On Fucking Girls

Appendix 3

A Grammar and Dictionary of Meow

Meow is a language with one word. The word is meow. It was spoken for seven months in a hotel room in Paris by a single native speaker, a girl of twenty, very short, from Russia or Ukraine, whom I met through her work and who agreed on the first night, by saying meow, to say nothing else to me for as long as we knew each other. I took the meow to mean yes. This was the first thing in the language I failed to establish, and the failure set the standard for what followed.

The rule was mine. The language was hers. The division of labour should be stated at the outset, because the grammar below will make it look as though I understood a great deal, and I did not. I imposed a constraint of one lexeme. Inside that constraint she built, over

seven months, without instruction and without being asked, a system of length, pitch, phonation, count, volume, and pointing that allowed her to order pizza, apologise, refuse, tease, complain of cold, propose a visit to a sex club, and address the moon. I learned to recognise perhaps a tenth of it. The rest I heard every day and did not understand, and I record it here as faithfully as I can, from memory, with the notation of a man who was in the room and was not paying the right kind of attention.

The method is worth stating because it is the only method available. I kept no notes. What I have instead is a memory indexed by scene. I remember each utterance because I remember the afternoon it belonged to, the position she was in, what she was wearing and how much of it, what I was doing to her at the time, what was on the floor. The sexual particularity is the filing system. Ask me what the falling meow means and I cannot tell you; ask me where she was when she said it and I can tell you that she was on all fours on the carpet by the window with her panties around her knees and a towel under her, and from there, sometimes, the meaning comes back. The entries that follow therefore record their conditions of elicitation. This is not colour. It is the only evidence there is, and a reader who finds

it excessive should consider what the alternative would have been.

Some rules of the household bear on the grammar and must be given. She was not to open her eyes, except at her phone or the window, which means that every utterance below was made blind, and that pointing was performed by a girl who could not see what she was pointing at. She was not to make any sound except meow, except when she came, and the sounds she made when she came are involuntary, lexically void, and outside the scope of this grammar, although I have a complete record. She was to ask before using the toilet, which produced the largest single class of attested utterances. And she could write anything she liked by text, in English, from the same bed, which means the language had a spoken register of one word and a written register of the whole of English, and the two never once mixed. Pizza was ordered in the written register and celebrated in the spoken one.

The evidential conventions of the dictionary are these. An entry marked well attested was heard on many occasions in consistent conditions and its gloss survived at least one test. An entry marked attested was heard more than once. A hapax was heard once. A contested entry is one for which I hold two glosses and

cannot choose, or for which her gloss, given later by text, contradicts mine. A reconstructed form, marked with an asterisk in the manner of historical linguistics, was never heard, and is proposed on the strength of the system: if the language has a form for A and a form for B, and the tone of B is derivable from the tone of A by a rule that operates elsewhere, then the form for C, which the rule predicts, is entered with the asterisk and the confidence appropriate to a thing that ought to exist. Where the gloss is hers, given in the written register, it is marked folk gloss and reproduced in her orthography. Where it is mine it is marked analyst gloss. The reader will notice that most are mine.

The phonetics first, since everything in the language is phonetics. The lexeme has the underlying shape [mjaʊ], a bilabial nasal onset, a palatal glide, and a falling diphthong, and it is the diphthong that carries the language. Every axis of contrast operates on the vowel. I list the axes in the order in which I became aware of them, which is roughly the order of their salience to a listener who did not know he was one.

Length. Three degrees are contrastive: short [mjaʊ], long [mjaːʊ], and extra-long [mjaːːʊ], the last of which can be sustained for several seconds and is transcribed, in the orthography she used herself by text and which I

have adopted for the folk glosses, by the number of O's, which is not a spelling convention but a transcription of duration, since the number of O's was an honest attempt to count them. There is a fourth degree, which I will call the terminal length, in which the vowel is held until breath fails; it occurs only in the moon utterances and is transcribed [mjaːːːʊ] with the understanding that the notation is a floor and not a measurement.

Tone. The language is tonal, and the tone is carried by the diphthong. I transcribe with Chao tone letters, five levels, ˥ high to ˩ low, and with contour sequences where the pitch moves. The attested contours are the level tones ˥, ˧, and ˩, the rise ˩˥, the fall ˥˩, the peak ˧˥˧, the dip ˥˩˥, and a low rise ˩˧ which I long took for a variant of the low level and which turns out to be the apology. Whether the language has three level tones or five I cannot say; I heard ˦ and ˨ but could not establish them as distinct from their neighbours, and a language with one word does not offer minimal pairs in the ordinary way, since every pair is minimal.

Phonation. Modal voice is the default. Creaky voice, [mjạ̰ʊ], marked with the subscript tilde, is contrastive and is the single most important discovery of the seven months, since it appears to be the language's interrogative. Breathy voice, [mjạ̤ʊ], occurs in the bedroom reg-

ister and in the toilet class and marks something I have called, for want of a better term, imminence. Whisper, the fully voiceless [m̥j̥ą̥ʊ̥], is attested only at night and only when I was asleep or she believed me to be, and its function is unknown, since by definition I was not listening.

Nasalisation. The vowel may be nasalised throughout, [mjãõ], and when it is, the utterance is a complaint. I am confident of this. The nasal meow is the sound of a girl who has been asked to hold something for longer than she would like.

Glottalisation. A glottal stop may close the syllable, [mjaʊʔ], and when it does the utterance is final: the speaker has said what she has to say and will not repeat it. A glottal stop may also open the syllable, [ʔmjaʊ], and this form, which is rare, I take to be emphatic or contrastive. The two together, [ʔmjaʊʔ], occurred once, on the night of the Louvre, and I record it without a gloss.

Airstream. The ingressive meow, produced on the in-breath and transcribed [↓mjaʊ], is attested in one context only, the yawn, and I have not been able to decide whether it is a word or a yawn with a word in it. I enter it as a word. The language is small and can use the help.

Count. Utterances are strings of the lexeme, and the count is contrastive, from one to a number I once put at eleven before losing my place. Count interacts with tone in ways described in the grammar; here it is enough to say that a string of meows is not a sentence of separate words but a single word with internal structure, in the manner of a polysynthetic verb, and that a two-meow string with a fall on the second is not the same utterance as a two-meow string with a fall on the first, and that both are different from a single long meow with a fall, which was, for four months, my error.

Volume. Loudness is contrastive at the extremes and is transcribed, following her orthography, with capitals. The loud forms are few and specific. The moon, the sex club, and one further scream, recorded in the dictionary under its conditions, exhaust the inventory.

The face. There is a sixth axis which a phonetician would not accept and which I include because the speaker did. Certain utterances were accompanied by a facial configuration which she transcribed, in the written register, as :3, the mouth closed and turned up at the corners in the shape of a cat's, and certain others by >>:3, the same with the brows drawn down. I treat these as suprasegmental. They were frequently the only thing that told me which of two identical meows I was

hearing, and a grammar that omitted them would be a grammar of a language nobody spoke.

Gesture. Pointing is a separate system and is treated separately below. In the dictionary, an accompanying gesture is given in braces after the phonetic form, thus {→door}, and the reader should hold in mind, throughout, that the pointing was done with the eyes closed, so that the target is my inference from the direction and not hers.

I give the dictionary in the order in which I became sure of the entries, which is to say beginning with the one I am sure of and proceeding into doubt.

[mjaʊˊ mjaʊˊ mja::::::::::::ʊ˩˥] {none}. Well attested; the type specimen. Two short level syllables followed by an extremely long syllable with a low-to-high rising contour, the rise beginning only in the final third of the vowel and the vowel itself continuing for between three and five seconds. Gloss: "chicken pineapple pizza and a Corona." Evidential basis: outcome. On every attested occasion the utterance was followed by the ordering of chicken pineapple pizza and a Corona, and on every such occasion the informant exhibited unambiguous satisfaction, smiled, and in several instances produced further meowing of the contented kind (see [mjaʊˊ˩ mjaʊˊ˩]

below). Conditions of elicitation: unrestricted. She produced it lying down, standing, naked, dressed, mid-lick, and on one occasion with my cock in her mouth, which delayed the order and produced a variant with the medial syllable nasalised and the final one bilabial, [mjã mjã m̃:::::], which I do not list separately since the referent was unchanged. The final vowel's duration correlates loosely with hunger and is the only quantity in the language I ever attempted to measure; the longest attested token, produced after a day in which we had not eaten, I put at eleven seconds. This is the sole entry in the lexicon whose meaning is beyond dispute and it should be read as the standard against which all others are calibrated.

