

The Trouble with Conversation:
*Understand What it is and is not Possible to
Communicate About and Why Unpleasant People
are an Invention of our Own Mind*

Fletcher Kovich

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1. Introduction

What is the trouble with conversation? When you're using it to merely pass the time of day, it probably seems to serve its purpose. But when you're trying to communicate about something that matters to you, you may have noticed that communication can often rapidly break down. When people can't understand what you're trying to say, or else have understood a completely wrong meaning in your words, what's going on here? I've wrestled with these types of questions most of my life.

When we experience communication problems with certain people, it's tempting to imagine that this may be due to inadequacies in the other person. But even as a child, I found myself suspecting that the problems may be due to something in the nature of words themselves.

Some of my earliest memories were of my awareness of this lack of communication between people—not only my own family members, but also friends at school and the adults I met. It seemed there was an illusion taking place; that each time people spoke, they were unwittingly performing a conjuring trick and that their audience *also* appeared to be unaware they were being tricked. At least that was how it appeared to me at the time. But looking back, I'm certain many of the people involved also noticed this 'illusion of communication' that existed when words were exchanged between people—and perhaps this alone explained the jaded persona that many adults appeared to me to possess.

For me, though, my childhood preoccupation never left me; it only intensified; and rather than give up on communication, I was determined to unravel these enigmas. And in the decades that followed, I found that the problems were, indeed, connected with the nature of words themselves. I also found that there was a similar problem with the way we form our impressions of other people. When we see an unpleasant personality trait in someone and we even start to dislike or hate the person because of this, usually our impression of the person is entirely wrong. They do not have this trait we've imagined in them and there is a much simpler explanation.

'Opinions' can not usually be communicated

While developing the ideas in this book, I made the following distinction. I noticed that there are two main types of comments. Comments could either

be about the physical world, or they could be stating an ‘opinion’ (here, I defined an ‘opinion’ as any idea that does not directly describe physical acts or objects—that is, ideas about relationship problems, politics, philosophy, religion, and so on). With comments about the physical world, communication is usually straightforward, but in any other areas, communication rapidly breaks down. In general, when we state an *opinion*, it is rare that true communication takes place. This only happens when the person we’re talking to has had the same experience we’re attempting to communicate (and has made the same reflections about that experience, and uses words to express it that are similar to the ones we use). In any other situation, communication of an *opinion* is not possible and this will either be obvious, or there may be the illusion that communication is taking place.

Communication is our lifeline, but we need to know its flaws

It’s often said that life is a lonely experience—that ultimately we’re all alone. It seems to me that communication is our lifeline; it’s the connection between us and other people. And at the most trying times in life, when we have a real need to use that lifeline, it may appear to be faulty and to only cause further problems.

For me, having explored these areas and clearly understood what it is and is not possible to properly communicate about, seems to have made life easier. It takes away a lot of the frustrations from everyday relationships and can even dispel the bad feelings that could otherwise end up driving people apart. It seems to me that knowing the flaws in this vital lifeline is an essential prerequisite to spending life amongst other people.

The layout of the book

The first part of the book takes a short example conversation between two friends and analyses each comment in turn, looking at what was intended by one friend and what was understood by the other. The conversation starts with a harmless comment by Paul. Susan then replies, trying to understand what Paul meant, and the following few comments then quickly become hostile and the short conversation ends with them trading insults. Yet there was previously no ill feeling between them, and the topic of conversation was fairly harmless, so what went wrong?

The book then looks in detail at each of their comments in turn. It describes the ideas they were intending to express and then looks at how and why the other person misunderstood them, and it also describes their past

experiences in detail to demonstrate how they managed to feel loathing for each other, based on misunderstanding just a few words.

Hence, as well as describing how we interpret other people's words, the book goes on to demonstrate how we also interpret their personality. To us, people may sometimes seem manipulative, malicious, patronizing, controlling, aggressive, offensive and so on. But these impressions are usually wrong. The book clearly describes the processes that our mind goes through to trick us into imagining these types of traits, and it shows that when we look at any of these situations from the other person's point of view, we find that most people do not have these negative traits and are perfectly normal, likeable people.

The book ends with 25 maxims which provide practical suggestions on how to incorporate all this knowledge into your daily life.

2. An example conversation between Paul and Susan

To begin exploring how conversation works, this first part of the book looks at a short example conversation between two friends. Susan and Paul have known each other for a few years, and their conversations frequently become antagonistic. Here's an example:

Paul had been considering a problem for the past few days. He was now in the company of Susan, and he mentioned this problem to her. He said: "I'm not going to my mother's for Christmas day—it makes it difficult, me being a vegetarian; I'd have to cook my meal at the same time that she prepares the other food, and I don't want all the fuss around the oven."

Susan looked puzzled and said: "But wouldn't you have that anyway?"

Paul said: "Not if I weren't a vegetarian, because I would just put my feet up and she'd do all the cooking."

Susan said: "No, 'if you stay at home', I mean."

Paul looked puzzled and said, in a hostile tone: "What!"

Susan was flustered by his tone but she managed to remain calm, and said: "If you stay at home, you'll still have all the fuss."

Paul said, now quite aggressively: "Of course I won't, that's the whole point!"

Susan also adopted an aggressive tone and said: "Well, who's going to cook for you!"

Paul looked daggers at her and said, in an even harsher tone: "I'll do it myself!"

Susan said: "Don't take that tone with me."

Paul looked as though he couldn't believe his ears and said: "That's crap!"

Susan replied: "You're scum!" then looked away.

What went wrong?

This started as a simple comment that Paul mentioned in passing, but it quickly escalated into open hostility between two friends who had not previously had any bad feelings towards one another.

The following chapters will now go through this short conversation again, looking at the detailed thoughts that Paul and Susan had had while the conversation was taking place, rather than just looking at the words themselves. This will enable you to understand how and why each of them was misinterpreting the other's words, and to therefore see why their hostility developed.

Paul's thoughts behind his opening comment

What was the exact idea in Paul's mind when he made his first comment?

To understand this, we need to look at the experiences that he recalled while thinking about the problem. The problem was that Christmas day was approaching, and he had been trying to decide whether to spend it at his mother's house. He felt duty-bound to attend, but on every previous year when he had attended, he had had bad experiences of his mother's personality and he had ended up thinking that he was never going to spend Christmas day there again.

This was what had happened on the two previous years:

He was a vegetarian, but his mother was not and she did not seem capable of understanding the way he felt, no matter what he said. Also, he had had past experiences of her deceiving other people about the ingredients she had used in their food; when they had specified one ingredient, rather than another, she would use the other ingredient, but lie to them that she had used the one they had specified. For these reasons, he did not trust her to prepare his food. Also, she was not a very good cook anyway and he cared about what he ate, so he felt that he would rather cook his meal himself.

Two years ago, Paul had decided to cook his own Christmas meal. He arranged that he would use one oven-ring, leaving the other three rings for his mother to use. She agreed to this and he started cooking. But then, without asking, she started doing things like adjusting the heat on his ring or adding salt to the vegetables he was cooking. She tried to do this without Paul noticing. It seemed to Paul that she was trying to take over his cooking and that she was doing this because she *thought* that she knew better than him how to do these tasks, even though he knew (as far as *he* was concerned) that he was a better cook than her and that she was ruining his meal with her ignorant interfering.

Then one year ago, because of the previous problems, he organized his cooking so that on Christmas morning, he would only need to use a single ring on the oven for about twenty minutes to make a sauce. He made a point of arranging this with her, and she agreed to this, apparently quite happy. But when he was halfway through making the sauce, she suddenly decided that she needed the ring he was using (as well as the other three). He said he would be finished with it in about ten minutes. At this point, she started fidgeting.

eting around while looking daggers at him, picking things up and putting them down again, sighing bad-temperedly and generally hovering around him, saying nothing, but making it clear that she wanted him to stop his own cooking.

To reader's who have not experienced similar behaviour, this description may seem trivial. What these words cannot convey, is the way it makes you feel when someone behaves like this towards you. This feeling is the essence of the experience, is the most powerful part of it. But this feeling cannot be conveyed here (for reasons that will be explained later) and therefore many readers will not be aware of the power of the experience. Hence this description may simply seem trivial to them.

To Paul, though, who had experienced her bad behaviour for many years, he immediately felt an unpleasant atmosphere when she started behaving like this. As far as he could see, she did not consider that she was messing his arrangements up, nor that his meal would not be ready on time and that he would then have to start eating later than everyone else. She seemed to have no notion of keeping her word, of politeness, of not hurting other people's feelings. It seemed that it did not matter to her how badly she behaved to other people. As long as she could do the task that she currently had on her mind, that was all she cared about.

This was how she conducted herself in all matters (not just in the kitchen). She arranged something with Paul, agreed, but then did the opposite without even consulting him or telling him that she was changing what he thought he had arranged with her. And if there was anything she would like done or changed, she would never talk about it, nor even just mention it; she would suddenly start aggressively shouting her demands at people. This sort of behaviour created an unpleasant atmosphere, which left Paul feeling on-edge while in her presence.

These were his experiences of past Christmases, and of his mother's behaviour in general. Her behaviour made the day an unpleasant experience. But if Paul stayed at his own home, he would miss all that, and would probably enjoy the day. He had been pondering this problem, recalling the last two years, then he mentioned to Susan:

"I'm not going to my mother's for Christmas day—it makes it difficult, me being a vegetarian; I'd have to cook my meal at the same time that she prepares the other food, and I don't want all the fuss around the oven."

Even though we now know the history behind his comment, it is perhaps still not clear exactly what Paul meant by the phrase 'fuss around the oven'. But as we will see later (on page 38), Paul understood this phrase to be referring to all the personality friction between himself and his mother that usually arose around the oven. It was this that he thought of as the 'fuss' around the oven.

The changed meaning of Paul's opening comment

When you read the above comment this second time, your understanding of the words would have been completely different from when you first read the comment a few pages ago. You probably felt that the words suddenly came into focus and you could properly understand them for the first time. This is because you have now heard some of the history behind the comment, so you can more easily see the words in the way that Paul had intended them. When you first read the comment, the words may have seemed vague, and may not have connected with any strong meaning in your mind. But after hearing the history, then re-reading the comment, all the words would have seemed to come to life, to suddenly have a vivid meaning for the first time. This is an important point. If you keep in mind these two experiences—what you understood in the comment when you first read it, and what you understood in the comment when you re-read it after hearing the history—if you keep these two experiences in mind, this will enable you to more easily understand some of the following passages. The following maxim summarizes this situation:

Understanding the history behind a person's comment may help you to understand their comment as they intended it.

Maxims, such as this one, are coined throughout this book. They are all reproduced in the final chapter, together with an explanation that summarizes the reasoning behind the maxim and also describes how you could apply the maxim in your daily life.

3. Susan's understanding of Paul's opening comment

When Susan heard Paul's opening comment, what meaning did she understand in his words? She was not aware of Paul's history behind his comment, which you have now read. Therefore she heard his words in a similar way to the way that you did *before* you had read about Paul's past experiences.

