THE TERM "MEANING"
IN LINGUISTICS

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A S ANY field of investigation moves forward, the modifying and refining of its terminology, together with the clarifying of its assumptions, is an ever-increasing necessity. The development of linguistics has exemplified this. We have long passed the stage of being satisfied with the terms of ordinary conversation. Nevertheless, the term *meaning* is still with us, carrying along a bewildering diversity of applications from centuries of general usage. This word needs unceasing critical examination. How adequate is it? What, if anything, is wrong with it?

So far as I can find, there is no student of language who denies that the raw material of our study must in some way be differentiated from noise, from random squeaks, taps, pops, and thumps; and the word *meaning* serves to characterize the systematic relevancies that are involved in language. As long as the word is used on the highest level of abstraction, with the widest generality, it appears to be acceptable and to cause little trouble.[1] We can grant that meaning is a suffusing characteristic of all language phenomena by definition. In a behavioristic analysis this can be accounted for as an elaboration of the stimulus-response pattern.

Troubles arise, however, for the scientific student, when meaning is appealed

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[1] Leonard Bloomfield, in his essay "Meaning," *Monatshefte für deutschen Unterricht,* XXXV (March, 1943), 101-106, supposed that an intelligent observer from another planet might come and note the adjusted cooperation achieved by language. As he concluded: "Now when our observer went back to his planet and made his report about us, he would need, in whatever system of communication was there in use, a general term to cover the objects and events which are typically connected with any one terrestrial speech form. The actual student of language, to return to him, faces the same necessity, and, if he does not want to coin a new term, he will naturally choose the traditional term *meaning.*"

to in concrete, particular instances. When we speak of "a" meaning, or "the" meaning, or "this" meaning, we automatically appear to erect it into an entity, to reify it. These entities do not fit into the framework of scientific investigation. They are based on the assumption of the traditional philosophical outlook, still respected and prevailing among most people today, of a dualism between mind and body or between a mental realm and a physical realm.

In the dualistic outlook, form and meaning must be correlated in some matching process. I have been haunted by the rhetorical query of Leo Spitzer ever since his controversy with Bloomfield in 1944. Spitzer asked, "By what miracle have sound and meaning been joined in the first place?" [2] When his outlook reduces him to allocating the problem to the realm of "miracle," he can make little fundamental contribution to the science of language. The work of C. K. Ogden and I. A. Richards, provocative as it has been, has a similar shortcoming, for their well-known "basic triangle" of meaning includes "thought or reference" at its apex.[3]

CAN WE fashion a terminology that will avoid fabricated mentalistic entities? The finding of a set of brilliant new terms can hardly be our solution, for people with a dualistic orientation would soon cram them back into their own system. As an instance we may cite from the field of medicine the term *psychosomatic,* intended to refer to the unified, unsplit approach to the body-mind problem. And yet listen to how an incorrigible dualist like J. B. Rhine treats it. He said: "At any rate in the new field called 'psychosomatic medicine' organic effects are casually enough attributed to the state of mind of the patient." [4] And on a popular level Mrs. Dorothy Schiff, publisher of the New York *Post,* has likewise written: "Most illnesses are due to psychosomatic causes —in other words, they are mental in origin." [5] When a fine term like *psychosomatic* can be thus maltreated, and its structural implications ignored, we see how strong the tendency is to fit new terms into old orientation patterns.

The search for a unitary, non-split analysis of language phenomena has been going on in many quarters, and I choose to mention here, as illustration, only a handful.

1. The position of Leonard Bloomfield is well-known, and he has influenced

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[2] *Language,* XX (Oct., 1944), 251.

[3] *The Meaning of Meaning* (2nd ed.; London, 1927), p. 11. See especially the searching criticism of their work by Thomas Clark Pollock, *A Theory of Meaning Analyzed,* "General Semantics Monographs, No. III" (Chicago, 1942), pp. 1-25. Also I cannot accept the formulation of Stephen Ullmann, in *The Principles of Semantics* (Glasgow, 1951), involving a curiously aberrant use of the word *sense* (p. 70): "Meaning is a reciprocal relation between name and sense, which enables them to call up one another."

[4] J. B. Rhine, *Extra-Sensory Perception After Sixty Years* (N. Y., 1940), p. 93.