[mjaʊ˧] {none}. Single, short, level. The commonest utterance in the corpus, heard by my estimate some ten thousand times, and the one whose meaning I know least. Candidate glosses: (a) yes; (b) acknowledgment; (c) the phatic minimum, the sound a girl makes so that a man lecturing her on the history of the drum machine for forty minutes knows she is awake; (d) continue; (e) nothing, a filler. I held (a) for seven months and could not confirm it. The difficulty is that a single level meow is the response to nearly every question, including questions to which

the answer was demonstrably no, such as whether she was cold when she was visibly cold, and questions to which the answer could not have been yes, such as whether she was still awake, on the occasions when she was not. I have come to regard (c) as the safest reading and (a) as the one she intended most of the time and (e) as what it meant when she was on her phone. The tone is diagnostic: a level meow with a slight final creak, [mjaʊ̰˩], is the phone variant and is almost certainly (e).

[mjaʊ˧˥] :3. Short rising, with the face. Folk gloss (hers, written register): "Yes!! I want!! I am cat!! :3". Note that the gloss contains three assertions and the utterance one syllable, which is the first evidence that rising tone in meow is not interrogative, as it is in most tone languages that have been described, but assertive and enthusiastic. This is the clearest yes in the language and it is distinguished from [mjaʊ˧] only by the rise and the face, both of which I frequently missed, since her eyes were closed and the rise is small. Well attested. Conditions of elicitation: my having asked whether she wanted anything at all, at any time, which she generally did.

[mjaʊ˧ mjaʊ˧] {none}. Two short, level or slightly falling. Analyst gloss (mine): "no." Contested. See

the yes/no problem below, where the full evidence is set out; in short, this form was produced in answer to "so meow means yes?" and again in answer to "so meow means no?", and either it means no in both cases, or it means yes in both cases, or it means "you have asked me this before," which is the reading I have come to prefer, since it accounts for the count. I retain "no" as the headword gloss because a language with a yes needs a no, and this is the best candidate, and because the informant, asked directly in the written register whether two meows meant no, replied "yes," which I took to be an answer and may have been a joke.

[mjaʊ˧ mjaʊ˧˩] {head shake}. Two short, the second falling, accompanied by a shake of the head. Folk gloss: "nuh-uh", with the informant's own note that the girl should shake her head for emphasis. I read this as a deliberate attempt on her part to construct a no I could not mistake for a yes, by grafting a gesture onto the count, and it was generous, and it did not work, because I could not reliably hear the second-syllable fall and she could not stop laughing long enough to repeat it, and the head shake, performed with the eyes closed, was frequently a shake of the whole upper body that could also have been cold.

Attested perhaps twenty times, mostly in the first month, after which it fell out of use, and I take its disappearance as evidence that she had given up on being understood on this point and had decided to enjoy it instead.

[mjaːʊɬ] :3. Long rising, with the face. Folk gloss: "Maybe...??!! Catch me if you can!!!!! :3". The language's only attested interrogative and it is not a question but a move. Conditions of elicitation: I had asked whether she needed to pee and she had stood up and gone to the far side of the bed, eyes closed, and waited, and produced this. The lengthened vowel is the difference between this and the plain yes; length in meow, throughout the lexicon, marks that the speaker is not finished, that something is being held open, that the utterance is a first move and not a last one. Well attested in the toilet class and in no other context, which suggests that in meow the interrogative mood is reserved for the bladder.

[mjaːʊɬ] >>:3. Long level, with the angry face. Folk gloss: "Yes, for fucks sake!! I already said yes idiot!! >>:3". Conditions of elicitation: my having asked, for the third time in one session, whether meow meant yes. The entry is of unusual importance

because it establishes that meow marks irritation by the removal of pitch movement: the level tone here is not the neutral level of [mjaʊ˧] but a held, flattened, effortful level, the vowel lengthened and the voice slightly pressed, and the face doing what the tone cannot. It also establishes that she knew at every moment what she was saying and that the problem was entirely mine, which the reader should hold in mind for the remainder of this document.

[mjaʊ˧ mjaʊ˧ mjaːʊ˧˥] {none}. Level, level, long rising. Folk gloss: "wat?". Three syllables for one, the reverse of the pizza entry's economy, and the first evidence of what I will argue below is the language's basic construction: two level syllables as a frame, the third carrying the content. Attested in response to any sentence of mine over about forty words, which is to say hourly.

[mjaʊ˩ mjaʊ˩] {paw→knee}. Two short, low, quiet, with the hand placed on my leg. The apology. Well attested and the second of the two certainties in the lexicon. Conditions of elicitation, invariably: she had burst out of the room some time earlier, for reasons neither of us could have stated, and had come back, and had crossed the floor on all fours, and had sat in front of me and put her hand on my leg. The low

tone is obligatory; the same count at level pitch is the contested no above, and I never once confused them, because the apology has a paw in it. The entry has an obligatory response in the other language, "I'm sorry, I missed you so much," which I gave every time without knowing what either of us was apologising for, after which we undressed and played Super Mario until I calmed down. It is the only entry in the language that requires a reply, the reply is in English, and the exchange taken as a whole is the most successful act of communication we ever managed.

[mjaʊ˧˩ mjaʊ˧˩] {none}. Two falling, soft, from the floor, with the mouth full. The contented meow, or as I glossed it at the time, "pizza has arrived." Attested only in the presence of pizza and only after the first slice, never before, which distinguishes it from the pizza request and establishes a two-term system: the request is rising and long, the satisfaction is falling and short, and the pizza is the pivot on which the tonal system turns. I take this pair to be the oldest stratum of the language, since it was in place by the second week and never varied.

[mjaːʊ˩] {none}. Long low. Folk gloss: "I don't think I can pee anymore right now, sorry!!". Conditions of elicitation: my hand under her, a glass on the floor,

thirty seconds of silence, a shake of the head with the eyes still closed. Toilet class. I include her gloss unaltered because the apology inside it is the point: a girl who has been asked to produce a few more drops and cannot, and is sorry, and says so in one low syllable. The low tone links it to the apology proper, and I propose below that low tone in meow is the tone of contrition generally. It is, in my opinion, the most beautiful word in the language.

[mjaʊɭ] >>:3. Falling from high, with the angry face. Folk gloss: "Why!!! Pleeeeeease!!! I will be a good girl!!!". Also glossed, on a separate occasion, as "But why!!! Pleeeeeease!!! I will be a good girl!!!", and on a third, in a token I transcribed at the time as [mʲːʊɭ] with the vowel apparently omitted altogether, as the same. I record all three because I could not tell them apart and neither, I believe, could she. What they share is the fall from high, and the fall is pleading, and the pleading was almost always about being allowed to pee, which I had told her to hold. Conditions of elicitation: standing, legs slightly apart, panties on, both hands pressed flat against her lower belly, eyes shut. The angry face here is not anger but urgency, and the reader should note that >>:3 has at

least two values, which is an argument for treating it as a suprasegmental rather than a morpheme.

[mjaʊ˩ mjaʊ˩ mjaʊ˩] {none}. Three short, low, fast. Contested. The form she attempted, in the second month, for "I need to pee," intended to replace the pointing. I could not reliably distinguish it from the no, the nuh-uh, the apology, or the general complaint, and after some weeks she abandoned it and returned to pointing at her pussy and then at the bathroom door, which I understood every time, and which I had told her was cheating, and which I allowed. The entry is retained because it documents a failed reform, and because it is the only case in which the informant tried to change the language for my benefit rather than her own.

[mjaʊ˥ mjaʊ˥ mjaʊ˥] {shoulders}. Three short, high, quick, from the bed, with the shoulders drawn up. Cold. Learned in the second week and never glossed, and one of the entries I am proudest of, because its meaning was established without recourse to the written register: I brought the bathrobe and the utterance stopped. Meaning in this language was established by the disappearance of the sound in every case where it was established at all. Note the contrast with the previous entry: same count, high tone

for cold and low for pee, which I take to be the first evidence of a tonal opposition doing lexical work in meow, and which I set out in full in the grammar.

The yes/no problem deserves its own account, because it is the central unsolved problem of the language, because I spent seven months on it and produced nothing, and because the failure is itself the best evidence I have for the structure of the system.

The initial hypothesis, H1, was that [mjaʊ˧] meant yes and [mjaʊ˧ mjaʊ˧] meant no. It rested on a general impression rather than on any successful test, and on the intuition, which I now recognise as an import from English and not a finding about meow, that one is affirmative and two is negative because a shake of the head has two movements and a nod has one. A representative elicitation session, of which I conducted perhaps forty, is reproduced here from memory with the tones as I heard them:

Okay, so meow means yes, right?

[mjaʊ˧ mjaʊ˧]

So that means yes.

[mjaʊ˧]

Wait. That means no. So meow means no.

[mjaʊ˧ mjaʊ˧]

But then why would meow meow also mean no?