When we hear a comment like this, and we are not aware of the history behind it, how do we interpret the comment? To understand this, we will look in detail at the thoughts and memories that ran through Susan's mind while she was listening to Paul.

When she heard the first part of the comment ("I'm not going to my mother's for Christmas day"), she understood these words immediately. Most people would have no difficulty understanding these words. This is because the comment was giving directions about the physical world, and in this area there is not usually a communication problem. The comment was simply saying that Paul was not going to a particular location on a certain day. The phrases that gave the location and the day were: *mother's* and: *Christmas day*. Both these phrases are familiar words and most people would immediately understand them. If you were talking to someone about your own mother's house, or *their* mother's house, they would immediately know the location that you were talking about. Or if they had never known their own mother, or their mother did not have a house, they would still be able to understand the comment, even though they did not have any personal experience of the exact things that you were talking about. This is because they were familiar with the concept of a 'house' and the concept of a person's 'mother'. Therefore, they could easily imagine a meaning to Paul's comment, and the meaning that they imagined would be the same one¹ that Paul had intended when he used the words: "I'm not going to my mother's for Christmas day". The comment was a simple statement about the physical world,

¹ Or very similar. In fact, so similar that, for our present purposes, we can assume that all people would understand the same meaning. Clearly, we may all have different associations about our mother, and these feelings will colour the exact meaning that we understand in the term: *our mother's house*. But for our present purposes, these differences are not important.

which most people would be able to immediately understand. When our comments give simple directions about the physical world, there is not usually a communication problem.

Susan then heard the next part of Paul's comment ("...—it makes it difficult, me being a vegetarian..."). When she heard this, no immediate meaning came to her. She was familiar with the words 'difficult' and 'vegetarian', but when you put these words together into the comment ("...—it makes it difficult, me being a vegetarian..."), the comment as a whole is not making a simple statement about the physical world. The comment is stating an opinion. But what do I mean by 'opinion' (in this context), and why did this make it harder for Susan to understand the words?

We only form these sorts of 'opinions' after we have had a particular experience and we have then thought about that experience and come to some sort of conclusion about the experience. This conclusion is then our 'opinion'. In Paul's case, to form his opinion, he had experienced something like the following:

On past Christmases he had had bad experiences of his mother's personality. He was a vegetarian, and he could not trust her to cook his meals, and she was not a very good cook anyway, so he felt that the only option he had when he ate at his mother's house was to cook his own meals. Over the past few years, he had attempted to do this on each Christmas morning. His mother agreed with him which oven rings he could use. While he was cooking, she would do things like secretly adding extra salt to the meal he was preparing, or interfering in some other way; or she would change her mind, saying that she now needed to use the ring that he was using, so that this would prevent him from cooking his meal at all. She would usually do these sorts of things in an aggressive manner, which created a bad atmosphere, made Paul feel uncomfortable, and made the experience of Christmas day stressful and irritating. After thinking about these experiences, he had come to the conclusion that it would be much better not to spend Christmas day at this mother's house because the experience would be unpleasant, whereas if he stayed at his own home he would enjoy the day. This conclusion of Paul's was the 'opinion' that he was expressing in his opening comment.

How do we choose the words to express an opinion?

When we want to express something like this, we have to decide for ourselves what words to use. This is because there are no set words or phrases that can be used to express these sorts of experiences (words that everybody uses and understands in the same way). Whereas, if we want to express something about the physical world, there are set words and phrases that we can use for most of the objects, actions and locations. These standard words exist because it is possible to teach them, and it is possible to teach them because

all the standard objects, actions and locations can be demonstrated. With all the common words, this usually happens in early childhood when our mother holds up an object (which demonstrates that object to us) and then uses the standard word for that object. In our mind, that standard word is then linked with our experience of that object. And since all other people have also been taught to associate that object with that same word, this enables communication about the physical world to take place. But when we want to express an opinion, we find that there are no standard words or phrases that we can use to do this. This is because opinions cannot be demonstrated, and this makes it impossible to teach standard words or phrases for them. We each tend to develop opinions as we go through life. We do this as we gradually acquire experiences and then find the time to reflect on them, which enables us to develop our own conclusions or observations about people or about other aspects of life. At the moment we form these conclusions or observations, there is no way that we can demonstrate them to other people, so it would not be possible for us to ask which words or phrases we could use to express them—because other people would have no way of knowing which experiences, observations or conclusions we were referring to. They are hidden inside our head and cannot be demonstrated. For the same reason, other people could not have instructed us on which words to use beforehand, because there was no way that they could have demonstrated the experiences to us, so it would not have been possible for them to tell us which words to use. So, when we want to express an opinion, we each have to decide for ourselves which words to use.

Paul decided to use the words: “—it makes it difficult, me being a vegetarian; I’d have to cook my meal at the same time that she prepares the other food, and I don’t want all the fuss around the oven.” He *could* have said:

“My mother’s a pig; I’m not going there on Christmas day.” Or:

“I’m not going to my mother’s on Christmas day; she doesn’t know how to behave; if you try to do anything with her, she always creates difficulties, and makes the whole day a nightmare.” Or:

“I hate going to my mother’s on Christmas day; I’m not doing it any more.”

All the above comments are ways that people might have expressed these experiences, and there are literally hundreds of other comments that Paul could have put together to try to express these same experiences. But with any of these comments, how would Susan (or anyone else) have interpreted each comment, so that she could understand the opinion that Paul was trying to express? Because these types of comments are not using words or phrases in a standard way, when we come to interpret them, there is a certain amount of guesswork involved. Usually, the main method that we use is to try to recall an experience or conclusion from our own life that *could* also be ex-

pressed with the same words, and once we have found one of these, we would then assume that this exact experience was what Paul's words were referring to. So, when Susan heard these words, what past experiences of her own came to her mind?

To answer this, we need to put ourselves in Susan's position. To do that, we need to first imagine that we have not read the above passages about Paul's past experiences, and then this might enable us to understand how Susan might have interpreted the comment. But first, to give us an insight into how our mind interprets such comments, the following section looks at four different interpretations of Paul's words:

Four interpretations of the same comment: "It makes it difficult, me being a vegetarian."

Imagine that a stranger had just said to you: "It makes it difficult, me being a vegetarian." They had said this as an opening comment, so that there were no previous comments in the conversation. Also, you knew nothing about the person's history, nor about their opinions or experiences connected with being a vegetarian. What meaning would you have understood in their comment?

The key words were 'difficult' and 'vegetarian'. Therefore, to interpret this comment, you would have probably started trying to recall any past experiences that you may have had related to 'difficulties' and vegetarianism. Here are some example experiences that *some* people may have had:

Example 1: you are a vegetarian

Suppose you were a vegetarian and whenever you went to a restaurant, they did not have a main course that you were able to eat, and if they had suggested some other dish, you usually felt that you did not trust them because in the past you had found that non-vegetarian chefs tended to use things like animal-based stock which made the meal inedible for vegetarians, but the chefs were unaware of this situation, which meant that they *believed* the meal was vegetarian, but it was not. Because of this you now tended not to trust such chefs.

Example 2: you have a vegetarian friend

Suppose you were *not* a vegetarian, but you had a close friend who was and you would sometimes go out with them during the day, or in the evening. You might have been walking round trying to find somewhere to eat, and you kept suggesting restaurant after restaurant, but each time you did this, they looked at the menu and decided that the restaurant was not suitable because it

did not seem to properly cater for vegetarians. But the restaurant would have been perfectly suitable for you. All you wanted to do was to sit down somewhere and eat something; you did not really care about which restaurant you ate in. Regardless of this, you had to keep walking further and further to try to find somewhere else.

Here's another experience. This one is again connected with eating in restaurants but the experience is entirely different from the previous two examples:

Example 3: your friend is a vegetarian; a different view of the 'difficulties'

Again, suppose you were *not* a vegetarian, but you had a friend who was. Whenever you ate a meal in a restaurant with them, and the waiter was taking the order, the experience was usually something like the following. Your friend would start going through the menu with the waiter, asking him what the exact ingredients of each meal were. The waiter usually had to go to the kitchen to ask the chef. The waiter would come back and answer the question, but your friend would not be satisfied with the answer and would ask for more detail. The waiter would go to the kitchen again and come back with an answer and your friend might then decide that they did not want that meal because there was something about the way it was cooked, or the ingredients, that they did not like, so they would start asking similar questions about another meal on the menu and the whole process would start again. It was sometimes clear that the waiter was becoming more and more irritated with this, and you found it more and more embarrassing because of the difficulty that this was causing the waiter, and also because of the fact that it was taking so much time and was holding up everybody else on the table—since they could not place their order, or start eating their meal until your friend had finished cross-examining the waiter and had finally placed their order. You also found this situation uncomfortable because you did not usually like to create unnecessary difficulties for people. You were sensitive to other people's feelings, and so you would usually try to avoid doing things like this, which would cause problems for the waiter and for the other people round the table, and which could all have been avoided if your friend had simply picked a meal from the menu and not gone through this long routine that they went through each time.

Example 4: your partner is a vegetarian; yet another interpretation of the 'difficulties'

Again, suppose you were *not* a vegetarian, but your partner was, and when you were invited to a dinner party or barbecue, your partner would usually

refuse to go. They did not feel confident that there would have been any food there that they could have eaten because whatever the hosts told them about the food, they would still suspect that it would have been contaminated with meat or other animal products, due to the same cooking utensils being used to prepare both meals, or due to the chef not being aware that some of the ingredients they were using would have been repulsive to vegetarians. This was frustrating for you, because you would usually have liked to have gone to the event. Or, if your partner *did* agree to go to something like a barbecue or a buffet, they might have refused to eat any of the food, or just put a few items on their plate and suspiciously picked at them. When this happened, this made you feel as though you were not joining in with the party because your partner was refusing to eat the food and was not therefore fully taking part in the party, and since your partner was not taking part, it made it seem to you as though *you* were also not taking part. This made you feel as though your partner was holding you back, was preventing you from properly taking part in the party. You also felt that it was preventing you from accepting the hospitality of your friends. And on other occasions, if you visited friends and you were offered cakes or biscuits, your partner would refuse to accept them in case they had had some ingredient in them that they found unacceptable. This also made you feel in a similar way.