[5] New York *Post,* March 16, 1952, Mag. section, p. 3, col. 3.

a moderate number of students, especially those practicing in anthropological circles.[6]

2. Independently of Bloomfield, J. R. Firth of the University of London has espoused the unitary approach. He wrote in 1935:

> As we know so little about mind and as our study is essentially social, I shall cease to respect the duality of mind and body, thought and word, and be satisfied with the whole man, thinking and acting as a whole, in association with his fellows. . . . Meaning, that is to say, is to be regarded as a complex of contextual relations, and phonetics, grammar, lexicography, and semantics each handles its own components of the complex in its appropriate context.[7]

3. Charles Morris, from a background in philosophy, has approached language on a thoroughly behavioral basis and has even taken the drastic step of dropping the word *meaning* altogether from his book of 365 pages, *Signs, Language and Behavior*. As he explained his point of view:

> Accounts of meaning usually throw a handful of putty at the target of sign phenomena, while a technical semiotic must provide us with words which are sharpened arrows. . .; hence it is desirable for semiotic to dispense with the term and to introduce special terms for the various factors which 'meaning' fails to discriminate.[8]

In this careful and impressive volume, Morris developed an elaborate set of terms, such as *lexicative ascriptor, utilitator, obligatum,* etc., which serve their purpose well, but do not deal with the make-up of language itself.

4. Working in the wide field that can loosely be called the "unity of science," Alfred Korzybski developed the discipline of general semantics, in which the approach that he called *non-elementalistic* was central. He maintained that verbal habits can lead us to split up wholes in a structurally false-to-fact way. The dichotomies of meaning/form, body/mind, emotion/intellect, ends/means, etc., are the result of pathological verbalisms. Although he did not attempt to analyze language mechanisms themselves, his system of formulations revolved around the place of symbolism in human life. In 1941 he declared: "The present day theories of 'meaning' are extremely confused and

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[6] The *locus classicus* for his discussion of mentalism is in his *Language* (N. Y., 1933), pp. 31-41; but see also his "Language or Ideas?" in the journal *Language,* XII (1936), 89-95; and his *Linguistic Aspects of Science,* "International Encyclopedia of Unified Science, I, No. 4" (Chicago, 1939), pp. 12-13. He did his best not to found a "school," but his work was so stimulating that in effect he did so; and his principles have been developed further at Yale, Cornell, and other centers.

[7] "The Technique of Semantics," in *Transactions of the Philological Society,* 1935, pp. 36-72, quot., pp. 53-54. For a recent re-statement, see his "General Linguistics and Descriptive Grammar," *ibid.,* 1951, pp. 82-87.

[8] *Op. cit.* (N. Y., 1946), p. 19.

difficult, ultimately hopeless, and probably harmful to the sanity of the human race." [9]

5. The development of "information theory" has had a benign influence in the direction of a non-mentalistic linguistics. The coding machines can handle only mechanical operations, and therefore a rigorously operational procedure has had to be devised. The accommodating to these limitations has led a number of scholars to modify their theories in a behavioral direction.[10]

Other workers of this same general orientation, such as George Trager, Henry Lee Smith, C. C. Fries, Zellig Harris, etc., will be mentioned in later connections.

THE DEVICE that most firmly establishes the "entitizing" of "a meaning" is the frequent grammatical pattern of saying that "a word has a meaning." The verb *has* implies that a something is possessed. Nowhere is this pattern more prevalent than in the practices of lexicographers, and let us turn to these next.

Nearly a century before linguistics could be called a science, the best English lexicographers had developed the practice of collecting quotations, and these served to emphasize the importance of context. However, when these quotations are regarded merely as "illustrative examples," as they often are called, they seem to be nothing but decoration, and the definition takes on an *a priori* character. The very procedure of isolating the evidence away from its social setting leads to an artificial result, and dictionaries appear to set forth reified meanings in serried ranks. It comes natural, even to the most enlightened of us, to say, "This word has two meanings," "The other word has three meanings," etc. James A. H. Murray, in the Introduction to the *Oxford English Dictionary* in 1884, stated this outrightly:

> Some words have only one invariable signification; but most words that have been used for any length of time in a language have acquired a long and sometimes intricate series of significations, as the primitive sense has been gradually extended to include allied or associated ideas, or transferred boldly to figurative and analogical uses.[11]

The words *signification* and *sense,* in lexicological use, are so close to *meaning* that they are no improvement.

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[9] *Science and Sanity,* Introduction to the 2nd ed. (Lancaster, Pa., 1941), p. x. See also his important essay of 1950, "The Role of Language in the Perceptual Processes," in *Perception: An Approach to Personality,* ed. Robert R. Blake & G. V. Ramsey, N. Y., 1951), pp. 170-205.

[10] George A. Miller, *Language and Communication* (N. Y., 1951), is oriented towards these problems; and the copious literature is there cited.

[11] In the reprinting of 1933, I, xxxi.

