familiar exemplars.

An intriguing implication of canons B57–58 is that in some cases listeners need not know the *yì* of a thing in order to understand the name for it. According to B58, we can understand the name “hammer” without knowing the *yì* of the hammer referred to. The *yì* concerns features that for some objects—such as columns and other things named on the basis of shape or appearance—are distinctive of things that take that name. But *yì* are not meanings or ideas that explain how we understand a name.

The role of *yì* as models also indicates that the Mohists implicitly regard at least some *yì* as having representational content. Models are applied by comparing whether the features of an object at hand are relevantly similar to those of the model. This process can involve perceptually matching features, as when the model referred to is an exemplar of the thing, or it can involve comparison to a measurement tool that maps the features, as when the model is a compass used to judge whether an object is circular. Either way, for the model to be informative about the relevant features, it must either instantiate or represent them in some way. Without some representational or mapping relation, a model cannot function as a model.

<sup>27</sup> The column and hammer examples treat visual features, but *yì* could include other sensory modalities—sounds, scents, textures, and tastes.

<sup>28</sup> If function is the “basis” (*yīn* 因) for naming objects “hammer,” and if the use of “hammer” is to be guided by models, then the simple account of models in A70 will need to be extended. A70 seems to assume that models are applied by a perceptual comparison of intrinsic features, while B58 implies that not all hammers share perceivable intrinsic features. In the case of artifacts such as hammers, the extension to models based on function should be straightforward.

Unlike in an ideational theory of meaning such as Locke's, however, the representational content of the thought does not explain the use of the name for which it is a model. *Yì* (thought) is not explanatorily basic. It is just one among several types of models, alongside concrete exemplars, measuring devices, and perhaps pictures and descriptions. The role of models is merely to provide examples of how to distinguish the extension of a name, not to give its meaning. The *yì* associated with some object is no more the meaning of its name than a concrete exemplar is. What is basic to explaining the use of names are the norm-governed practices by which the speech community distinguishes similar from different kinds of objects. These practices explain and determine the representational content of *yì*, since only through the practice can speakers learn to apply the *yì* as a model for a certain kind of object.

The second role of *yì* (thought or intention) is as an end of communication, such as the intended object or point a speaker seeks to inform listeners about or the purpose the speaker seeks to accomplish. This role is illustrated by Later Mohist canon B41, which depicts a scenario in which a speaker asks a listener whether the listener knows the thing denoted by a strange, unfamiliar name. The canon asserts that before responding, the listener should ask what the unknown name refers to, since it may turn out to refer to something he does know.<sup>29</sup> If the reference of the name can be identified in this way, according to the text, then speaker and listener “connect thoughts” (*tōng yì* 通意) and the listener knows what the speaker is talking about. From B41, then, a result of communication is “connecting thoughts,” by which listeners understand the *yì* a speaker is expressing or acting on.

Crucially, for understanding the theoretical role of *yì*, the direction of explanation here is not that the listener is able to understand the speaker's words by virtue of grasping the speaker's *yì*. It is that the listener can grasp the *yì* by virtue of understanding the reference of the strange name. “Expressing thoughts” or “connecting thoughts” is an aim or outcome of successful communication, not an explanation of why names refer to the things they do. Utterances can be used to express *yì* because interlocutors understand the reference of names, which they learn through shared practices for distinguishing the objects and situations names denote. So, although the *yì* an utterance expresses may have representational content, that content does not determine the correct use or the semantic content of the utterance. Instead, listeners' grasp of the correct use is what enables them to understand the *yì*.

Canon B41 concerns the *yì* associated with the referent of an unknown name. More typically, in discursive contexts, *yì* is associated not with names (*míng* 名) but with statements (*yán*) or declarations (*cí*), utterances composed of two or more

<sup>29</sup> Consistent with the extensional character of Mohist semantic theory, the listener asks the speaker about the reference of the unknown name, not its meaning. In contexts when we might ask for or explain the meaning of a word or sentence, classical Chinese texts consistently use the extensional concept *wèi* 謂 (call, refer). They do not ask about the word's *yì* 意, as we might expect if the theoretical role of *yì* were similar to that of meaning.

names. The Later Mohist texts use *yì* this way in three places. One is the passage in the “Lesser Selection,” mentioned above, which states that “declarations” (*cí*) express *yì*. Another is canons A89–A92, which indicate that getting the *yì* (the intention, the point) of what one hears requires “discernment” (A90), while using *yán* to present one’s *yì* is a matter of “intelligence” (A92). The third is canon A14, which explains that “trustworthiness is statements (*yán*) matching with *yì*.” Similar uses of *yì* in the literature include Xúnzǐ’s explanation of “declarations” (*cí*) as discussing *yì* (22/39) and two passages in the *Annals* that refer to statements (*yán*) as conveying *yì* and declarations (*cí*) as the “indicators” or “marks” (*biǎo* 表) of *yì* (18.4). Also informative are Xúnzǐ’s complaint that when norms governing the use of names become disordered, obstacles arise to communicating *zhì* 志 (intent) (22/13–15) and a further remark in the *Annals* that statements are used to convey the *xīn* 心 (one’s mind or attitudes) (18.5).