Conclusions on examples 1 to 4

If you had had one of the above experiences, or any experience similar to them, you would have been likely to have recalled your experience when you had heard the stranger (mentioned above) say to you: “It makes it difficult, me being a vegetarian.” And you would then have imagined that your *own* experience was the exact one that the stranger was talking about. The particular meaning that we see in other people’s comments is dependant on our own past experiences. You might have a group of people all listening to the same comment and each of them might understand a different meaning in the comment. For example, if we assume that the four example experiences above belonged to four different people, and these same four people were listening to Paul saying: “It makes it difficult, me being a vegetarian,” they would each have understood a different meaning in his comment:

The first person (who was a vegetarian) would interpret the word ‘difficult’ by recalling their own experiences of difficulties related to their own vegetarianism. Hence they would understand Paul to be saying that he would feel reluctant to go into restaurants because there would probably not be anything on the menu that he would be able to eat, and if he *did* pick something, all the time he was eating it, he would suspect that the meal was not really edible for vegetarians. There would also be the awkward and embarrassing problem of trying to pick what to eat when there was not really anything on

the menu that was edible for him—embarrassing for him and for the waiter and restaurant. And Paul would also feel a sense of alienation, of being shunned by the restaurant, and of being let down by them due to them not being able to cater for him. All these things are what the first person would have understood in Paul’s comment, and they might have nodded and said “Yes, I know exactly what you mean.” But of course, Paul meant nothing of the sort.

The second person (who had a friend who was a vegetarian) would interpret Paul’s use of the word ‘difficult’ by recalling the difficulties that their own friend’s vegetarianism caused for *them*. Hence they would understand Paul to be saying that his own vegetarianism causes difficulties for Paul’s friends when they were all trying to pick a restaurant to eat at. It would mean that they would never be able to find a restaurant that Paul was happy with, so they would all have to spend much extra time and effort walking round trying to find an acceptable restaurant, whereas if Paul’s friends were *not* with Paul, they would be able to eat at any restaurant. This situation would often turn the trip from a pleasurable experience into hard work. All these experiences are what the second person would understand Paul to mean by the word ‘difficult’, and they might also nod, along with the first person, and say “Yes, I too know exactly what you mean,” while looking knowingly at Paul and welcoming his apology for all these difficulties that he usually created for his friends. But of course, nothing could have been further from Paul’s mind.

The third person (who also had a friend who was a vegetarian) would also interpret Paul’s use of the word ‘difficult’ to be referring to the problems that Paul’s vegetarianism would cause for Paul’s own friends. Paul would embarrass everyone at restaurants by asking the waiter for more and more detail about each item on the menu, so that the waiter would have to keep returning to the kitchen to cross-examine the chef. This would inconvenience everyone at the table, because they would have to wait longer before they could place their own order and finally start eating, and it would cause unnecessary extra work for the waiter and chef. Paul’s friends would find all this embarrassing and awkward. This is what the third person would have understood Paul to mean by his use of the word ‘difficult’, and while the first and second person were nodding, the third person might frown disapprovingly at Paul, and perhaps shake their head at the thought of Paul’s bad behaviour.

The fourth person (whose partner was a vegetarian) would understand the word ‘difficult’ to be referring to the problems that Paul’s vegetarianism would usually cause for Paul’s own partner. Paul would usually refuse to go to dinner parties, barbecues or buffets, because he would not be able to eat any of the food, or would not feel comfortable eating it. He would also refuse to eat any snacks that were offered to him when he and his partner visited

friends. This would make it seem as though Paul was putting up a barrier¹ that was isolating him and his partner from other people at social gatherings, or was preventing them from attending at all. This would be frustrating for Paul's partner, because she would always feel left out at social gatherings, and isolated from most of their other friends. All these experiences are what the fourth person would understand Paul to mean by his use of the word 'difficult', and while the first two people were nodding at him, and the third frowning disapprovingly, the fourth person might take it upon themselves to spit at him. And Paul, of course, would find their response puzzling.

What is happening here? Why is it that this single comment can be interpreted to mean all these different things by different people?

On page 15, it was said that there are two types of comments—comments that make a statement about the physical world, and comments that state an opinion. When we want to make a comment about the physical world, we find that all the objects, locations, and actions that we want to describe all have set words for them, which all people understand in the same way. But when we come to express an opinion, there are no set words or phrases that all people understand in the same way. We each have to decide for ourselves which words or phrases to use to express our opinion. There are a number of ways that we can solve this problem. The method used in the above example, is to use a certain type of word; these words have a vague, adaptable meaning, so that we can use them to mean many different things (such as the word: 'difficult'). When you hear the word 'difficult' on its own, it has a simple meaning. And if you use the word to describe something about the physical world, such as in the comment: "Climbing over that wall is difficult," the meaning of the comment as a whole is straightforward, and most people would understand the same meaning in the comment. Yet if you take this simple word and use it in a comment that is describing an opinion (such as in the comment: "It makes it difficult, me being a vegetarian"), then the comment as a whole has many different meanings, depending on the past experiences of each listener (as in examples 1 to 4 on page 18, where the same word 'difficult' was interpreted by four different people to be describing four completely different experiences). It is because these words have such adapt-

¹ This phrase 'putting up a barrier' is, itself, expressing an opinion. The phrase could be interpreted to mean many different things, depending on the past experiences of the listener. You have read the passage that came before this, so you know what experience the phrase 'putting up a barrier' is intended to refer to. But if you had not read the passage that came before, you would have been left to 'guess' what the phrase might have meant. You would have done this by looking through your own past experiences, searching for one that *seemed* to fit the words.

able meanings that they are useful for expressing opinions¹. There are also other methods that we can use to attempt to express our opinions but they all cause similar problems when other people then try to interpret our comment².

When we have expressed an opinion (no matter which method we have used) and someone else then hears our comment, because we have not used words or phrases in a standard way, the other person has to use a certain amount of guesswork to try to interpret our comment. In this situation, we all use the same technique to do this. We look for one of our own past experiences that the comment *could* be used to express. Our mind does this automatically and we are not usually aware of the process. We would only usually be aware of the memory of an experience popping into our mind (that is, if our mind *can* find one of our own experiences that the words *could* be used to express). Once this happens, we think that this experience of our own is what the other person's comment is about. But because each person has had different experiences, and may have drawn different conclusions from their experiences, each person who hears a comment that is stating an opinion, will probably hear a different meaning in it. And sometimes these meanings can be so different that they bare no resemblance to each other.

Back to the main example

But so far, we have not looked at the comment in its correct context. When Susan heard this comment, Paul had just said something about Christmas day and his mother's house. He had then made his comment: "It makes it difficult, me being a vegetarian." When we hear someone make a comment like this, we know that their comment is referring to what they had said before. So Susan knew that Paul was saying that something about Christmas day and his mother's house was made difficult because he was a vegetarian. This was the way that Susan heard the comment while the conversation was taking place. Paul then went on to make the remainder of his comment. This meant that Susan had only about one second to interpret Paul's words so far, before she had to start thinking about what the remainder of his comment meant. But at that point, if she could have stopped the conversation, sat back and thought about it, how would she have interpreted Paul's words so far?

¹ This topic is covered in more detail in the passage on page 34: *The two different areas*; and in the passage on page 141: *Constructing a descriptive comment using vague words*.

² These other methods are covered in the passages: *How do we choose the words to express an opinion?* p.134; *Using a descriptive comment*, p.136; *Some standard words for opinions*, p.138; *Constructing a descriptive comment using vague words*, p.141; *Expressing an opinion by using our favourite slang phrase*, p.146.

Susan had had no experience of vegetarianism. Therefore, to put yourself in Susan's situation, you need to imagine that you are not a vegetarian, have had no experience of vegetarian friends, have never even met one, and have never even thought about the practice and have never had any reason to. You are aware of the word 'vegetarian' and that it means: a person who does not eat meat. Apart from this, your mind is a complete blank on the subject. In this situation, when you hear the comment "Concerning mother's house and Christmas day: it makes it difficult, me being a vegetarian," it is likely that no strong impressions come to your mind at all. You hear the second part of the comment: "It makes it difficult, me being a vegetarian" but the words do not evoke any past experiences of your own that relate to Christmas day and your mother's house, and the words do not bring to your mind any of your own ideas or opinions. Your mind remains a blank. This was the situation that Susan was in while the conversation was taking place. But if we imagined that we were Susan, and we took all the time we needed to think about this, what meaning might we have understood in the comment?

To interpret the comment, you might first start trying to imagine any sort of 'difficult' situation that could be related to vegetarianism and Christmas day at your mother's house. The first thing you might think of is that you would not be able to eat any of the turkey, whereas the other people there obviously would be eating turkey. This might cause various difficult situations. For instance, you might imagine that this would cause arguments between you and some of the other people there; there might be arguments about vegetarianism; you might imagine certain of the family members being intolerant about this and criticizing you for practising vegetarianism (you would be very likely to image this scenario if your own family had had a member who was always behaving in this intolerant way towards other people's beliefs and choices). Or you might imagine yourself being offended that other people at the table were eating turkey whilst you had taken the decision not to. You might imagine yourself seeing this as their insensitivity towards your feelings, or as them insulting your principles. This might cause you to feel uncomfortable or offended, which is another type of difficult situation. Or you might imagine a different situation, but it is likely to concern food or arguments about the practice of vegetarianism, since the comment we are trying to interpret mentions a difficult situation related to vegetarianism.

But while the conversation was taking place, Susan had only about one second to understand Paul's comment so far. In that time, no strong impressions came to her at all, since she had had no experiences or opinions that the words had caused her to recall. In general, when we hear someone else's words, if our mind cannot recall a suitable experience of our own that *seems* to fit the words, the words will have no meaning to us and our mind will ig-

nore them¹. By that time, if the other person is still speaking, we will have then moved on to listening to the remaining parts of their comment and trying to recall any experiences of our own that *those* words seemed to fit. We are so used to this process going on in our mind that we are usually unaware of it. To become aware of it, you might need to consciously look out for this happening within your own mind when you are next listening to someone talking (or, indeed, when you are reading words that require you to interpret them, as you are now).

So far, Susan had understood Paul's comment in this way: he had said that he was not going to his mother's for Christmas day, and he had then mentioned something about vegetarianism.

The remainder of Paul's opening comment—our mind does not interpret all the words

Paul then made the final part of his comment: "...I'd have to cook my meal at the same time that she prepares the other food, and I don't want all the fuss around the oven." What did Susan understand by this? The first part of the comment ("...I'd have to cook my meal at the same time that she prepares the other food..."), was making a simple statement about the physical world. As was said on page 15, with comments about the physical world, we can usually immediately understand the comment. But while the conversation was taking place, what meaning did Susan understand in these words? In the first half of the statement, the phrase 'cook my meal' had a simple meaning. It meant the process of performing a particular action—the process of 'cooking a meal'. This process is something that we are all familiar with, in one way or another. We might have cooked many meals ourselves, or seen other people cook meals, or our experience of 'cooking a meal' might consist of opening a tin and heating its contents in a saucepan, or placing a piece of bread in a toaster. Whatever our own main experience of 'cooking' is, when we hear the phrase 'cook my meal' this experience of ours will come to our mind. If we have a strong opinion that we have formed about this experience of ours, then this opinion might also come to our mind when we hear the phrase 'cook my meal'. With Susan, when she heard Paul use this phrase, she recalled her own experiences of the process of 'cooking a meal' (see later).