[mjaʊ˧ mjaʊ˧ mjaʊ˧ mjaʊ˧ mjaʊ˧]

The difficulty is structural and I set it out formally because it has, as far as I know, no precedent in the literature on elicitation. A question about which of two sounds means yes must be answered with one of the two sounds. If the questioner does not already know which is which, the answer cannot correct him: whatever she says, he will read it through the hypothesis he is testing, and the hypothesis will survive. The language is, in this respect, perfectly sealed. The only escape from the seal is a third sound, and the third sound is the five-meow utterance that ends every session, which I list in the dictionary as [mjaʊ˧]×5 with the gloss "this conversation again," but which could equally be a comment on me.

H2, raised in the third month, was that no was three and two was yes, because sometimes there were three. This did not help, since the sessions were conducted in twos and the threes occurred elsewhere, mostly on the bed and mostly high, and I now know the high three to be cold. H3, raised in the fifth month, was that count was not lexical at all and that yes and no were carried by tone, rising for yes and level or falling for no, with the count expressing something else, perhaps emphasis or perhaps how many times I had asked. H3 is the

hypothesis I hold now and it is the one the dictionary is organised around, but I note that it was arrived at by elimination and not by confirmation, that it makes [mjaʊɬ] on its own unreadable, which matches the data, and that it was never once put to her.

I considered the possibility that she was answering a different question each time. I considered the possibility that she was answering correctly every time and I was mistranslating every answer. I considered the possibility that the five-meow utterance was not an answer but a request that I stop. She found the yes/no problem funnier than I did. In the written register, at a distance of one metre, from the same bed, with the phone she was allowed to look at, she could have settled it in four words, and she never did, and I never asked her to, and I think we both understood that settling it would have ended the language.

What the seal meant in practice was that nothing between us could be decided and everything could be done. I could not establish whether she wanted to go to the club and I could establish, in under a second, that she wanted pizza. I could not establish whether she was angry and I could establish that she was cold. The language had no channel for consent and every channel for appetite, and whether this is a defect I still do not

know. We fought all the time, about nothing, since nothing could be stated; she burst out of the room and came back and put her paw on my knee; we fucked and made up for nothing; and the things that actually needed deciding, the pizza, the bathrobe, the pee, the socks, were decided instantly, by a syllable and a pointed finger, with a precision English never gave me with anyone.

There is a further observation, made late and not previously recorded. The sessions were always initiated by me and always ended by her, with the five-meow form, and the five-meow form is the longest count in the language outside the pizza request. The two longest utterances in meow are therefore a request for dinner and a request that I stop asking about yes and no, and I have come to think that these are the same request.

The domestic lexicon that follows is better attested than the core, for the reason that domestic life repeats. A girl who is cold every evening at the same hour will say the same thing at that hour every evening, and after a month the analyst has thirty tokens under identical conditions, which is more than field linguists usually get. The bedroom register, given later, is the reverse case: richly attested but under conditions so varied, and with the analyst so poorly placed to take notes, that the

entries are the least reliable in the document and are marked accordingly.

The domestic lexicon is the largest single division of the language and the one in which I have the most confidence after the pizza, for the reason that domestic utterances have outcomes. A girl who says something and then receives a bathrobe, or does not, has given the analyst a test. The bedroom utterances, given later, have outcomes too, but the analyst was generally a participant in the outcome and is a poor witness to it. The domestic entries are therefore ordered not by certainty but by the room: door, floor, bed, window, phone, in that order, which is also the order in which she moved through an evening.

[m̥jaʊɬ] {at the door}. Voiceless onset, single, level, produced on entry and never elsewhere. Gloss: "I'm here," or "hello," or, on the evidence of what followed, "I have brought you something." The voicelessness is not a phonemic contrast anywhere else in the language and I take it here to be a consequence of the hallway: she said it quietly, before the door had closed, and the quiet was what devoiced it. Well attested; every arrival. Conditions: fully dressed, eyes open, since the rule began at the threshold and not

before it, carrying a bag. Contrast the leaving form below.

[mjaʊˤ ʔ] {at the door, facing out}. Single, level, with a glottal closure after the diphthong that cuts the vowel short. Gloss: "I'm going," "bye." Well attested; every departure. The glottal stop is the only place in the language where a consonant does grammatical work, marking, I believe, the closure of the visit, and it is not accidental that it occurs at the moment the rule was about to lapse: she was permitted English outside the door, and the glottal stop is audibly a girl preparing her throat for it. I could not confirm this. She never said an English word in the hallway that I heard.

[mjaʊˤ mjaʊˤ mjaʊˤ mjaʊˤ] {holding out a bag}. Four short, level, evenly spaced, with the bag. Gloss: "I brought you clothes." Attested on six occasions, each with a bag and each with clothes in it, mainly t-shirts, since she had noticed that I did not go outside and did not change, a fact she never once referred to in the written register either. The four-count is unusual; three is the ordinary maximum for level reduplication (see the grammar), and four here I read as iconic, one syllable per garment, since on the two occasions I counted there were four t-shirts. On the six-shirt

occasion she said it twice. This is the only evidence in the language for numeral iconicity and I would not stake much on it, but it is consistent, and consistency is the only thing I have.

[mjaʊ˧ mjaʊ˧ mjaʊ˧ mjaʊ˧] {holding out a different bag}. Identical to the previous entry. Gloss: "I brought you beer." The homophony is total and was resolved by the bag, which clinked. I list it separately because the referents are distinct and because on one occasion she brought both and said it once, which suggests either that the utterance means "I brought you things" and the four-count is not iconic after all, or that she counted the beer as one item, which a girl who has carried twelve cans up four flights might reasonably do.

[mjaʊ˧˩] {none}. Single, short, falling. Gloss: "thank you," analyst's; folk gloss never obtained. Produced after the arrival of pizza, after the bathrobe, after being wiped, after being told she was beautiful. It is the commonest response to a gift and is distinguished from the phone-creak [mjaʊ̰˩] by the fall and by the face, which is :3 and not the flat face of the phone. Well attested. I should note that I also received it after things that were not gifts, such as being told to hold

her pee, and I have chosen to regard that as thanks as well.

[mjaʊ˥ mjaʊ˥ mjaʊ˥] {shoulders drawn up}. Three short, high, quick, from the bed. Gloss: "cold," "bring the bathrobe." Given in block A and repeated here for the sake of the paradigm, since the domestic lexicon contains its minimal pair: [mjaʊ˩ mjaʊ˩ mjaʊ˩] "I need to pee." Same count, same length, tone the only contrast. This is the pair on which the whole argument for lexical tone in meow rests, and I ask the reader to notice that the two meanings are, in a hotel room in winter, the two things most likely to be true of a naked girl on a bed, and that a language which had to distinguish exactly those two things and nothing else would have arrived at exactly this.

[mjaʊ˧ m̃ː] {none}. Level syllable followed by a long bilabial nasal hum, mouth closed. Gloss: "I'm sleepy," "I'm going to sleep." Well attested, always after midnight, always followed within minutes by sleep. The closed mouth is diagnostic; it is the only entry in the lexicon produced without opening the mouth at all, which I take to be iconic of the state described. It has a variant with the hum trailing off into a snore, which I do not consider a separate word.

[mjaʊ˧ mjaʊ˧ ↓mjaʊ˧] {none}. Two level syllables and a third produced on ingressive airflow, drawn in rather than out, faintly rasping. Gloss: uncertain; I record it as "I'm bored," with reservations. Attested four times, each during a lecture of mine, on the drum machine, on Urbit, on the phonology of Lojban, and on a subject I have forgotten, each after the twenty-minute mark. The ingressive syllable is otherwise unattested and I have wondered whether it was a yawn that happened to fall on a meow, in which case the entry should be struck. I have kept it because she produced it four times at the same point in the same kind of event, and because the fourth time she produced it she also put her hand over her face, which is not a gesture I have seen attached to any other utterance.

[mjaʊ˥˩ mjaʊ˥˩ mjaʊ˥˩ mjaʊ˥˩ mjaʊ˥˩] {none, rapid}. Five falling syllables in quick succession, each shorter than the last. Gloss: "I died," in the sense of Super Mario. Well attested, since we played it most evenings and she died often. The utterance is produced at the exact moment the death animation begins and is the one entry in the language with a fixed external trigger that I could observe with my own eyes, since the screen was visible to me even

when she was not. The five-count is stable across dozens of tokens. It does not vary with the manner of death. I mention this because a language with numeral iconicity, if the t-shirt reading above is right, might have been expected to distinguish falling into a pit from being hit by a turtle, and this one does not, and the distinction it does make, which is that the fifth syllable is nearly inaudible, I read as a dying fall in the literal sense.