But is this reification inevitable in lexicography? Theoretically it is not. The so-called meaning is a set of "features" to which users of a language have become conditioned. These features could be set forth informally, without the arbitrary definitions that seem to create formidable entities.[12] In the compilation of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the intermediate or transitional quotations were discarded as being "ambiguous" or "not clear," and the resulting neat patterns are false to actual usage. The theoretical fluidity of these features that are abstracted from a social setting is hard for many people to admit, especially philosophers. Bloomfield has stated the principle that "every utterance of a speech-form involves a minute semantic innovation." [13] And yet in denouncing this position, Ernest Nagel, a Columbia philosopher, has declared: "If this were really the case, no valid inference could ever be drawn and no inconsistency ever exhibited." [14] Thus some philosophers achieve their false absolutisms.

In the project called "The English Semantic Count," at Teachers College, Columbia, the workers have attempted to count the uncountable, by assuming that they have access to reified meanings. In actual practice, they simply compared their contexts with the numbered definitions of the *OED*, thus depending upon the arbitrary slicings of *its* editors.[15] These "semanticists," as they called themselves, agreed with one another, on the average, about 85% of the time.[16]

L ET US pass now from a consideration of lexicon to that of morpheme analysis, as practiced by linguicists.[17] Rigorous linguicists have reached the con-

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[12] I have set forth how this could be done in my paper, "The Lexicographer and General Semantics, With a Plan for 'A Semantic Guide to Current English'," in *Papers from the Second American Congress on General Semantics*, ed. M. Kendig (Chicago, 1943), pp. 33-42, esp. pp. 34-35. The project of the *Semantic Guide* has been under way since that time, and my files for it now have well over 25,000 alphabetized quotations and as many again waiting to be processed. See also the report of progress in *Studies in Linguistics*, I, No. 17 (April, 1943), 4.

[13] *Language, op. cit.*, p. 407.

[14] *Journal of Philosophy*, XXXVIII (Dec. 18, 1941), 721.

[15] Irving Lorge, "The English Semantic Count," *Teachers College Record*, XXXIX (Oct., 1937), 65-77, esp. pp. 66-69.

[16] Irving Lorge, *The Semantic Count of the 570 Commonest English Words* (N. Y.: Bureau of Publications, Teachers College, Columbia University, 1949), pp. 4-5. He has found, with regard to the *OED*, he says, that "some of the distinctions among numbered and lettered meanings are excessively precise."

[17] I present this coinage for your sufferance. The two rival sets of contexts of the word *linguist* have long been a nuisance—on the one hand, in popular use, a set referring to "polyglot," and on the other, among specialists, "scientific student of language." The word *linguistician* has had some currency since 1895, as noted by Fred W. Householder and T. A. Sebeok, in *Am. Speech*, XXV (Oct., 1951), 221-22; but it is so awkward and

clusion that morphemes can be segmented on the basis of their relation to each other, and the attribution of a particular "meaning" to each is merely a bow in the direction of traditional ways of talking about language. In Zellig Harris's words:

> Descriptive linguistics has not dealt with the meanings of morphemes; and though one might try to get around that by speaking not of meanings, but of the social and interpersonal situation in which speech occurs, descriptive linguistics has had no equipment for taking the social situation into account: it has only been able to state the occurrence of one linguistic element in respect to the occurrence of others.[18]

Trager and Smith hold a similar point of view in this matter. As they say, "The recurrences exhibit patterns of occurrence and distribution." [19] They admit that meanings of utterance fractions can serve as "a general guide and short-cut to the identification of morphemes," [20] but in principle it is not necessary: "The theoretical basis of the analysis then becomes evident: it consists of the recognition of the recurrences and distributions of similar patterns and sequences."

In his practice, C. C. Fries arrives at a similar position by correlating, as he says, the "regularly recurrent sames of the stimulus-situation features, and the regularly elicited recurring sames of response features." [21] Here the word *same*, certainly a neutral one, carries the burden of the terminology, and yet he insists on labeling these as "meanings." I query whether such a labeling is necessary or operationally entailed: perhaps it is a gesture in the direction of popular understanding.[22] Other definitions are open to serious criticism, as when John B. Carroll describes morphemes as "the smallest units of structure which embody

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cumbersome that most of us have refrained from adopting it. I submit *linguicist* as a great improvement over *linguistician*. It was inspired by the distinction made over two decades ago by Professor Kemp Malone in his essay, "The Terminology of Anglistics," in the *English Journal*, XIX (Oct., 1930), 639-51, between *Anglist*, a student of English culture in general, and *Anglicist*, a student of a particular phase of the subject. Cf. also C. S. Peirce's distinction between *pragmatist* and *pragmaticist*. Thus the word *linguist* can be left to its fate in popular usage as "polyglot," and the neat *linguicist* can serve our linguicistic needs.