She then heard him say: "...at the same time that she prepares the other food..." This, again, is a simple statement about the physical world. Susan immediately understood these words, but at the moment she heard this, she could see no significance in the words. From Paul's point of view, these

¹ See the passage on page 35: *People often do not seem to hear all our words.*

words were significant, because he was talking about the problem of himself and his mother interacting with each other, and the friction between them whilst they were both trying to do their cooking at the same time. But to Susan, the words did not seem to be saying anything of any importance, since she was unaware of the history behind Paul's comment. The words seemed to have no more significance than if Paul had said: 'I'm cooking my meal in the kitchen,' or: 'I'm cooking my meal using utensils.' If we heard someone say this, the main meaning we would hear in their comment is the fact that they were cooking a meal. Therefore, when Susan heard him say: "...I'd have to cook my meal at the same time that she prepares the other food...", the only part of this that 'sank in' were his words: 'I'd have to cook my meal' and her mind ignored the other words.

The 'speeding car' analogy

An important point to remember when you are considering the above paragraph, is that Susan's mind had about one second to interpret Paul's comment, and her mind had to do this while Paul was still talking, making further comments which her mind would need to interpret. As readers, though, we are not under this same pressure. We can take all the time we need to read a sentence, then pause to think about it, then read the sentence again if we want to. But while a conversation is taking place, the listener has to interpret the other person's words extremely quickly, and there is not usually any time available to stop and think about the words. Therefore, the process might be likened to the experience of peering out of a speeding car's window at buildings as they pass by, and you can only take in fleeting glimpses of the most prominent landmarks. You cannot stop and analyse every detail of a building's structure. As with conversation: we tend to hear a few prominent phrases here and there, and we might not even notice a lot of the other words that are spoken. And in the time available, our mind has to then use these few prominent phrases to tell us what the meaning of the other person's comment is¹.

Meanwhile, Susan was then listening to the last part of Paul's comment: "...and I don't want all the fuss around the oven." In this part of Paul's comment, he was using the phrase 'fuss around the oven' to express an opinion.

What is the difference between an 'opinion' and a statement about the physical world?

¹ This analogy, though useful, is an oversimplification. See the passage on page 35: *People often do not seem to hear all our words*, which gives a more accurate description of this scenario.

So far in this chapter (starting on page 15), an ‘opinion’ has been defined in the following way:

We might have a particular experience, or a series of experiences, and following one of these experiences, we might do some thinking about the experiences. We might start wondering what was happening in them, why a person was behaving in a certain way, or why we had reacted in a certain way to certain people. This might cause us to come to a conclusion, or make an observation, or to invent our own theory about why people behave in a certain way in certain situations. This conclusion or observation or theory of ours is our ‘opinion’. (An ‘opinion’, though, does not have to be about people; it may be in any area other than the physical world. It may be concerning politics, religion, philosophy, and so on.)

Later, if we want to express our opinion, we will need to decide for ourselves which words or phrases to use. This is because there are no set words to express these sorts of things (words which all people use and understand in the same way). One method that we can use is to construct a comment using vague words (such as ‘difficult’ or ‘fuss’). These are useful because we can interpret them to mean almost anything that we want, so our comment *seems* to us to express our opinion (such as with the comment ‘it makes it difficult, me being a vegetarian’)¹. Then, when somebody else hears our comment, because its words or phrases do not have a standard meaning, they will need to use a certain amount of guesswork to try to work out what we mean. People usually do this by trying to recall a past experience or observation of their *own* that our phrase *seems* to fit. If they can recall one, then they assume that this past experience of their own was the exact one that *we* had in mind.

These are the processes that we usually go through when we are stating an ‘opinion’ of our own, or interpreting someone else’s ‘opinion’.

This is quite different from when we make a statement about the physical world. With statements about the physical world, such as: ‘The front door to my house is red’, there are usually set words and phrases for all the objects, actions, or locations (words which all people use and understand in the same way). For example, the words ‘front door’, ‘house’, and ‘red’ are words that most people will understand in the same way.

Why are there no standard words for expressing opinions?

There are standard words to describe the physical world because the objects, locations and actions can be easily demonstrated, so it is possible to teach standard words to use for them. For instance, you might point a child towards a house and say “That is a house.” The child then has the experience of see-

¹ There are also other methods that we can use to construct our comment, but they all cause similar problems. See footnote 2 on page 23.

ing a house and they know that we use the word ‘house’ to refer to that object. Whereas with opinions, these cannot be demonstrated to other people.

For example, if there *were* set phrases for every opinion, and opinions could be demonstrated, then in Paul’s case, when he was learning the standard phrases for opinions, there would have been a teacher of his who had also experienced the exact sequence of events that Paul would later go through with his own mother in relation to preparing a vegetarian meal in her kitchen while she was preparing the Christmas meal, and the teacher’s mother would have also behaved towards the teacher with the same aggressive manner, the breaking of agreements and with all the other behaviour that created a bad atmosphere, and the teacher would have felt the same aversion to all this bad behaviour that Paul would also later feel and the teacher would have also drawn all the same conclusions that Paul would later do. In this situation, the teacher would have experienced exactly what Paul would experience later in his life. And in the classroom, the teacher could have then recalled these experiences of their own, pointed inside their own head to show the experiences to Paul and told him, “To express this, we say: ‘fuss around the oven,’” and Paul would have then known the standard phrase that he should later use to express that particular set of observations. And this same process would be used to teach all other people to use this same phrase to refer to this same sequence of experiences and the effect that these had had on Paul; and there would also be a similar standard phrase that all people could use for each of the similar observations that most of us will make throughout our life.

Of course, this cannot be done. Opinions cannot be demonstrated to other people (our opinions are invisible, are locked inside our own memory), and therefore it is not possible to teach standard words to express them. Each person has to discover their own opinions for themselves—in their own time and in their own way—and once they have discovered each opinion, they must then decide for themselves what words or phrases to use to express it.

The last part of Paul’s comment (“...and I don’t want all the fuss around the oven.”) was stating an opinion. Therefore, the comment could mean any number of different things, and it is up to each person who hears it, to decide for themselves what it means. In Susan’s case, what did she understand by it?

The key phrase here was ‘fuss around the oven’. What did Susan understand by this?

As was said before, when we interpret a phrase like this, our mind does this by looking for a past opinion or experience of our own that the words *seem* to fit. In Susan’s case, when she heard Paul say “...and I don’t want all the fuss around the oven,” this did not cause her to recall one of her own past experiences. Therefore, after she heard him say this, she was left wondering

what he meant by it. In this situation, our mind would use other methods to try to interpret the phrase.

Interpreting a phrase by relating it to what has been said before

Another method that our mind uses is to look at the phrase's context. To see this from Susan's point of view, we need to look again at what Paul had said immediately before this final part of his opening comment. Immediately before, he had said "...I'd have to cook my meal at the same time that she prepares the other food..." As was explained on page 26, when Susan heard this, the only meaning that 'sank in' were Paul's words: "I'd have to cook my meal." Therefore this was *all* that she understood by his words (her mind 'ignored' his other words).

But what did Susan understand by his words 'I'd have to cook my meal'? We all have different experiences and opinions about cooking, therefore this phrase ("I'd have to cook my meal") will mean different things to different people. When you hear the words: 'cook my meal', what comes to *your* mind? Maybe you recall a recent argument that you have been having with your partner over the problem of sharing the cooking tasks, or over deciding what to eat, or an argument over shopping or the washing up or something else that is related to the process of 'cooking a meal'; or maybe you recall a general feeling of delight that you experience in the pleasure of cooking; or maybe you do not have any strong opinions or experiences related to 'cooking a meal' and therefore when you hear the words 'I'd have to cook my meal', there are no particular experiences or opinions that come to your mind. The words 'cook my meal' will mean different things to different people.

In Susan's case, let us assume that when she heard Paul say, "I'd have to cook my meal," his words brought to her mind the experience of preparing a particular meal that she had prepared many times. Then she heard Paul's final words ("...and I don't want all the fuss around the oven."). Since these words came after his previous ones (and when Susan heard his previous ones, she had recalled an experience of preparing a meal), her mind would assume that Paul's final words were something to do with this 'food-preparing' experience that she had just remembered. But in this 'food-preparing' experience, Susan could not immediately see any detail of it that seemed to fit the words 'fuss around the oven'. When we are in this situation, our mind would then automatically start trying to recall any other experiences we have that are related to 'preparing food', and looking at these other experiences to try to find a particular detail in any of them that might fit Paul's words: 'fuss around the oven'. If our mind manages to find a detail that seems to fit the words, then this detail is what we would understand as the meaning of the

phrase ‘fuss around the oven’. In Susan’s case, the exact meaning that she found would depend on what she felt about these past experiences of her own that her mind was shifting through. Let us take a couple of examples:

Suppose that Susan had done a lot of cooking. When she heard Paul’s final words, she might have recalled an experience like this one. She was preparing a meal, which was almost finished. At this point, she had three or four pans on the go, and every task had to be done quickly, so as to make sure it was all ready at the same time and that some things did not end up being over-cooked. Because she was having to work so quickly and juggle several different tasks, she started to feel flustered and a little panicked. When she heard Paul’s final words ‘fuss around the oven’, this feeling came to her mind. Therefore she thought that ‘fuss around the oven’ meant this feeling of being flustered and panicked when she was nearing the end of preparing a complicated meal.

Alternatively, suppose that Susan’s entire experience of cooking consisted of emptying a tin into a saucepan and heating the saucepan, or placing something under the grill to cook it, or perhaps placing a packet into the microwave, turning the timer and opening the packet when it was cooked. Suppose that this was the extent of her cooking experience and she had never learned (nor wanted to learn) any skill beyond this. She was perfectly happy with this, because (to her) food ‘all tastes the same’ and it just served to ‘fill a gap’¹. Then one day she was visiting a friend, and the friend started preparing a meal from raw ingredients, using several pans and different cooking methods. Susan was disgusted. The whole ‘palaver’ seemed like a foolish waste of time and totally unnecessary when food was only something to ‘fill a gap’. And after the meal was prepared, there was the further ‘palaver’ of washing all the saucepans and cleaning the surfaces. Her estimation of her friend went down considerably. When Susan heard Paul’s final words ‘fuss around the oven’, this experience came to her mind.

It so happens that this second example is nearest to Susan’s experience. Therefore she thought that Paul’s words: ‘fuss around the oven’ meant: the ‘palaver’ of using raw ingredients and several pots and pans in a lengthy process and creating lots of unnecessary washing up to do afterwards.

¹ The phrase ‘all tastes the same’ is, itself, being used to express an opinion, as is the following phrase: ‘fill a gap’. These sorts of phrases are sometimes used by people whose appreciation of food is less well developed than it is with other people. As with all opinions, you would only be able to understand the phrases in the way they were meant if you had also had the same experience that the speaker had had in mind. If you had never had that particular experience, you would only be capable of misinterpreting these phrases (by recalling a different experience of your own, and assuming that *your* experience was what the speaker had had in mind). But usually you would not be aware that you were thinking of a different experience.