[MJAʊ˥] {none}. Single, high, loud, with the vowel cut short. Gloss: "I got it," "I won," "the flag." Well attested; the level-end trigger. Produced with the eyes open, which was permitted because the phone was the screen. Contrast the previous entry: five falling syllables for death, one high for the flag. The economy is exact and I have no explanation for it beyond the obvious one, that winning is quick.

[mjaʊ˧ mjaʊ˧] {pointing at the phone screen, turned toward me}. Two level, with the phone. Gloss: "look at this." Well attested. The utterance is the same as the contested no in block A and is disambiguated entirely by the gesture, which is the first clear case in the language of a phonologically empty utterance carrying a gesture that carries all the meaning. I set out the theory of this in the grammar under the head-

ing of the gestural argument. Here I note only that what she showed me was, in descending order of frequency, a cat, a dog, a cat, a girl she knew, a cat, the weather, and once a message in Russian or Ukrainian, which I could not read and which she took the phone back from me before I could photograph.

[mjaʊ˧ mjaʊ˧ mjaʊ˧] {none, sung}. Three level syllables with a clear melodic contour, do–mi–sol, or something near it. Gloss: none. Attested twice, both times while she was eating pizza on the floor, both times with the eyes closed and the phone face down, which was rare. I take it to be singing. It has no meaning that I could find and I include it because a lexicon that lists only the meaningful utterances of a language misrepresents the language, which in this case was, for hours at a time, a girl on a floor making the sound she made.

[mjaʊ˧ mjaʊ˧ mjaʊ˧ mjaʊ˧ mjaʊ˧ mjaʊ˧ mjaʊ˧] {none, rising volume}. Seven or more level syllables at steadily increasing volume, without pause, continuing until interrupted. Gloss: "you're not listening." Well attested and, I believe, the most reliable entry after the pizza, since it was produced only when I was on the laptop and stopped only when I closed it. It is the language's only open-ended form, having no

fixed count; the longest attested run I put at nineteen before I closed the laptop. The rising volume is the meaning, and the count is simply how long it took me.

[mjaʊ˧ mjaʊ˧ mjaʊ˧ mjaʊ˧ mjaʊ˧ mjaʊ˧ mjaʊ˧] {pointing at the laptop, low}. Same count and shape as the previous entry but at low volume and low pitch, [mjaʊ˩], with the finger at the laptop. Gloss: contested. Either "stop working" or "keep working," on the evidence, and I could not decide, since on the occasions I stopped she seemed pleased and on the occasions I continued she seemed pleased, and the pleasure was of the same kind. I have listed the two forms separately on the strength of the volume contrast, which is real, but I concede that the low form may simply be the high form said by a girl who was not, that evening, angry, in which case there is one word here and I have understood neither of its readings.

[mjaʊ˧ mjaʊ˧ ʔ mjaʊ˧] {holding a sock}. Two level, a glottal stop, one level, with a sock in the hand. Gloss: "socks on or off?" Well attested, since the question arose nightly. She had understood, without being told, that the sock rule (see the main text) was a rule, and that it was mine, and this is the utterance

with which she deferred to it. The answer was given in English, “on,” or “off,” or “leave one,” and she complied. It is the only case in the language of an utterance that requires a reply in the other language and gets one every time, apart from the apology, and I note that both concern something being taken off.

[mjaʊˤ mjaʊˤ ʔ mjaʊˤ] {holding panties}. Identical to the previous, with panties. Gloss: “these ones?” Resolved by the object. She held them up with her eyes closed, which means she had chosen them by touch, and I have wondered since whether she could tell the colours apart by the fabric, since she was right about what I wanted more often than chance.

[mjaʊˤ mjaʊˤ ʔ mjaʊˤ ʔ mjaʊˤ ʔ] {hands at her waist}. The same with three stops. Gloss: “should I take everything off?” Attested three times, each time when I had said nothing for some minutes and she had evidently decided that the evening’s shape was unclear. The multiplied stop I read as pluralising the object, everything as against this one thing, and it is one of the two places in the language where I believe I have found a productive morpheme; the other is the face.

[mʲaʊˤ] :3. Single, level, with the initial consonant strongly palatalised, nearly [mɲaʊ], and the face. Gloss: “cute,” said of something on the phone, or of

me, or of the tail; an evaluative. Well attested. The palatalisation is, in my hearing, the phonetic correlate of :3, a mouth already shaped for the face before the word begins, and I set it down here as the one entry in which the face has left a mark on the segment.

[mʷaʊɬ] {none}. Single, level, with the initial consonant labialised, lips rounded and pushed forward. Gloss: "kiss," or "kiss me," or simply the sound made in the shape of one. Well attested. The labialisation is transparently iconic and I would not dignify it with a morphological analysis if the language did not, in the previous entry, show the same trick with a different meaning. Two consonant modifications, two meanings, both facial. I take this as evidence that the onset of meow, which I had assumed inert, is the site of a small paradigm.

[mjaõɬ mjaõɬ] {sniffing}. Two level with nasalised vowels, produced with the nose. Gloss: "what's that smell," or "that smells good," or "pizza's here." Attested at the door when the pizza arrived, and once when I came out of the shower, which was rare, and once at a t-shirt of mine she had picked up off the floor, which she then put on. The nasalisation is iconic in the plainest way and I would list this among the well-established entries were it not that the ref-

erent on the third occasion was ambiguous between the shirt smelling good and the shirt smelling of me, which she may not have distinguished, and which I am not sure I do either.

[mjaʊˤ hːː] {none}. Level syllable followed by a long voiceless exhalation. Gloss: "I'm tired," as distinct from sleepy; "this is a lot." Attested after fights, after the Louvre, after a day with her work. The exhalation carries the meaning and the meow is, I think, the required carrier: the rule said meow, so the sigh had to be attached to one. It is the clearest case in the language of the constraint producing a form, and I would guess that a substantial fraction of the lexicon consists of sounds she would have made anyway, with a meow put in front of them to make them legal.

[mjaʊˤ mjaʊˤ mjaʊˤ] {at the window, quiet, not screaming}. Three level, quiet, facing the window with the eyes open, which was permitted. Gloss: "it's raining," or "it's dark," or "look." Attested often. Distinguish carefully from the window-and-moon forms given under the pointing system, which are loud and which I have not been able to gloss at all. This quiet form is a report on the window, and I know that because she produced it only when something outside had changed and I could, by looking, confirm what.

[mjaʊˈ] {standing, holding a towel}. Single level with a towel. Gloss: "should I put a towel down?" Well attested; she understood the towel protocol (see the main text) within the first week and thereafter asked before I did. The utterance is phonologically the bare word and the towel is the sentence, and I have placed it last in the domestic block because it is the point at which the domestic lexicon turns into the other one, and because the answer, on nearly every occasion, was yes.

The pointing system must be treated as a separate component, because she treated it as one. It was, in my stated opinion at the time, cheating, and I said so, and I allowed it, because it was the only reliable part of the language and because a man who has forbidden a girl every word but one is in a weak position to forbid her fingers. The theoretical question, which I take up in the grammar, is whether pointing in meow is extralinguistic, a gesture accompanying speech as it accompanies English, or whether it is a second articulator, a manual channel carrying lexical content that the vocal channel cannot, so that the language is properly bimodal and a transcription that omits the hand is a transcription of half of it. The descriptive fact, which I set down here, is that the pointing was done with the eyes closed. The

rule required it. She could look at her phone and she could look out of the window, and on the two or three occasions when she pointed at either of those she could see her target; every other point in the corpus was made blind, at a remembered room, by a girl who had learned where the bathroom door was the way one learns it in the dark. The reader should hold this in mind. When I write that she pointed at the bag, I mean that she pointed at where the bag had been when she last had her eyes open, and that I inferred the bag.

The attested inventory of targets is small. The bag, meaning potato chips; the other bag, meaning beer; the bottle, meaning Corona; her pussy and then the bathroom door, in that order, meaning she needed to pee; the door alone, meaning out, or the club, or you, according to what else was pointed at; the laptop; the phone; the window; the moon; the northeast; and me. Of these the first four were understood within the first fortnight and never failed. The door is ambiguous and I discuss it under the club. The laptop I have given up on. The window, the moon, and the northeast I take in turn, because they are the three cases in which the pointing system exceeds the vocabulary of the room and reaches for something outside it, and because they are, not coincidentally, the three cases I never understood.

