

## LETTERS TO NEW SCIENTIST

11 March 1995

### Many meanings

With reference to Tam Dalyell's column (11 February), the sentence "When John met his uncle in the street he took off his hat" is in fact capable of many more than six meanings without even considering doubts about the identity of John.

The first pronoun can mean John or some third party and the other two have three meanings each (John, Uncle or third party). The phrase "took off his hat" may be an action, a metaphor, or the mute on a brass instrument. If spoken, "the street" could be a place or slang for the TV programme Coronation Street, as the presence of capital letters would not be apparent. That makes 108 possibilities. A 109th is that the sentence has no meaning but is an identifying sentence of the type beloved in spy stories.

Presumably someone can improve on this total.

*Richard West  
Bristol*

1 April 1995

### Doubling up

Richard West (Letters, 11 March) gives 108 possible meanings to the sentence, "When John met his uncle in the street he took off his hat". This number can easily be doubled: "uncle" can mean either "mother's brother" or "father's brother".

*David Brokensha  
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May 6, 1995

### Oodles of uncles

David Brokensha's logic regard-ing the avuncular conun-drum (Letters, 1 April) is impeccable, bur has he realised that John's mother (or father) may have a number of broth-ers, each with an extensive collection of hats? In any case, the uncle in question might not be John's. He could well relate to someone mentioned in the preceding (bur unquoted) sentence. So who really took off whose hat?

If we can also accept that the number of Johns-and streets-in the world, if nor infinite, is certainly too large to be measured with accuracy, the number of possible meanings is high indeed.

Any advance?

*Graham Bird, London*