This was what Susan understood by Paul's phrase: 'fuss around the oven'. But you have read Paul's history behind his comment, so you know that when Paul said 'fuss around the oven', he was referring to all the personality friction that usually arose between him and his mother whenever he had to make any arrangements with her, or cook a meal in her kitchen at the same time that she was cooking a meal. But because Susan was not aware of any of Paul's history, she could only use her *own* experiences to interpret what he meant by his words. And it so happens that she had never had the particular experiences that Paul was expressing, so it was not possible for her to recall those experiences when she heard his words. Instead, she had no choice but to recall one of her own experiences that *seemed* to match the words he used. And as we have seen, the experience that she recalled was completely different from the one that he had had in mind. But at the time, there was no way that Susan (or Paul) could have been aware of this.

The entire of Paul's opening comment

Taking the whole of Paul's opening comment from Susan's point of view, Paul had said: "I'm not going to my mother's for Christmas day—it makes it difficult, me being a vegetarian; I'd have to cook my meal at the same time that she prepares the other food, and I don't want all the fuss around the oven."

While Susan was listening to this, she interpreted his words in the ways that have been described. To represent her understanding of Paul's comment, we could replace his words with the following ones:

Susan's understanding: (*I'm not going to my mother's for Christmas day because I would have to cook my own meal, and I don't want all the 'palaver' of using raw ingredients and several pots and pans in a lengthy process and creating lots of unnecessary washing up to do afterwards.*)

But it occurred to her that if he spent Christmas day at his own home, he would still have to prepare his own meal anyway, so by not going to his mother's for Christmas, he would not be getting out of the 'fuss around the oven'. When this occurred to her, she replied: "But wouldn't you have that anyway?" meaning: (*But if you stayed at your own home, you would still have to cook, so wouldn't you still have all that 'palaver' even if you don't go to your mother's house?*)

Conclusions from this chapter

When we are listening to a person speaking and we understand a meaning in their comment, common sense tells us that this is what is happening:

The person had something they wanted to express. To do this, they thought up a comment. This comment was made up of separate words. Each of the separate words had a particular meaning. When all the words were put together, the individual meanings of the words combined to make one overall meaning, which was the meaning of the comment. The person then spoke the comment, while we listened to them. We heard all the individual words. Each of these words had a particular meaning and we put all these meanings together to make one overall meaning. When we had done this, this was the meaning of the other person's comment. Therefore we had understood what they had meant.

Common sense tells us that this is how conversation works. But it does not work like this at all.

Words are meaningless sounds

Firstly, common sense tells us that each word has a particular meaning and that the two are inseparable, that the word somehow 'contains' or 'embodies' the meaning. But this is not the case at all. Words are simply sounds, and each of these 'sounds' has no more meaning than the bark of a dog does. However, we understand a meaning in a word by associating the word with a particular past experience of our own. For instance, the word 'door' is a meaningless sound, but we have all experienced *a rectangular frame that contains a panel of wood which is hinged on one side and which swings inward to allow us to pass through it and enter a building*. We have all experienced this object. And from an early age our mother pointed at this object and made the sound: 'door'. After she had done this a few times, this sound 'door' became associated in our mind with this object. From that moment onwards, when we see this object or want to talk about it, our mind recalls the sound: 'door', or when we hear someone else making the sound: 'door', our mind recalls our experience of this object. Therefore (in *our* mind), the word 'door' means all our own experiences of that hinged object that we pass through when we enter a building. Even though the word 'door' is a meaningless sound, because our mind associates this sound with all these experiences of ours, then (to us) this word seems extremely meaningful. This situation is easier to recognise when you hear a word that is new to you. At that moment, the word seems to have no meaning; nothing comes to your mind when you hear the word; your mind is just a blank. But when you know which one of your own past experiences that you should use this word for, then (to you) the word seems full of meaning. In general, we could say that words are meaningless sounds that we use as labels to refer to our own past experiences.

In the sentence above that was highlighted with italic type, this same principle applies to most of the words in the sentence. For instance, the words: ‘rectangular’, ‘frame’, ‘panel’, ‘wood’, ‘hinge’, ‘one side’, ‘building’, all these words are meaningless sounds, but we understand a meaning when we hear them because our mind has learnt to associate each of the sounds with a particular experience of our own, and it is this experience that we understand as the meaning. (With some of the other words in the italic-highlighted sentence—for instance: ‘contains’, ‘swings’, ‘inward’, ‘pass through’, ‘enter’—with these words our mind associates them with actions, rather than with objects, but the same principle applies; our mind has learnt to associate the sounds of these particular words with particular actions that we have experienced.¹)

This is how words and meaning work. The words themselves do not contain a particular meaning; each word is simply a meaningless sound. But in our mind we associate each word with a particular past experience of our own, and it is this experience of our own that we understand as the meaning of the word.

Why is this important? It is important to be aware of this process because this will enable us to understand why our comments are often misunderstood when we talk on certain topics (such as when we are attempting to discuss a relationship problem, for instance). This area is explored in detail in the following chapters². For the time being, the following maxim summarizes the situation:

Words are merely meaningless sounds which you have ‘imagined’ a meaning in. Do not automatically assume that other people will understand the same meaning in your words that you do.

The two different areas

When we make a comment, it might be in one of two areas. It could either be about something in the physical world, or it could be stating an ‘opinion’. In this chapter, an ‘opinion’ was defined in the following way:

¹ There are some other types of words in the sentence, but these are not of any significance. For example, in the comment, “The door is red,” the words ‘the’ and ‘is’ are just grammatical tools. These words do not refer to any particular experience. Most sentences contain these types of words but these do not generally cause communication problems, so for our present purposes, we can ignore them.

² See, in particular, the two chapters beginning on pages 127 and 153. But to understand those sections fully, you should first read all the preceding chapters.

After we have had a particular experience, we might do some thinking about it. We might start wondering what was happening, why a person behaved in a certain way, or why we reacted in a certain way to certain people. This might cause us to come to a conclusion, or make an observation, or to invent our own theory about why people behave in a certain way in certain situations. This conclusion or observation or theory of ours is our ‘opinion’.

When we want to make a statement about the physical world, we find that all the objects, locations, and actions have set words for them, which all people understand in the same way (for example, the words: ‘rectangular’, ‘wood’, ‘hinge’, ‘swing’, ‘building’). This is because these words can be taught to us. But when we come to express an opinion, there are no set words or phrases that all people understand in the same way. This is because opinions cannot be demonstrated, therefore standard words cannot be taught to express them¹. So, not only do we have to discover our own opinions, we also have to decide for ourselves how to express them. In effect, we have to invent our own phrases. There are a number of methods that we can use to do this. Most of these involve us using words with vague, adaptable meanings—words whose meanings we can twist around to mean almost anything that we want them to. And once we have constructed a comment in this way, then, to us, the comment *seems* to express our opinion exactly².

Comments that state ‘opinions’ will probably be misinterpreted

When we express opinions in a comment, and someone hears our comment, they then have to interpret it. But because we have usually used words or phrases that could mean many different things (such as the phrase ‘fuss around the oven,’ or: ‘It makes it difficult, me being a vegetarian’), then the listener has to use a certain amount of guesswork to work out what we mean. In the same way that we ‘invented’ our own meaning to the phrase we used, the listener also has to then invent *their* own meaning to our phrase.

The usual way that people do this, is to look for a past experience of their own that our comment *seems* to fit (in other words: an experience that *could* be expressed using this same comment). But usually our comment will have used one or more of these vague, adaptable phrases, and these phrases have such flexible meanings that the other person will be able to twist them round

¹ See the passage on page 27: *Why are there no standard words for expressing opinions?*

² There are other methods that can be used to express opinions, but they all cause similar problems. These are covered later and are all summarized in the passage starting on page 134 (see footnote 2 on page 23).

to mean almost anything that they want them to. Therefore, different people may recall different experiences from the one that *we* had in mind, and yet our comment may still *seem* to fit their experience, so they would assume that their *own* particular experience was the exact meaning that *we* intended in our comment. Sometimes these different meanings will bear absolutely no resemblance to each other—as with Paul’s and Susan’s different interpretations of the phrase: ‘fuss around the oven’. Paul understood it to mean the personality friction between him and his mother, and Susan understood it to mean the ‘palaver’ of using raw ingredients and several pots and pans in a lengthy process and creating lots of unnecessary washing up to do afterwards.

In general, it could be said that if the other person has not experienced what we are trying to express, they will either misinterpret our comment (by recalling a completely different experience of their own and thinking that that is the experience we had in mind) or they will not be able to understand our comment at all (because they have not been able to recall a past experience or opinion of their own that our comment *could* be used to express).

When these misinterpretations happen, sometimes it will be obvious to us that the other person has misinterpreted our words, but sometimes neither we nor the other person will be aware of this (as with the whole Paul and Susan conversation). The following two maxims summarize the situation:

When comments contain simple directions about the physical world, there is not usually a communication problem.

and:

When comments state ‘opinions’ they will probably be misinterpreted.

People often do not seem to hear all our words

When we make a comment to someone and they reply, we may sometimes notice that they have not understood our comment. From their reply, it may sometimes appear to us that they have only listened to one or two words out of our whole comment and that they are basing their reply on these one or two words but ignoring all the other words. Whereas (it seems to us) if they *had* listened to our entire comment, they would then have understood what we meant.

This scenario was first alluded to in the passage: *The speeding car analogy*, on page 26. That analogy is a useful one but it is an oversimplification of what is happening. More accurately, what is happening here is this. When we are interpreting a comment, we are looking for ‘an’ interpretation. As soon as ‘an’ experience or opinion comes to our mind, then we have understood the comment (as far as *we* are concerned), therefore we do not need to look fur-

ther. So, we have no reason to go on examining any of the other words in the comment and we will therefore move on and continue listening to what the speaker is saying next; or we will start making our reply. We will, in effect, ignore all the other words in the comment, once any *single* word or phrase in the comment has evoked a past experience or opinion of our own—regardless of what any of the other words might be ‘saying’, or how they might modify our understanding of the whole comment *if* we had had the time to take them in.

We all use this process to interpret other people’s comments during a live conversation. To the people who have made those comments, when they hear our reply, it may sometimes seem to them that we have only heard a few selected words of their comment, whereas, if we had listened to them all, we would have understood their *whole* comment as they had intended it, and not misinterpreted it due to this dim-witted tendency that we have of not properly listening to other people. It may *seem* like this, but this situation is an unfortunate result of the way that we all interpret other people’s comments, and often it cannot be avoided. The only instance where it may be avoided is when we have also had exactly the same experience that the person we are listening to is trying to communicate, and we had made the same observations about that experience and we tend to express these using similar words to the ones that they do. In this situation, we would only need to hear a few words of their comment and we would understand exactly what they were trying to communicate, because we had experienced it ourselves; and they would then probably think very highly of us, instead of thinking us dim-witted—all due to this mere coincidence of us both having shared an experience. (Of course every listener believes that they *have* shared the exact experience that the speaker is attempting to communicate, so this rare instance where they have *genuinely* shared the same experience, can only be detected by the speaker, and not by the listener themselves.) The following maxim summarizes this situation:

If a person’s reply makes it seem that they have not heard all the words in your comment, this may simply mean that they have not shared your experience.