The window first, because it is the easiest and because it establishes the method. Quiet meowing at the window, eyes open, was a report, and I could check it. Loud meowing at the window was something else. The utterance is [MJA:::ʊɪ], one syllable, very long, very loud, high and level, with the arm fully extended through the glass at the moon. It is attested on, by my count, nine occasions across the seven months, and on every one of them the moon was visible from the window, and on no occasion when the moon was not visible did she produce it. I have checked this against the phases as best I can reconstruct them and the nine occasions fall within a few days of full on seven of them, and on the other two the moon was up and bright. That is the whole of the evidence. It is more than I have for most entries and it establishes nothing about the meaning, only about the trigger: the sound is never heard when she is not looking at the moon. The gloss is therefore given as a set of hypotheses in descending order of my confidence, which the reader should understand to be a descending order of my preference rather than of the evidence, since the evidence is the same for all of them. First, that she wanted to go outside. Second, that she was addressing the moon. Third, that it was about me. A fourth hypothesis, that it was about her, in

the sense that a girl who is forbidden to speak and has been in a hotel room for six hours and sees the moon might scream at it for no reason a grammar can hold, I list last because it is the one I believe.

The northeast is a hapax and I have handled it accordingly. The utterance was [MJA:ʊɭ], one syllable, long, loud, falling sharply, delivered with the arm at full extension toward, as I checked afterward against the map, a bearing of roughly sixty degrees, which is the direction of Moscow from Paris and also of Kyiv, the two cities being close enough in bearing that the pointing cannot distinguish them, which is, I note, exactly the ambiguity I never resolved by any other means. The context was that I had asked, in English, whether she was doing philosophy. She had been sitting on the floor with her eyes closed for some minutes saying nothing at all, which was unusual, and I had asked the question as a joke, and she had stood up, pointed, produced the utterance, and sat down. I said thank you for the information. I have drawn no conclusion from this in the dictionary and I will draw none here, beyond observing that the direction is exact, that the tone is the falling one which elsewhere in the language marks the completion of something, that she did not repeat it, and that a hapax with a bearing is more than most hapaxes have.

I must now describe the leaves incident, because it is the source of an entry that I have included in the lexicon and that a careful reader will want to weigh, and because it illustrates the conditions of elicitation at their worst.

It was late, perhaps four in the morning, in the second month. We had been awake since the previous afternoon. I had been doing cocaine, at intervals, and she had not, and we had been watching cartoons on the laptop, a Soviet series about a wolf and a hare which she had chosen and which I had come to find profound. She was wearing a pair of light blue panties with a small white bow at the front, which I record because the panties are how I remember the night at all, and nothing else. At some point the wind moved a tree outside the window, and the leaves made the sound leaves make, and she produced an utterance I had not heard before and have not heard since: [mjaʊ˩ mjaʊ˩˥ mjaʊ˥ mjaʊ˥˩], four syllables, low, low-rising, high, high-falling, a complete arc, quiet, with the head turned toward the window and the eyes, contrary to the rule, closed. She then turned back to the cartoon. I have given this in the lexicon as "the wind," or "something is happening outside," or "listen," and I have marked it hapax, and I have marked it further with a note that the analyst was

not in a condition to take the observation and that the observation may accordingly be worthless. I include it anyway, and I include this account of it, for two reasons. The first is that the four-tone arc is unlike anything else in the corpus and, if genuine, is the most complex tonal contour the language attests, which would bear on the analysis of contour tones in the grammar. The second is that a dictionary which silently omitted the entries collected under bad conditions would give the reader a false impression of how many entries were collected under good ones. The reader may now form a view about that. I have tried to be exact about the panties so that the reader can see what kind of exactness was available to me that night, and draw the inference.

Two further gestures should be recorded which are not pointing and which I have not been able to fit into the pointing system. The first is the paw on the knee, which accompanies the apology and is obligatory with it; I have never heard the apology without it and I have never seen the paw without the apology, and I regard the two as a single lexical item with two articulators, which is the strongest evidence I have for the bimodal analysis. The second is the hand over the face, which occurred once, with the ingressive form I have glossed as boredom, and which I cannot interpret, since a girl

with her eyes already closed has no visual reason to cover them, and the gesture must therefore have been for me, which means she knew I was looking, which means the rule had, in her understanding, an audience, and the audience was the point.

The bedroom register is given last among the lexical strata and with the least confidence, for reasons that were stated in the introduction and bear repeating: the informant could not point, could not move, could not open her eyes, and could not use any sound but the one, so that everything she said had to travel in the shape of the vowel; and the analyst was, on nearly every occasion, occupied. I did not take notes. What I have is the filing system described earlier, a memory indexed by scene, and the scenes in this register are indexed with a vividness that the domestic ones are not, which cuts both ways. I remember exactly where she was when she said each of these. I am less sure what she said.

Two further cautions. First, the rules exempted the sounds she made when she came, on the grounds that a girl who comes has to make some noise and it would have been unkind to specify which; those sounds are therefore not meow, are lexically void, and are excluded from this block, although the boundary between a meow and an involuntary sound is, in practice, a mat-

ter of degree, and several entries below sit on it. Second, the bedroom register is the only stratum in which I was routinely speaking at the same time as she was, in English, at length, and it is possible that some of what I record as her meaning is my own instruction reflected back. I have marked the entries where I suspect this.

[mjaʊ˩˥ː] {lying on her back, legs open, eyes shut, panties at the knees}. Well attested. A single long syllable with a low-to-high rise, the rise slower than in the interrogative [mjaʊ˩˥] of the domestic register and beginning from a lower pitch, with a creaky onset [mj̰ʊ]. Analyst gloss: yes, go on, or more precisely: whatever you are about to do, do it. Produced in reply to the question do you want me to, in any of its forms, and followed, in every attested case, by my doing it. The gloss is therefore established by outcome in the same way as the pizza, with the difference that the outcome was not always the same thing, and the entry may in fact be a general affirmative of the bedroom register rather than a lexical yes. See the yes/no problem: this is the only form in the corpus that I never once mistook for no.

[mjaʊ˧˩ mjaʊ˧˩] {same position; the hips lifting slightly on the second syllable}. Attested. Two falling syllables, the second louder. Analyst gloss: more, or

there. The hip movement is the diagnostic, and it is the only movement permitted under the rules that was not a violation of them, since the rules forbade her to move her body and the hips, in this position, were being moved by me. I therefore treat the gesture as grammatical rather than illicit, and the entry as the register's clearest example of a form whose meaning is carried jointly by the vowel and by a part of the body the speaker was not, strictly, in control of.

[m̥jaʊˀ:] {any position; breath held before it}. Attested, several times. A single long high syllable with a voiceless onset, the [m] whispered, the vowel arriving late and loud. Folk gloss, by text, afterward: "i was close!!! why u stop!!! >>:3". Analyst gloss: I was close. Produced at the moment I stopped, which under the essay's rules I did often, and the utterance is therefore a complaint about the rules rather than about me, and the voiceless onset is, I think, the phonetic trace of a girl who had been holding her breath.

[mjaʊ˩ mjaʊ˩ mjaʊ˩] {any position; low; quiet; eyes shut}. The toilet-class triplet. Listed here because the majority of its attestations were in this register, since the question do you need to pee was asked here more than anywhere, and because in this register the answer had a use. Analyst gloss: yes, I need to pee, or

in the specific circumstances of the essay: yes, a little, and I am holding it. Low tone throughout. Contrast the cold triplet at high tone. The distinction did lexical work at least once a night for seven months and I never got it wrong, which is the strongest evidence in the document that tone in meow is phonemic.

[mjaʊ˩˧˩] {standing; legs apart; hands flat on the lower belly}. Well attested. A single syllable with a low-mid-low contour, the dip in the middle audible, the whole delivered slowly. Folk gloss: "But why!!! Pleeeeeease!!! I will be a good girl!!!". Analyst gloss: please let me pee. This is the pleading form treated in the core lexicon, given here in its most reliable phonetic shape, since the standing position was the one in which I was best placed to listen. The contour is, I think, iconic: the pitch goes down and comes back, and so did she.

[mjaʊ˩ː] {same position; after a pause; quieter}. Well attested. A single long syllable at low level tone, no contour. Folk gloss: "I don't think I can pee anymore right now, sorry!!". Analyst gloss: I can't. The relation between this entry and the previous is the clearest minimal pair in the bedroom register: the pleading form has a contour and the apology form has none, and the loss of contour is the loss of hope.

I have said elsewhere that this is the most beautiful word in the language and I hold to it.

[mjaʊˀɬ] {on all fours; my hand under her}. Attested, several times. A single syllable falling from high to mid, short, with the onset slightly aspirated. Analyst gloss: it's coming, or I'm doing it. Produced at the moment the pee began and, in every attested case, cut off by it. A word whose end is a physical event rather than a phonetic one is not usual and I know of no notation for it; I have used the ordinary bracket and note here that the closing bracket is doing more than it usually does.