These passages thus form a cluster of examples that treat utterances as expressing or representing attitudes denoted by the roughly synonymous terms *yì*, *zhì*, and *xīn*. The attitudes seem to be understood as having content parallel to that of utterances. One passage in the *Annals* states that “within disorderly declarations (*cí*), there are further declarations present—these refer to the *xīn*” (18.5). This remark suggests the attitudes of the *xīn* have a content that in principle can be conveyed using appropriate utterances, even when the speaker has made a “disorderly” utterance, one that violates norms for the correct use of names or does not express the speaker’s actual attitudes.

One interpretive proposal is that *yì*, *zhì*, and *xīn* could refer to speaker meaning, the implicit content a speaker intends to convey by an utterance, which may be different from its literal meaning.<sup>30</sup> In some contexts, the role of *yì* might indeed coincide with speaker meaning. For example, this interpretation might explain the well-known remark in the *Zhuāngzǐ* that the purpose of statements (*yán*) lies in *yì* [the speaker’s intended point] and hence we should seek to “get the *yì* and forget about [the precise wording of] the statement” (26/48–49). It might also explain a passage in the *Annals* which similarly remarks that “the ancients, having got the *yì* (the point), set aside the statement. Listening to statements is [a matter of] using the statement to observe the *yì*” (18.4). It could explain why Mohist canon A90 states that getting the *yì* of what we hear requires discernment.

However, a broader survey of remarks on the relation of language to *yì*, *zhì*, and *xīn* suggests that these concepts do not refer specifically to meaning, whether speaker meaning or literal meaning. A more comprehensive explanation is that they refer very generally to an intended point, end, or purpose, which can but need not coincide with speaker meaning. For a signal concern of such remarks is the problem of *yì* diverging from the content of what is said, whether literal or implied. In such cases, according to the *Annals*, statements (*yán*) and *yì* or *xīn*

<sup>30</sup> I credit this proposal to Christoph Harbsmeier, *Science and Civilisation in China, Vol. 7, Part 1: Language and Logic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 186. An example of speaker meaning is answering the question “Is Anna still in the office?” by uttering “Her car is gone.” The explicit, literal meaning is that Anna’s car is no longer there; the implicit, speaker meaning is that Anna is no longer in the office.

“depart from each other” (*xiāng lí* 相離, 18.4, 18.5). According to canon A14, for example, untrustworthy speakers are those whose *yì* does not match what they say, as when someone expresses a promise but intends to break it. According to *Annals* 18.5, if statements and *xīn* (mind) become separated, subordinates may fail to do what they state and instead do what they do not state. Here *yì* and *xīn* refer to what speakers actually think or intend to do, which may be contrary to what they say or imply. In such contexts, *yì* and *xīn* refer to neither literal nor speaker meaning.

To sum up, the *yì* associated with utterances may have representational content, which utterances can express. But *yì* are not regarded as explaining the literal meaning of utterances, since an utterance may be understood without knowing the relevant *yì*, and the content of the *yì* expressed by or associated with an utterance may be something other than its literal meaning. In some contexts, the *yì* expressed by an utterance may correspond to speaker’s meaning. In other contexts, however, *yì* may be unrelated to linguistic meaning, referring instead to the speaker’s intention to act or purpose in making the utterance.

## 6. Concluding Remarks

Early Chinese thinkers explicitly attribute representational functions to language. They explain these by appeal to social practices for distinguishing similar from different kinds of objects and associating names with them. Names inform listeners about their referents by indicating that the referents are relevantly similar to other objects denoted by those names, objects with which members of the speech community are already familiar.

Unlike an ideational theory of language, pre-Han theorists do not assume the existence of inherently representational mental items that names signify, such as ideas, concepts, or meanings. Accordingly, they do not explain the content or communicative function of words by appeal to mental contents that words supposedly represent. They do take utterances to express *yì* 意, thoughts or intentions. However, this expressive role is part of an account of the function of utterances—what linguistic communication enables us to do—rather than an explanation of how interlocutors understand each other’s utterances. The contents of the thoughts or intentions expressed may be distinct from the meanings of the words used, as the texts imply that, in some cases at least, listeners can understand utterances without grasping the thought or intention. Insofar as thoughts can be expressed through utterances, it is likely that their content is derived from the same distinction-drawing practices that fix the content of words.

At its core, then, pre-Han theorists’ view of language and mind can justifiably be characterised as pragmatic, rather than representational. The central role of language and mind is to guide action, not to represent states of affairs, and representational content is explained by appeal to practices aimed at coordinating how people distinguish and respond to things, rather than treated as inherent in

mental items. Consistent with their thematic focus on *dào* (ways), these thinkers take practice, not representation, to be fundamental.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> I am grateful to two anonymous readers for constructive comments that prompted numerous revisions and clarifications.

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