4. Paul's understanding of Susan's reply: "But wouldn't you have that anyway?"

To open the conversation, Paul said: "I'm not going to my mother's for Christmas day—it makes it difficult, me being a vegetarian; I'd have to cook my meal at the same time that she prepares the other food, and I don't want all the fuss around the oven."

What did he mean by this? The only way to portray this accurately would be to repeat everything that was said (starting on page 12) about all his experiences related to past Christmases at his mother's house and the way those made him feel. But it would take too much time to repeat all that history here, so to jog our memory, we might summarize all that history with the following words:

Paul's understanding of his opening comment: (*I'm not going to my mother's for Christmas day. I'm a vegetarian, which she doesn't understand, so I can't trust her to prepare my food, and she is not a very good cook anyway, so it's best for me to cook my own meal. But we would both have to be using the oven at the same time, and when I make arrangements with her in the kitchen, she always goes back on what she has agreed, which prevents me from finishing my cooking. She does this in an aggressive and blunt manner. All this 'fuss around the oven' creates a bad atmosphere and makes the day an unpleasant experience. Therefore it's better to stay away all together.*)

Susan replied: "But wouldn't you have that anyway?"

What did Paul understand by this?

In order to understand a meaning in this, Paul needed to interpret what Susan meant when she used the words 'that' and 'anyway'. What was she referring to?

Let us look at each of these words in turn.

Suppose that you meet a friend of yours, and as their opening comment, your friend asks you the question: "But wouldn't you have that anyway?" Nothing had been said between you previously; your friend was asking this as the start of a new conversation. You would wonder what they meant by 'that'. You might say to them: "Wouldn't I have *what* anyway? I don't know what you're talking about."

Because of the way grammar works, we know that this question is referring to something that was said previously. In the question, the word ‘that’ means something like: ‘whatever we were talking about in our previous comments’. We all know this rule without having to think about it. Our minds just seem to know how the basic rules of grammar and sentence construction work. So, to interpret what Susan meant by the word ‘that’ in her question, Paul needed to think back to what *his* previous comment was about.

When Paul made his comment, he was thinking about all the personality friction that usually arose between him and his mother whenever he had to make any arrangements with her or cook a meal in her kitchen at the same time that she was cooking a meal. He was recalling the unpleasant atmosphere that her behaviour created, and he was thinking that it would be better not to go there at all. In his comment, he used the phrase ‘fuss around the oven’ to refer to this bad atmosphere and all the difficulties that were usually created around the oven as he was attempting to cook his meal. Then Susan asked “But wouldn’t you have that anyway?” Since her question came immediately after his comment, and his comment was about avoiding this ‘fuss around the oven’, he assumed that the word ‘that’ in her question was referring to this ‘fuss around the oven’.

Therefore, if we rewrite Susan’s question as *Paul* understood it, it would become: “But wouldn’t you have the ‘fuss around the oven’ anyway?”

But to more fully represent Paul’s understanding of her question, we should replace the phrase ‘fuss around the oven’ with some words that refer more directly to what Paul was thinking about when he used the phrase. Susan’s question would then become something like: (*But wouldn’t you still have your mother’s bad behaviour and the friction from her personality to cope with anyway?*)

But what did Susan mean by ‘anyway’?

This also refers to something in Paul’s previous comment. Again, to know how to use and interpret this type of word, we just need to be aware of the basic rules of grammar and sentence construction. Our minds are aware of these rules. We do not need to think about them; we just seem to know them. But in this present case, when we hear this word ‘anyway’ in Susan’s question, and then think back to Paul’s comment (which she was responding to), we find that the word could have two different meanings.

The first part of his comment said: “I’m not going to my mother’s for Christmas day....” If the word ‘anyway’ was referring to this part of Paul’s comment, then ‘anyway’ would mean: ‘even if you don’t go to your mother’s house.’ But then the next part of his comment said: “...it makes it difficult, me being a vegetarian....” If the word ‘anyway’ was referring to *this* part of Paul’s comment, then ‘anyway’ would mean: ‘even if you weren’t a vegetarian.’

How did Paul's mind decide which of these the word was referring to?

When Paul said "...it makes it difficult, me being a vegetarian...", he was thinking about the central problem that was on his mind. It was the fact that he was a vegetarian that caused him to have to prepare his own meal, and therefore to be in the kitchen at the same time as his mother and to suffer all her bad behaviour over the cooking arrangements. Whereas if he were *not* a vegetarian, he would have been able to stay out of the kitchen and avoid his mother's behaviour. Therefore, you could say that it was Paul's vegetarianism that was keeping him from going to his mother's house on Christmas day. As far as Paul was concerned, his vegetarianism was the main issue. And this is what he was expressing in his comment. Therefore, when Susan replied: "But wouldn't you have that anyway?" Paul interpreted her 'anyway' to mean: 'even if you weren't a vegetarian.'

If he had had all the time he needed to sit back and think about it, he would have probably noticed that Susan's word 'anyway' could have meant *either* of the two completely different things mentioned above, and he may have weighed up the two different meanings, trying to decide which one she meant, and if he could not decide, he would have probably asked her which one she meant. But while a conversation is taking place, we have to interpret comments quickly, and Paul accepted the first meaning that came to his mind.

So, as far as Paul was concerned, Susan's entire question meant: (*But wouldn't you still have your mother's bad behaviour and the friction from her personality to cope with, even if you weren't a vegetarian?*)

Paul had now understood her question and he started considering his reply.

In response to her question, a past experience came to Paul's mind. Paul recalled a previous Christmas day at his mother's house. He was in the kitchen, preparing his meal. He went into the living room and the other family members were doing something in there. They seemed to be relaxing and enjoying themselves. When Paul recalled this experience now, it occurred to him that if he were not a vegetarian, he would not need to prepare his own food, and this would have meant that he could have stayed out of the kitchen all together (avoiding his mother's bad behaviour) and sat in the living room with the others, joining in with the fun. This way, he would have avoided his mother's company as much as possible, and the usual problems that arose between him and her would not have cropped up.

In response to Susan's question, Paul thought something along the lines of: "No, if I weren't a vegetarian, she would do all the cooking, so that I wouldn't have to prepare my own meal, and therefore I wouldn't still have my mother's bad behaviour and the friction from her personality to cope with." To express this, he replied:

“Not if I weren’t a vegetarian, because I would just put my feet up and she’d do all the cooking.” meaning: *(Not if I weren’t a vegetarian, because I would stay in the living room with the others, relaxing and enjoying myself, and would not go near the kitchen, and therefore would not have to suffer my mothers’ bad behaviour)*

5. Susan's understanding of Paul's reply: "Not if I weren't a vegetarian, because I would...."

As far as Susan was concerned, the following exchange had just taken place.

Paul made his opening comment, which Susan understood to mean: (*I'm not going to my mother's for Christmas day because I would have to cook my own meal, and I don't want all the 'palaver' of using raw ingredients and several pots and pans in a lengthy process and creating lots of unnecessary washing up to do afterwards.*)

She replied: "But wouldn't you have that anyway?" which she meant as: (*But if you stayed at your own home, you would still have to cook, so wouldn't you still have all that 'palaver' anyway?*)

Paul said: "Not if I weren't a vegetarian, because I would just put my feet up and she'd do all the cooking."

What did Susan understand by this?

When Susan heard the first part of Paul's answer ("Not if I weren't a vegetarian..."), she understood these words immediately. The words were making a simple statement about the physical world. As was said before, when we hear a statement about the physical world (as opposed to an opinion) we can usually easily understand what the other person means by the words.

But Paul's answer was not finished yet. Because of the way grammar works, Susan needed to hear the remainder of Paul's answer before she could tell what his overall answer meant. He did not pronounce the word 'vegetarian' as though it were the end of a sentence, therefore she knew that he had more to say, that he was going to add more detail.

Paul then went on to say: "...because I would just put my feet up and she'd do all the cooking."

Again, this second part of his answer was making a simple statement about the physical world. The words themselves were easy to understand. We all know what the phrase 'put my feet up' means (it means to relax—in some instances it might even literally mean to sit down and put your feet up on some sort of foot rest), and Susan understood what he meant by 'and she'd do all the cooking' (he meant that his mother would do the cooking). These

words were giving simple directions about the physical world. So, the words themselves were easy to understand, but what did his overall answer mean?

His answer was in reply to Susan's question. She had asked him: "But wouldn't you have that anyway?" From her point of view, she understood her question to mean: (*But if you stayed at your own home, you would still have to cook, so wouldn't you still have all the 'palaver' of using raw ingredients and several pots and pans in a lengthy process and creating lots of unnecessary washing up to do afterwards?*)

Paul had replied: "Not if I weren't a vegetarian, because I would just put my feet up and she'd do all the cooking."

Because his reply was in response to Susan's question, in order for her to understand what his reply meant, she needed to relate his words to her question to try to see how his reply *answered* her question.

When she tried to relate his reply to her question, there did not seem to be any connection between the two. As far as Susan had understood, their previous comments had been about Paul not going to his mother's house, and staying at his own home. So where do these words fit in: "...because I would just put my feet up and she'd do all the cooking." These words were talking about his mother, but his mother would not be at Paul's home. And how do these words relate to: "Not if I weren't a vegetarian..."? What does *not* being a vegetarian have to do with the 'palaver' of cooking his own meal? And how does 'vegetarianism' come into this anyway? There does not seem to be any sensible way that these words could answer Susan's question. In fact, they do not seem to be connected to Susan's question at all. To her, Paul's comment just seemed like a complete change of subject. She therefore did not understand what he meant by his answer.

But while trying to interpret his answer, one idea came to her. His answer was talking about him putting his feet up and his mother doing the cooking. But her question was about him staying at his own home, and obviously his mother would not have been there, so it occurred to her that Paul had thought that her question was relating to him being at his mother's house, rather than staying at his own home. So she thought that perhaps he had misunderstood her question. We will represent her understanding as follows: (*Susan thought: He has just said something about his mother doing the cooking. Therefore he thinks I was talking about him being at his mother's house, whereas I was talking about him staying at his own home.*)

In reply, she said: "No, 'if you stay at home', I mean." meaning: (*You have misunderstood my last comment. I was asking you whether you wouldn't still have all that 'palaver' if you stayed at your own home and cooked, not if you went to your mother's house and cooked.*)

There are often two different conversations taking place

When two people are talking and they are expressing opinions (as Paul was in his opening comment), it might appear that they are having the same conversation, since each of them hears the other's comments, nods, then replies. But in this situation, there are usually two different conversations taking place. On first appearance, we assume that the conversation consists of the words that the two people are using—the comments that they are passing between them like a ball in a game of tennis. But when we look closer at our example, we begin to realize that there were two separate conversations taking place, the one that Susan imagined she was taking part in, and the one that Paul imagined he was taking part in.