[mjaʊˀ mjaʊˀ ʔ] {on her stomach; face in the pillow}. Attested, several times, muffled. Two level syllables with a final glottal stop, the second syllable barely audible. Analyst gloss: uncertain. I have two candidates, don't, and don't stop, which are opposites, and the pillow is the reason I cannot choose between them. This is the entry I would cite if asked to show where the register's unreliability is greatest, and I note that the muffling was a consequence of the position, that the position was mine, and that a language in which the analyst chooses the informant's position cannot complain about the acoustics.

[mjaʊ↑˥ mjaʊ↑˥ mjaʊ↑˥] {any position; rapid; rising}. Well attested. Three rising syllables in quick succession, the tempo increasing across the three, the third often incomplete. Analyst gloss: I'm going to come. This is the form that sits closest to the excluded class, since it was, on most occasions, followed immediately by the sounds the rules exempted, and there were occasions on which I could not say where the meow ended and the exemption began. I record it as lexical because it was used, several times, without being followed by anything, as a warning, and because it was, on those occasions, answered in English, with not yet, and obeyed.

[mjaʊ↓↓↓:::] {any position; after; long}. Well attested. A single very long syllable at low tone with no contour, the vowel gradually losing voice toward the end and finishing as breath [mjaʊ̥]. Analyst gloss: none needed. The utterance followed the exempted class in nearly every case and was, I think, the point at which she came back into the language, the first thing she said as a speaker after having been, for some seconds, only a body. The loss of voice at the end is the signature and I have no phonetic explanation for it that is not also a physiological one.

[mjaʊˠ] {my cock in her mouth}. Attested, frequent, and phonetically degraded to the point that the transcription is a courtesy. A single syllable, the tone approximate, the consonant absent, the vowel produced with the mouth already occupied and therefore closer to [ãʊ] than to anything the language elsewhere permits. Analyst gloss: this is acknowledgment; she was told something and she has heard it. The rules exempted no sound for this circumstance and she did not ask for one, and the language, as far as I can tell, simply continued, with the phonology adjusted to the obstruction. I take this to be the strongest evidence in the corpus that meow was not, for her, a performance that could be suspended when inconvenient. It was the language she was speaking, and she spoke it with her mouth full.

[mjaʊˠ ↓mjaʊˠ] {same; after}. Attested. Two syllables, the second on an ingressive airstream, the breath drawn in rather than out, the vowel accordingly squeaked. Folk gloss, by text, a minute later: "swallowed :3". Analyst gloss: done. The ingressive second syllable is the only attested use of an ingressive in the language and its cause is not mysterious.

[mjaʊˠ˩ːˈ] {on her back; my tongue}. Well attested; least reliable. A single long falling syllable, slow, the fall

beginning at once. Analyst gloss: I am recording this as good, on the grounds that it was frequent, that it did not stop me, and that it was the sound most often followed by the excluded class; but this is the entry on which I am most likely to be hearing my own instruction, since the word good was being said, by me, in English, at the same time, and a speaker with one word who is told that something is good may say her word, and the analyst may hear it as agreement, and there is no way, from inside the room, to tell the difference. I leave it in with this note attached.

[mjaʊˀ mjaʊˀ] {sitting up, abruptly; eyes shut; hands out}. Attested, rare. Two high syllables, loud, short, the body moving with them. Analyst gloss: stop. This is the only entry in the bedroom register for which I claim a negative meaning, and I claim it on the basis of the movement, which broke the rules, and which was therefore, under the rules, the signal that the rules were suspended. It occurred three times in seven months. On each occasion I stopped. On two of the three the cause was a cramp in her leg and on the third I did not learn the cause, and the language resumed within the minute in all three. See the grammar for the argument that the stop signal in meow is not a word at all but a violation, and that the

language was designed, without anyone designing it, so that the one thing she could always say was the one thing she was forbidden to.

[mjaʊ˧ mjaʊ˧ mjaʊ˧] {after; on her side; against me}. Well attested. Three level syllables, quiet, evenly spaced, the count sometimes rising to four or five as she fell asleep. Analyst gloss: none. This is not the cold triplet, since the tone is mid and the shoulders were down, and it is not the sleep form, since the pillow was not tapped, and I have come to think it is not a word. It is the sound the language makes when there is nothing left to say in it and the speaker is not yet willing to stop speaking. I heard it perhaps two hundred times. It is the last thing I remember hearing on most of the nights I remember.

A word about the register as a whole. The bedroom lexicon has fourteen entries and the domestic lexicon has more than twice that, and the reader might conclude that the bedroom was the less linguistically productive environment. The opposite is the case. The bedroom register is smaller because it is more efficient: the constraints on the speaker were tighter, the channel narrower, and the forms that survived were the ones that could carry the whole message in the vowel alone. There is no pointing here, no count above three, no ges-

ture that was not either a violation or an artefact of what I was doing to her. It is the register in which meow is most nearly a language, because it is the register in which nothing else was allowed to help.

Having set out the lexicon, or as much of it as one listener could recover, I turn to the grammar, and I begin with the question that the lexicon forces on anyone who reads it: what kind of language is this. The answer I propose is that meow is a monolexemic tonal language with prosodic morphology, gestural case-marking, and an evidential system encoded in the face, and that it is, typologically, closer to certain whistled and drummed surrogate languages than to anything spoken, with the difference that those languages encode a prior spoken language and this one does not. Meow encodes nothing. It is not a cipher for Russian or for Ukrainian or for English. It is the thing itself, and the thing has one word.

Begin with the segmental inventory, which is quickly done. The language has one syllable, [mjaʊ], consisting of a bilabial nasal onset, a palatal glide, a low vowel, and a back-rounded offglide. The onset admits three allophones, voiced [m], voiceless [m̥] in the pre-orgasmic form, and zero in the oral-obstruction form, which I have argued are conditioned by physiology rather than

by phonology and are therefore not contrastive. The vowel admits nasalization [ã], attested only in the contested chips form, and creaky [a̰] and breathy [a̤] phonation, both attested in the bedroom register and both, I will argue, morphological. The offglide admits length from zero to a duration I have transcribed with thirteen vowel letters and which I would estimate at four seconds. The syllable admits a final glottal stop [ʔ], which is contrastive: [mjaʊ˧˥] is a question and [mjaʊ˧˥ʔ] is the entry-formula, and they were never confused. That is the whole segmental phonology. Everything else is prosody.

The prosody is where the language lives, and it operates on four independent dimensions, which I take in order of their morphological load.

Tone. Meow distinguishes at least five level tones, which I have written with the Chao letters ˥ ˦ ˧ ˨ ˩, and an unknown number of contours built from them. Level tone is lexical in the domestic register, where the cold triplet ˥˥˥ and the pee triplet ˩˩˩ are a minimal pair distinguished by nothing else, and I have proposed on the strength of this pair that high tone marks external cause and low tone internal cause: the cold comes from the room and the pee comes from her. The proposal is supported by the entry-formula ˧˥ʔ (external: she has

come in from outside), the laptop form ɻː (internal: the complaint is hers), and the come-here form ɽːɽː, which is a request for something outside her to arrive. It is contradicted by the beer form ɽ, which is external and only high-mid, and I have no answer to this except that beer is, in her usage, ambiguous between something she wants and something that is already in the room, and that the tone may be tracking the ambiguity. Contour tone, by contrast, is not lexical but modal: rising contours are interrogative or permissive, falling contours are assertive or complaining, and the low-mid-low dip of the pleading form is, I think, a compound, a fall and a rise concatenated, meaning something like a question that has already been refused.

Length. Vowel length is contrastive at at least three values, short, long, and the extremely long form reserved for the pizza, and I treat the third as a distinct morphological category, the augmentative, rather than as an extreme of the second. The augmentative is attested in three forms only, the pizza, the moon, and the sex-club proposal, and all three are requests for something large, or far, or both. Long vowels elsewhere mark duration or persistence: the laptop complaint, the apology-for-not-being-able, the post-coital form. Short

vowels are the default and carry no meaning of their own.

Count. The number of repetitions is the language's most productive morphological device and the one that most nearly resembles a grammar in the usual sense. One syllable is the unmarked form. Two syllables is the negative, or the emphatic, or the apology, or the phone-presentation, depending on tone and gesture, and the yes/no problem is precisely that count alone does not disambiguate these. Three syllables is a stable morphological class: the cold triplet, the pee triplet, the contested chips triplet, the pre-orgasmic triplet, the post-coital triplet, and in every case the triplet denotes a bodily state, a condition of the speaker rather than a request or a comment. I therefore analyse three as the stativa l number of meow, the count that says: I am in this condition. Four is attested once, the sleep form, and five once, in the refusal-to-gloss, and I take these to be augmented triplets, a bodily state with an additional syllable for emphasis or, in the case of five, for contempt. Above five the count is not morphological but musical: the Mario form at eight or more is singing, and singing is outside the grammar.