A person's private experiences are the 'real' conversation

From Paul's point of view, the conversation that *he* thought he was taking part in, consisted of the experiences that he was thinking of when he had made his comments, and also the experiences that were running through his mind as he had heard Susan's replies. The 'real' conversation consisted of this sequence of his own experiences that were running through his mind. From Susan's point of view, the conversation that *she* thought she was taking part in, consisted of the sequence of her own experiences that had ran through *her* mind as she had heard Paul's words and then made her own replies. These two sequences of experiences (within Susan's and Paul's minds) were the real conversations that were taking place.

The problem was that these two conversations were entirely different from one another, and neither of them seemed to coincide with the words that either Paul or Susan were using.

6. Paul's understanding of Susan's reply: "No, 'if you stay at home', I mean."

For us to hear Susan's reply as Paul heard it, it will be helpful to first repeat the comments that led up to it—as *Paul* understood them. So, as far as *Paul* was concerned, the following exchange had just taken place:

To open, he said: "I'm not going to my mother's for Christmas day—it makes it difficult, me being a vegetarian; I'd have to cook my meal at the same time that she prepares the other food, and I don't want all the fuss around the oven." which he understood to mean: (*I'm not going to my mother's for Christmas day. I'm a vegetarian, which she doesn't understand, so I can't trust her to prepare my food, and she is not a very good cook anyway, so it's best for me to prepare my own. But I would have to do this at the same time that she prepares hers, and when I make arrangements with her in the kitchen, she always goes back on what she has agreed, which messes up my plans. She does this in an aggressive and blunt manner. All this makes the day an unpleasant experience. Therefore it's better to stay away all together.*)

Susan asked: "But wouldn't you have that anyway?" which Paul understood to mean: (*But wouldn't you still have your mother's bad behaviour and the friction from her personality to cope with, even if you weren't a vegetarian?*)

He replied: "Not if I weren't a vegetarian, because I would just put my feet up and she'd do all the cooking." meaning: (*Not if I weren't a vegetarian, because I'd stay in the living room with the others, relaxing and enjoying myself, and wouldn't go near the kitchen, and therefore wouldn't have to suffer my mothers' bad behaviour.*)

She said: "No, 'if you stay at home', I mean."

What did Paul understand by this?

The words themselves have a clear meaning. If we were to write out Susan's comment in more detail, it would read something like:

"No, you've made a mistake. You've misunderstood what I meant by my initial question. I meant it to apply 'if you stay at your own home', and not

how you understood it to apply, which was: ‘if you stay at your mother’s house’.”

This is what the words themselves meant, but what did Paul understand Susan to mean by this comment?

To understand this, Paul recalled Susan’s question to see if he could see how he had misunderstood it.

Susan’s question was: “But wouldn’t you have that anyway?” which Paul had understood to mean: (*But wouldn’t you still have your mother’s bad behaviour and the friction from her personality to cope with, even if you weren’t a vegetarian?*)

But now Susan was saying that she had meant her question to apply ‘if you stay at your own home’. So, it occurred to Paul that she might have meant her initial question to mean: (*But wouldn’t you still have your mother’s bad behaviour and the friction from her personality to cope with, even if you stay at your own home?*)

But to Paul, this did not make sense, because his mother would not be at *his* home, so obviously he would not still have her bad behaviour to cope with. So he could not see how Susan’s previous question could have meant this. And at that moment in the conversation, he could not see any other possible meaning to her question. Therefore, her comment did not seem to make sense, did not seem to relate to her previous question. When Paul tried to understand what she meant by her comment, there was just this sense of confusion in his mind, and her comment seemed to have no meaning at all, as though she had suddenly changed the subject and asked him a riddle, which Paul could not solve. At that point, he said:

“What!” meaning: (*Your comment does not seem to relate to your initial question, so it does not make sense*)

He had no other thoughts in his mind. It did not occur to him that Susan might have misunderstood his opening comment, nor that there might have been a misunderstanding anywhere else in their conversation. All he was aware of, was that Susan’s last comment did not seem to make sense.

For the reader, the challenge here is to be able to ignore all that you have read about Susan’s understanding of Paul’s previous comment, and also her own thoughts behind her own comments. Paul was not aware of any of that content, so to understand the conversation as *he* had done, you would need to ignore all the things you have read that describe Susan’s point of view.

Tone of voice

Another factor is the tone of voice. If you had asked Paul, he would have said that when he said “What!”, he had said it in a *normal* tone. But somebody

listening to him at the time (as Susan was), would have described his tone as blunt, or harsh, or aggressive.

Each person has their own particular tone of voice. With many people, this is simply neutral. But with some people, when they are in a neutral state (not angry or irritated) their voice has a harsh tone. For that person, this is their *normal* tone of voice.

With Paul, his *normal* tone of voice had a slight harshness to it, but when he was experiencing an emotion (such as in the current example, when he was puzzled, or surprised) this harshness in his tone of voice came out vividly. But Paul was unaware of his tone of voice. He was only aware of making his comment: “What!” and of it meaning: ‘Your comment does not make sense’.

The problem is that our tone of voice can determine the meaning that someone will hear in our comment (regardless of what words we use). In the current case, Paul was making his comment merely to express his puzzlement, to say: “This does not mean anything to me.” But the tone of voice he used had a big effect on Susan; and her impression of what he meant by this simple ‘What!’ was quite different from what he had intended it to mean.

7. Susan's understanding of Paul's reply: "What!"

Again, it will be helpful to repeat the conversation so far—from Susan's point of view:

To open, Paul said: "I'm not going to my mother's for Christmas day—it makes it difficult, me being a vegetarian; I'd have to cook my meal at the same time that she prepares the other food, and I don't want all the fuss around the oven." which Susan understood as: (*I'm not going to my mother's for Christmas day because I would have to cook my own meal, and I don't want all the 'palaver' of using raw ingredients and several pots and pans in a lengthy process and creating lots of unnecessary washing up to do afterwards.*)

She replied: "But wouldn't you have that anyway?" which she meant as: (But if you stayed at your own home, you would still have to cook, so wouldn't you still have all that 'palaver' anyway?)

Paul said: "Not if I weren't a vegetarian, because I would just put my feet up and she'd do all the cooking." which Susan understood as: (*Susan thought: He has just said something about his mother doing the cooking. Therefore he thinks I was talking about him being at his mother's house, whereas I was talking about him staying at his own home.*)

In reply, she said: "No, 'if you stay at home', I mean." which she meant as: (*You have misunderstood my last comment. I was asking you whether you wouldn't still have all that 'palaver' if you stayed at your own home and cooked, not if you went to your mother's house and cooked.*)

Paul quickly said, in a blunt and harsh tone: "What!"

When Susan heard his tone, she felt a shock go through her. To Susan, his tone felt like aggression. What did she understand by this comment?

An unexpected manner

His tone of voice was unexpected. When we are talking to someone, if their tone of voice or facial expression is unexpected, or out of the ordinary, then our mind will also use this as a clue (as well as their words) when we try to work out what they mean. If Paul had said 'What?' in a calm tone, with no excited or exaggerated manner at all, Susan would not have thought anything of his manner, and she would have probably just interpreted his 'What?' to

mean something like: “Yes, you’re right; I seem to have misunderstood you; what was it that you meant?” But because Paul’s tone was so out of place and *seemed* aggressive, Susan started wondering why he was responding with this apparent aggression. When she wondered this, a past observation came to her mind. In the past, she had noticed that when a man made a mistake and you questioned him about this, he would usually use some sort of aggressive behaviour in order to try to intimidate you, so that you would stop questioning him, and he would not then have to admit his mistake. To understand how Susan made this complex observation, we need to look at some of her past experiences.

Susan’s past experiences

Her father sometimes behaved in a way that was similar to the way that Paul was behaving in now. Here is what used to happen:

If people were talking about a topic that her father *seemed* to find uncomfortable, or they were expressing an opinion that he *seemed* to disagree with, he would start shouting or perhaps banging things down or adopting some other sort of behaviour that *seemed* aggressive. People would then stop their conversation. At other times, if people were doing something that he *seemed* to not feel comfortable with, or they had decided to go somewhere that he *seemed* to not want to go to, he would adopt some sort of *apparently* aggressive behaviour and people would then stop doing what they were doing or change their plans.

After she had seen this behaviour a few times, she started wondering why he was behaving like this. She noticed that he was using aggressive behaviour. At least, his behaviour *seemed* aggressive to her, since she felt threatened by it—he may not have intended any aggression at all. But to Susan his behaviour felt like aggression, so it *seemed* to her that he was threatening to use violence against them. In her mind, this then raised the question: Why was he being aggressive? His behaviour was in response to what had just come before, or what was about to happen, so she decided that he did not agree with the things people had just said or done, or that he did not want to go to the place that they were planning to go to; and that his apparent aggression was therefore his attempt to get people to stop their discussion, or change their plans. She had already decided that he *seemed* to be threatening to use violence against them. And having now decided that he seemed to be wanting people to change their behaviour, it then seemed obvious that he was threatening to use violence against them if they did not change their behaviour in the way that he wanted it changed. He was attempting to intimidate people into complying with his wishes.

Once she had decided all this, it occurred to her that he must have consciously decided to use force to try to make people change their behaviour to suit himself. She felt that this was wrong. Firstly, because it was unpleasant, but more importantly, she felt that it was just plain wrong to behave like this. These things should be done by negotiation, by agreement, and you should not ignore people's wishes, deny them the option of choice and simply trample over them, trying to force them to behave in the way you require.

Once she had gone through the above train of thought, she could then clearly see this undesirable quality in him, this conscious decision to use force to make people change their behaviour to suit himself, denying them any choice in the matter. And she found this quality distasteful. To sum up this observation of hers, she used the phrase: 'Men use force to get what they want.'

From then onwards, whenever she took part in a conversation and the other person suddenly started shouting or being aggressive in some other way, she would recall this observation that she had made about her father when *he* was behaving in this way. Whenever this happened, this would cause her to see this same negative quality in this other man; she would imagine that he was also *using force to get what he wanted* (as Susan calls it), which means that she thought that the man had consciously decided to disallow any discussion or negotiation and to use aggression to make people change their behaviour to suit himself, and that he did not care what effect his aggressive behaviour might have on them. And when she saw this quality in the man, she would feel distaste for him.

From her father's point of view, this observation was completely wrong; he was not using force or aggression at all. To him, his behaviour seemed totally normal; he was simply making a comment. But because his normal tone of voice was loud or harsh, his behaviour felt like aggression to other people; therefore Susan assumed that his behaviour was intended as aggression, and the—almost inevitable—train of reasoning that then followed on from this assumption, lead her to the conclusion that he had consciously decided to deny people any choice and to force them to change their behaviour to suit himself. This hated quality that she was seeing in him had therefore been fabricated by her own mind. All her reasoning had been based on a wrong assumption: that he was consciously using aggression. But since this idea was nowhere in his mind, any reasoning that followed on from this wrong assumption, could only be wrong and could only lead to a wrong conclusion. This same situation also applies to any other man that Susan then applied her observation to in the future; the hated quality that she would be seeing in them was imaginary¹.

¹ These points are covered in more detail in the passage: *Observations on*

We use our own past observations to interpret people's behaviour and words

Once we have made an observation like this, we tend to remember it and then use it when we are trying to understand the behaviour of other people that we meet in the future. While a conversation is taking place, there is not enough time to think up new thoughts of this type (thoughts similar to Susan's observation about her father), so instead we tend to rely on thinking that we have done in the past. When we have had quiet moments alone, we might have thought about a person's behaviour and made an observation similar to Susan's. In the future, we might then have encountered someone else who started behaving in a puzzling way, but while the conversation was taking place, there was not enough time for us to have thought about why the person might have been behaving in the way they were, so instead, we would have recalled any past observations that we had made about behaviour that *seemed* similar to this current person's behaviour. Once one had come to our mind, our past observation (as far as *we* were concerned) would have explained this current person's puzzling behaviour to us. In this way, we use our past observations to understand the behaviour of any new people that we meet. Quite often though, our past observation will not bear any resemblance to what is really going on in the other person's mind (as in the present case with Paul and Susan), but we do not have any choice but to use this method to try to understand other people. This is the way our mind solves this particular problem, and we are not usually even aware that this process is taking place.

Another of Susan's past observations

Another observation that Susan had made in the past was that people do not like to admit that they are wrong. She discovered this observation through personal experience. On several occasions she had made a mistake about something and someone had noticed this and pointed it out to her. She had then felt a great reluctance to admit her mistake. Once she had noticed this reluctance in herself, and this had happened a few times, she came to the conclusion that people did not like admitting when they were wrong. This conclusion then became another of Susan's observations that she now used to try to understand other people.

Combining these two observations

In these situations when a man suddenly adopted aggressive behaviour of some sort, and Susan's past observation came to her mind—that men use force to get what they want—in these situations, it was sometimes not obvious what the man was using this force to try to achieve. As was said above, sometimes it seemed to Susan that the man was uncomfortable with the topic of conversation, so he seemed to be using this aggressive behaviour to make people change the subject, and on other occasions, it seemed to her that he was using this aggressive behaviour to try to make people change their plans. But sometimes, Susan could not immediately see the man's motive. In these situations, she would start wondering what the man was trying to achieve. When she wondered this, what thoughts would come to her? In some situations, this was the way the incident would seem to Susan:

The man had said something that Susan had thought was incorrect, so she had pointed out his mistake to him, and he had then adopted this aggressive behaviour.

In these situations, when she wondered what his motive might have been, she would recall her other observation—that people do not like to admit being wrong. When this came to her, it would seem to fit the man's behaviour. Therefore, it would occur to her that this was what the man was feeling and that he was therefore using the aggression to try to stop her pointing out his mistake, so that he would not have to admit that he was wrong.

After a few incidents like this, this complex conclusion then became another one of Susan's observations that she might recall at any point in the future when she was trying to understand a person's behaviour.

A trap that we all fall into

For Susan to arrive at this complex conclusion, she needed to first apply her observation—that men use force to get what they want—and then try to work out what the man's motive was to use this force. Usually, this type of initial observation is wrong, so any further reasoning that we do based on it, is also going to be wrong. For example, in most of these instances where Susan thought she could see this behaviour in a man, the man did not consider himself to be using force, or aggression, at all, and was not therefore attempting to achieve anything (as in Paul's case), so when Susan wondered what the man was trying to achieve (with this imaginary aggression), any motive that she had managed to come up with, could only have been one that she had invented herself. We all use this process when we think about people, and it is this process that is responsible for us inventing all sorts of bizarre, far-

fetched explanations to describe a person's behaviour—though our explanations always seem convincing to us at the time.

Back to the present conversation

When Susan asked Paul her last question and Paul had said, in a blunt and aggressive tone: “What!” she recalled her complex observation that was described above—that men use force to get what they want, and people do not like to admit that they are wrong, so that if you point out a man's mistake to him, he will sometimes use an aggressive manner to try to stop you questioning him, so that he will not have to admit his mistake. This complex observation of Susan's seemed to fit Paul's behaviour. Therefore, she understood his comment in this way: (*Susan thought: He has misunderstood what I said previously and I have pointed this out to him but he does not like admitting he is wrong, so he has suddenly become aggressive to try to stop me asking my question, so that he will not have to admit that he was wrong.*)

This, of course, does not bear any resemblance to what Paul was thinking. But from Susan's point of view, her observation seemed to fit his behaviour, and she had no reason to think that her observation might be wrong.

Susan's response (the pressure to respond quickly)

She had understood Paul's comment, and now she had to respond.

Normally, in a conversation, there is a pressure to respond within a second or two to each comment. The other person has said something or asked a question, and is now waiting for your response. While you are thinking about what to say, you are conscious of the fact that the other person is waiting. This creates a pressure on you to make your response. The more seconds that go by, the more this pressure increases. If about four or five seconds have gone by and you still have not thought of what to say, the pressure on you to respond will probably cause you to say something like: “Er...” You will have said this because you were aware that the other person was still waiting for your response, and you felt that you had to say *something*, but you had not thought of your response yet, so you had said something like “Er...” because then at least you would have said *something*, and this would have therefore reduced the pressure a little while you continued to think about your reply.

In the present example, because of Paul's blunt and harsh tone, Susan felt that he was being aggressive (although he did not intend it in that way). When she felt this aggression, it raised the temperature of the conversation and caused her to become alarmed. In this alarmed state, she felt an even greater pressure to respond quickly. So, she was under even greater pressure than normal to respond quickly.

If this pressure had not been there, and she had had time to calmly consider her response (and there were no *other* pressures to stop Susan speaking her mind), she would have probably said something like:

“It’s unfair to be aggressive to me. I don’t deserve to be spoken to in this unpleasant way. I haven’t done anything wrong. You’re only doing this because you misunderstood what I’d said previously, and when I asked you about this, to try to clear up what you were saying, you then noticed that you’d misunderstood my previous comment, but you don’t like to admit that you’re wrong, so you wanted to stop me asking you about your misunderstanding. To do this, you adopted this aggressive behaviour towards me to try to intimidate me, so that I wouldn’t ask you my question. But it’s not *my* fault that you’ve made a mistake and misunderstood me, and it’s not *my* fault that you don’t like to admit that you’re wrong, so it’s wrong of you to be aggressive towards me. This is bad behaviour.”

(Of course none of this would have meant anything to Paul, since her observations of him do not bear any resemblance to what he was thinking.)

However, she was under great pressure to respond quickly, due to his bluntness, and she had no time to think. By saying “What!” he was asking her a question. In the time available, the only response she could think of was to simply answer his question. She did this by repeating *her* question to him, but with a bit more detail, in order to try to explain what she meant.

She was conscious of how uncomfortable his manner had made her feel (this state of alarm within her), but she managed to respond in a reasonably calm tone. She said:

“If you stay at home, you’ll still have all the fuss.” meaning something like: (*I know you are only being aggressive to me to try to intimidate me, in the hope that this will stop me asking you about your misunderstanding of my previous question, so that you will not then have to admit that you have made this mistake. But I will ignore your bad behaviour and repeat my question anyway. I was asking you whether you would not still have all that ‘palaver’ if you stay at your own home and cook, not if you go to your mother’s house and cook.*)

Conclusions from this chapter

This chapter mainly focused on the process that Susan’s mind went through when she formed her observation about Paul. She was convinced that her observation explained *why* Paul was behaving in the way he was—though her observation did not bear any resemblance to what was really going on in Paul’s mind. The process that Susan’s mind went through is the same one that our own mind goes through whenever we try to understand the behaviour of other people.

When someone's behaviour or tone of voice is unexpected, or out of place, our mind will use their behaviour as an extra clue (as well as their words) when we try to work out what the person means. On page 51, we saw how, because Paul's tone of voice was unexpected, Susan's mind used this to work out what Paul meant when he said, bluntly: 'What!'.

When we take part in a conversation like this one and someone asks us a question, we feel a pressure to respond quickly—usually within a few seconds. If there is something unusual about the person's behaviour or manner (as there was with Paul), we would ideally like to sit back and take our time to think about what the person meant by their comment, or why they were behaving in this strange way. But because of the pressure, there would not be enough time for us to do this. Usually, the only time that we *can* do this sort of complex thinking, is when we have quiet moments alone. Therefore, when something about a person's behaviour has puzzled us, we tend to think about this when we have a quiet moment alone. Once we have done this type of thinking, if we have managed to come to a conclusion, we will remember this, and the next time we encounter behaviour that *seems* similar to this past puzzling behaviour, we will recall our conclusion. At that moment, we will be convinced that our conclusion accurately describes what is going on in the other person's mind. In this way, we use our own past observations (or conclusions) to interpret the behaviour of the people that we meet.

As we go through life, we build up a store of these observations. The problem is that when we do this complex thinking to try to work out why a person is behaving in a certain way, and we have never experienced behaving in that way ourselves, we tend to come up with observations like Susan's, which do not usually bear any resemblance to what the person was really thinking. For example, when Paul used his blunt and aggressive tone, he was not using force to get what he wanted; he was not trying to intimidate Susan into *not* questioning him, so that he would not have to then admit that he had made a mistake. He was not doing any of this; he was simply puzzled. Susan had asked him a question, but it did not make sense to him. To him, it seemed unrelated to anything that had gone before, and he was simply puzzled and confused by her question. So he asked, "What!" From his point of view, he was unaware of his tone; to him, he would have honestly said that it was a perfectly normal tone. All the motives that Susan had seen in Paul were simply not there. Paul had not misunderstood her first question; he had not made any mistake; he had no intention to intimidate her; he was not trying to stop her asking her question. So, to Paul, Susan's observation of him would have seemed like something out of science fiction, yet most of us would have made similar observations to the ones that Susan had done.

Later in the book, we will explore in more detail how our minds fall into the trap of 'inventing' these kinds of thoughts about other people. One of the

main problems is that when we do the sort of thinking that leads us to make up these observations, we are usually trying to understand behaviour that we have never indulged in ourselves. And it is this that usually causes us to make observations about people that do not bear any resemblance to the way that people really behave. The big problem here is that when this happens, we will have not only misinterpreted the other person's words, but also their motive. And the motive that we have seen in them would usually be an undesirable one, which may then cause us to feel loathing or hatred for the person. But the quality that we are loathing in them does not exist; our mind has invented it. In the above example, Susan may have felt loathing for Paul purely because of this motive that she *thought* he had had—consciously using force to try to intimidate her into silence. Yet he had had no such motive; it had been invented by Susan's mind. The following maxim summarizes this situation:

All our observations about personality, when we have not behaved in that way ourselves, are usually wrong. There is usually a simpler explanation.