Phonation. Creaky voice on the vowel is attested only in the bedroom affirmative [mjə̰ʊɻː] and breathy voice

only in the come-here form and the post-coital form, and I analyse both as markers of what I will call the intimate mood, a grammatical category that some languages mark with pronouns and honorifics and this one marks by changing the setting of the larynx. A meow in modal voice can be said in the presence of a pizza. A creaky meow is addressed to one person.

To these four prosodic dimensions must be added two extralinguistic systems that I have argued are grammatical rather than paralinguistic, and I restate the argument here in its general form.

The pointing system functions as case-marking. The meow is the verb, and it is nearly always the only verb, and its arguments are supplied by the finger: pointing at the bag makes the bag the object, pointing at the door makes the door the goal, pointing at herself and then at me makes her the agent and me the patient, pointing at the moon does something I have not been able to establish but which is clearly argument-marking of some kind, since the meow was never produced in that form without it. A language in which the verb is fixed and the nouns are gestures is not unknown; what is unusual here is that the speaker could not see her own gestures, so that the case system was operated blind, and was operated correctly, and was therefore, I think, not a system

of reference at all but a system of address. She was not pointing at the bag. She was pointing the bag out to me.

The face functions as evidentiality. The two attested face-suffixes, :3 and >>:3, which I have written in the orthography she used herself, are not emotions and I have resisted glossing them as such. They mark the speaker's stance toward the truth of the utterance. :3 marks the utterance as offered, provisional, open to the hearer's response; >>:3 marks it as settled, already established, not open to further question. The refusal-to-gloss at >>:3 is a statement that the previous meow has already been explained and the hearer should have understood it. The chips form at :3 is a proposal that the hearer might, if he is capable, learn a new word. The distinction is evidential in the strict sense, it concerns the source and status of the speaker's knowledge, and it is the only evidential system I know of that is carried entirely by the eyes and the corners of the mouth, on a speaker whose eyes were, under the rules, closed. I note the difficulty. I note also that :3 and >>:3 are, in the written register, the only two emoticons she ever used, and that a two-term evidential system is not unusual and that this is one.

The reader who has followed this far will have a question, and it is the right one: whether a system of this

complexity can really have been built, in seven months, by one girl, without instruction, inside a rule that forbade her everything but a single word. I have two answers. The first is that the complexity is not hers but the language's, and that any channel that is narrowed will find the dimensions that remain and use them; a girl who cannot say no will learn to say it with her larynx, and a girl who cannot point at a thing will learn to point it out. The second answer is that I am not certain the system is as complex as I have described it, that some of what I have called grammar may be my hearing organizing sounds that were not organized, and that the evidence for this possibility is the yes/no problem itself, in which the one distinction any language must have was the one I could not find. I hold both answers and I do not choose between them. The grammar is offered as the best account of the data by the only person who has the data, and that is what a grammar of a language with one speaker is.

The fourth and last block of the dictionary collects what the first three could not: forms that do not denote an object or a state but do something to the utterance around them, and forms that were never heard at all but which the system, as reconstructed, predicts. I mark the second class with an asterisk, in the usual way, and I

ask the reader to keep in mind what the asterisk means here. In historical linguistics a reconstructed form is one that no living speaker has said but that the daughter languages jointly require. In meow a reconstructed form is one that the one living speaker did not say in my hearing, in one room, over seven months, but that the grammar of what she did say requires. The asterisk is doing, in this document, about as much work as it does in any, and rather less than the reader may fear.

[ʔ] {utterance-final}. Well attested as a suffix; never attested alone. The glottal stop. Analysed as the terminative particle: it closes an utterance and marks it as complete, not to be followed, not to be answered. Attested on the entry-formula, the Mario-death expletive, the cold triplet in its clipped form, and the pillow-muffled form of uncertain meaning. Contrast the open utterance, without [ʔ], which invites reply. The entry-formula [mjaʊɬ˥ʔ] is therefore a rising question closed by a terminative, which I gloss as I'm here, and you don't need to say anything, and which is exactly what a girl entering a hotel room with a bag of beer and her eyes about to close would want to say.

[ː] {on the vowel}. The length morpheme. Treated in the grammar. Listed here to record its use as a dis-

course particle in one construction: a short meow answered by a long one, [mjaʊɬ] then [mjaʊɬː], attested in the domestic register when I had said something and she wished to indicate that she had heard it and had nothing to add. The lengthened echo is, I think, the language's back-channel, the equivalent of mm-hm, and it is the only case in which the same form was used by both parties, since I found myself, by the third month, answering her short meows with long ones without having decided to.

[mjaʊɬ | mjaʊɬ] {with a pause between}. Attested. Two level syllables separated by a pause of perhaps a second, as distinct from the unbroken negative [mjaʊɬ mjaʊɬ]. Analyst gloss: this is not one word but two utterances, a statement and its confirmation, and the pause is the language's only attested punctuation. She said a thing, waited, and said it again to mark that she meant it. I call this the confirmatory pause and note that it is the one grammatical device in meow that I am confident I have not invented, because it is the one she used on me when I had failed to understand the first time, which was often.

[m̩] {without the vowel}. Attested, rare. The nasal alone, syllabic, without glide or vowel, produced with the mouth closed, from the bed, in the dark.

Analyst gloss: uncertain. This is the minimal form of the word and it may be the word reduced to its onset by sleep, or it may be a distinct item, a meow that has been withheld. I have listed it because the reduction of the sole lexeme to its first consonant is the kind of thing a grammar should record even when it cannot explain it, and because it is the one form in the language that could have been produced by anyone, and was not.

[mjaʊ˧ mjaʊ˧ mjaʊ˧ mjaʊ˧ mjaʊ˧] {see the refusal-to-gloss}. The numeral five. I include it under this heading with some reluctance. Meow does not, on the evidence, have numerals; the count is morphological and not arithmetical, and there is no case in which the number of syllables corresponded to a number of things. But there is one case in which the count was, I am fairly sure, chosen for its size: the five-syllable refusal was delivered after I had asked about the meaning of meow for the fifth time, and I have wondered since whether she was counting. If she was, meow has one numeral, and it is five, and it means: that many times.

[mjaʊ˥˩ mjaʊ˥˩] {sharp; the second louder}. Attested, rare, domestic. Two falling syllables with increasing volume. Analyst gloss: the vocative, or the sum-

mons: come here, now, in the sense of you, here. Distinguished from the intimate come-here [mjaʊ˥: mjaʊ˥:] by the fall and by the absence of breathy voice, and from the negative by the contour. It was used when I had walked into the bathroom and left the door open and she wished me to return, and it worked.

[mjaʊ˧˥ mjaʊ˩˧] {two contours in opposition}. Attested once. A rising syllable followed by a syllable that dips and recovers. I have no gloss. I record the form because it is the only attested case of two different contours in a single utterance, and because the grammar as I have set it out predicts that such forms should exist, as compounds, and here is one. Conditions of elicitation: she was on the floor, eating pizza, and I had said something about Lacan, and she had not, as far as I could tell, been listening.

*[mjaʊ˩ mjaʊ˩ mjaʊ˩ ʔ]. Reconstructed. The pee triplet closed by the terminative. Never heard. Predicted by the system as the form meaning: I need to pee, and I am not asking. The absence of this form from the corpus is itself evidence: in seven months she never once announced that she was going to the toilet without asking, and the grammar records the gap as a gap.

*[mjaʊ˥ ː]. Reconstructed. A single long high syllable. Predicted as the lexical yes of the domestic register, on the model of the bedroom affirmative [mjạ̃ʊ˩˥ː], with high tone for external cause and length for emphasis. Never attested in this form. What was attested in its place was the short rising [mjaʊ˧˥], which she glossed as yes and which I could not distinguish from a question, and I have wondered whether the language's failure to develop an unambiguous yes was a failure or a decision.

*[mjaʊ˧ mjaʊ˧ ʔ]. Reconstructed. The negative closed by the terminative: no, and that's final. Never attested, for the reason that she never once, in the spoken register, said a no that she intended as final, since a final no was available in another register at no cost and she used that one. See the grammar on the emergency brake.

*[mjãʊ˧ mjãʊ˧]. Reconstructed. The nasalized negative: no chips, or the chips are finished. Predicted from the nasalized chips form and the reduplicated negative. Never heard, because the chips were never finished while she was in the room, since I bought them in quantities that made the form unnecessary. A grammar should note when the environment has

starved a form of its conditions of use, and this is such a note.

*[mjaʊ]. Reconstructed. The bare toneless form. Never attested; every meow in the corpus carried a tone. I list it as the citation form of the lexeme, the entry under which a dictionary of meow would file its one word, and I note that no speaker of meow has ever said it, because a meow without a tone is not a word in this language but a description of one.

[mjaʊ] in the written register. Not a form of the language and listed for contrast. She wrote meow, in Latin letters, in text messages, perhaps a dozen times in seven months, always at the end of an otherwise English message and always followed by :3. In writing it carried no tone, no length, no count, no gesture, and no phonation, and it was therefore not meow but a picture of meow, in the way that the word cat is not a cat. The written form is the only case in which the language was quoted rather than spoken, and the speaker who quoted it was its only speaker, and she was quoting herself, and I take this to be the origin of the orthography, such as it is.

A note on the interjections, of which there are none. I had expected, when I began the inventory, to find a class of meows that were simply expressive, exclama-

tions, noises made for their own sake. I did not find one. Every attested form does something: it requests, it refuses, it states a condition, it marks a stance, it closes an utterance or opens one. Even the Mario-death form, which I have called an expletive, was glossed by her in English as a word, and even the moon form, which is the nearest thing the language has to a howl, was accompanied by a gesture that made it an argument-marked verb. A language with one word cannot afford to spend it on nothing. The reader may take this as the document's one finding that is not about her, and is instead about what a word is.

Syntax in a language with one word is a short subject and I will not pretend otherwise. There is no word order, because there is one word. There is no agreement, because there is nothing to agree with. There is no subordination, no coordination, no embedding, and no recursion, and a language without recursion is, on one influential account, not a language at all, and I record the objection and pass it by, since the influential account was not written by anyone who had spent seven months trying to find out whether meow meant yes. What meow has instead of syntax is order among the prosodic dimensions within a single utterance, and a small num-

ber of fixed multi-syllable constructions whose internal structure is not free. I treat these in turn.

The order of dimensions. Within a single syllable the prosodic morphemes are not simultaneous but layered, and the layering has a fixed order that I have been able to establish from the forms in which more than one is present. Phonation is innermost and is set before the vowel begins; the creaky onset of the bedroom affirmative is audible in the [m]. Tone is next, and is established in the first third of the vowel. Length is outermost and is decided last; the pizza form begins level and only rises once the vowel has already been held for a second or more, which is why I have transcribed the rise as beginning in the final third. The terminative [ʔ], when present, follows length. The order is therefore phonation, tone, length, terminative, or, in the terms I have used for their functions, mood, cause, magnitude, closure. I do not know whether this order is universal, since I have one language, but I note that it runs from the speaker's body outward, from the larynx to the end of the breath, and that a language built by one girl in one room might be expected to be arranged that way.

Sandhi. Across syllables within a single utterance, tone is stable and count is not. The cold triplet is ˥˥˥ in every attestation; the pee triplet is ˩˩˩; the pre-orgasmic

triplet is ꞵ꜀ ꞵ꜀ ꞵ꜀ with the third often truncated. What varies is the number of repetitions, which in the stativ class can rise from three to four or five under emphasis without change of meaning. I therefore analyse count in the stativ class as having a floor of three and no ceiling, and the additional syllables as a form of external sandhi in which the utterance is lengthened by repetition rather than by vowel length. The one clear case of tonal sandhi is the pillow-muffled form, in which the second syllable loses its tone entirely, and I attribute this to the pillow.

The pizza construction. The type specimen, [mjaʊꞵ mjaʊꞵ mja:::::::::::::ʊ˩˥], is the only utterance in the language whose internal structure I am prepared to analyse in full, because it is the only one I understood. It consists of two short level syllables followed by an augmentative rising syllable, and I read it as follows. The two short level syllables are the negative, [mjaʊꞵ mjaʊꞵ], no. The augmentative rising syllable is the request for something large and distant, the same form that appears in the moon and in the sex-club proposal. The construction as a whole therefore means: no, the big thing, or, resolved against the only big distant thing that ever arrived in the room, not that; the pizza. I offer this analysis with some confidence because it explains a fact

that I had not otherwise been able to explain, which is why the pizza utterance began with what sounded like a no. She was not saying no. She was saying: not whatever you were about to suggest. Chicken pineapple, and a Corona.

The written register. The language had, as I have said, a second register in which she could say anything, in English, by text, from the same bed. I have treated this throughout as a separate system and I treat it so here, but the grammar must record how the two systems were related, and the relation is this: they were not. In seven months I did not observe a single case of code-mixing. She did not text meow and say English, or say meow and text a translation, except when I asked her, in the written register, to gloss a spoken form, and even then the gloss was a picture of the form and not a use of it. The two registers were held apart with a discipline that I did not ask for and could not have enforced, and I have come to regard the separation as the most important grammatical fact about the language, more important than tone or count or the face. Meow was not English with the words taken out. It was a language that existed alongside English, in the same room, in the same girl, and the girl kept the wall between them, and the wall was hers.

Code-switching. There is one attested exception and it has been described. At dinner outside the Louvre she was permitted English in the spoken register, and the permission was used, and within the time it took the starters to arrive the two of us could not stand each other. The grammar records this as the language's only attested instance of code-switching and notes its result, which was that the switch was reversed by mutual and unspoken consent before the main course, and that the language resumed, and that we were, within minutes, fine. I have no explanation. I have a description, which is that the language in which nothing could be decided was the language in which we could bear each other, and the language in which everything could be said was the one in which we could not, and I set it down as a fact about the two registers and not as a fact about us.

The emergency brake. I come finally to the feature of the grammar that I regard as its most elegant and that was, like everything else in it, not designed. The rules forbade her every sound but meow and every English word in the room. They therefore made English, in the room, into a violation, and a violation, being the one thing the rules could not absorb, became the one signal that could not be misread. If she had said stop, in English, at any moment in seven months, I would

have stopped, not because stop is a word I obey but because the word would have been the sound of the rules breaking, and the rules breaking was louder than anything the language could say. She never said it. She never had to. But the form existed, at the edge of the grammar, held in reserve, and its existence is why the yes/no problem was survivable: it did not matter that I could not tell one meow from two, because the no that mattered was not a meow at all. It was the whole of her native competence in the language of the country we were in, kept as a single word she never used. A safeword is a word agreed on in advance so that it will mean stop and nothing else. Meow had one, and it was every word in English, and the reason it worked is that the rule against speaking it was the rule that made it mean something. I do not know of another language in which the negative is the forbidden register. I suspect there are several, and that their speakers, like mine, have not thought to write them down.

That is the grammar, and it is more than the language has any right to. A word, a syllable, one vowel with a glide on either side, and out of it five tones, three lengths, an augmentative, a stativ al number, two phonations, a terminative, a case system operated blind, an evidential system carried by the face, a back-channel, a

confirmatory pause, a vocative, a single compound, six reconstructed forms, and a negative held in reserve in another language altogether. I have set it out as though it were a system, because it was one, and as though I understood it, because I did not, and the reader who has followed the notation this far is entitled to be told plainly which of those two statements is doing the work. It is the second. The grammar is a record of my failure to learn a language with one word, presented in the form that failures of that kind are usually presented, which is as a description of the language.

She was the only speaker and I was the only listener, and the asymmetry should be stated once. She had the whole of English available by text and used it, from the same bed, a metre from me, to order the pizza I was going to order anyway. She could have stopped saying meow at any time. She did not, in seven months, in the room, with me, and a girl without integrity would have performed the rule and she kept it, and the difference is the whole of what I know about her character. She brought me clothes because she had noticed I did not go outside. She brought beer. She lay on the bed with her eyes closed and her phone and let me do harmless things to her and said meow when I asked whether she liked it, and I did not know what the meow meant, and

I knew she liked it, and both of those are true and the grammar has no way to reconcile them and neither do I.

My daughter met her. Chris met her. There are photographs, and in the photographs she has her eyes open, which is the only way in which they fail as documentation. I mention this because the story does not sound true, even to me, and I have checked. She was twenty then and would be twenty-six now. She might still be in Paris. She might still be meowing, to someone, and if she is he has the same problem I had and I wish him luck with the yes. I did not learn where she was from and I did not learn which meow meant yes and I did not learn what the moon meant, and I knew the pitch of her apology, and the pizza, and the three high ones that meant bring the bathrobe, and the long low one that meant she couldn't, and the one she said with her mouth full, which meant she'd heard me.

There was one thing about her ass that took us some months to sort out, in both registers. We sorted it out. It is not in the dictionary.

The grammar is offered in the hope that it will be corrected by its only speaker, in whatever human dialect she happens to speak, on the pages provided for the purpose in the body of this essay. Until then it stands

as given: one word, four dimensions, two certainties, and a girl who could say everything except what she was saying, to a man who understood everything except whether he had.