   [18] "Discourse Analysis," in *Language*, XXVIII (Jan., 1952), 2. His procedure is set forth in his *Methods in Structural Linguistics* (Chicago, 1951), *passim*, esp. pp. 25-28, 156-96.

   [19] George L. Trager and Henry Lee Smith, Jr., *An Outline of English Structure*, "Studies in Linguistics, Occas. Papers, No. 3" (Norman, Oklahoma, 1951), p. 53.

   [20] *Ibid.*, p. 54.

   [21] "Meaning and Linguistic Analysis," in *Language*, XXX (Jan., 1954), 57-68, quot., p. 65.

   [22] This manner of statement does not seem to me to invalidate the actual methodology in his brilliant study, *The Structure of English* (N. Y., 1952).

grammatical or lexical meanings." [23] His stipulation "which embody" is an especially unfortunate pattern to fall into.

It will be noted that the word *distribution* occurs in some of these accounts, and it can be made to carry a heavy burden in describing what has usually gone by the name of "meaning." If we describe and classify the elements of speech in terms of their relations to social situations for lexicon and their relations to one another in morphemics and syntax, is this not the same as saying their *distribution?* Objective as this sounds, it has been challenged. W. Haas, of Manchester University, England, developing the approach of J. R. Firth, has recently pointed out that even the reliance on the term *distribution* has its dangers. As he says:

> The distributional definition of a sign is disguised as an analysis of it. Meaning, although in fact defined by the sign's function, is presented as if it were contained within the limits of its form—the "content" of the form. Sounds and meanings continue to be forced into some kind of parallelism —the empty frame of the forsaken psycho-physical theories of language. The distributional relations of a sign masquerade as components of it.[24]

Although this strikes me as hypercritical, or even carping, the Firth-Haas solution is to emphasize *function.* As Haas says (*ibid.,* p. 78): "Speech *engages* in social situations, but its internal structure does not 'correspond' to them." This outlook leads to what Haas calls "a Functional Theory of Meaning and Form." He concludes: " . . . the meaning of an element is not the content, it is the functions of its form. . . . In this way, we seem to have freed ourselves of the perplexities of Correspondence Theories of Language, the psycho-physical version or any other." (*Ibid.,* p. 81.)

OTHER problems arise when we pass on to the subject of syntax. Here too, Trager and Smith have said boldly: "It is emphasized that all this is done without the use of 'meaning': it is formal analysis of formal units." [25] And yet C. C. Fries has found it necessary over a period of years to make a sharp distinction between what he calls "lexical meanings" and "structural meanings." [26] Is this again a bow towards popularization? Need a syntactic category be labeled a meaning? Perhaps Martin Joos's statement in this connection is *apropos:* " . . . it is the category that tyrannizes over us, not the form, and not

[23] *The Study of Language* (Cambridge, Mass., 1953), p. 24.

[24] "On Defining Linguistic Units," in *Transactions of the Philological Society,* 1954, pp. 75-76.

[25] *Outline of English Structure, op. cit.,* p. 68.

[26] This began in his article, "Implications of Modern Linguistic Science," in *College English,* VIII (March, 1947), 314-20, and continued in *Structure,* p. 56 and elsewhere, and in the article "Meaning and Linguistic Analysis," *loc. cit.,* p. 66.

the meaning either; and even a word like *sheep* must be, each time that it is used, either singular or else plural." [27]

As a sample of syntax, let us take a bit of light repartee from a feather-brained English novel: " 'By trade he's a corn-chandler' [said one character]. 'And what on earth *is* a corn-chandler?' Peggy asked crossly. . . . Lady Mear said: 'A man who chandles corn, I suppose. Even my underrated intelligence can work that out.' " [28] To be sure, her answer was not the one requested. She was asked for a lexicological account, "In what social situations does the word *corn-chandler* operate?" However, she answered by manipulating forms, and Fries would say that she knew, or used, structural meanings. But is it not sufficient to say that she demonstrated her conditioning to the equivalences of certain syntactic form classes? The whole situation in the above incident was suffused with generalized meaning, but do we need to appeal to any lump of concretized meaning?

The great danger in attempting to exorcise reified meaning is that one will merely push the problem into other terms, and they will carry the same burden in a masked way. Is *signal* blameless? Are *purport* and *import* profitable? What of the phrases with the adjective *semantic?* [29] I feel that the phrase *semantic content* implies a "thingness" that is parallel to form, and am therefore unhappy at the statement of John Lotz: "Speech is a *tool* for communicating a semantic content, a meaning." [30] However, the phrases *semantic value* and *semantic dimension* do not seem to me to lead to hypostatization.[31]

The word *meaning* has often implied far more of richness in the interpretation of life than is involved in descriptive linguistics. If we use the word *meaning* to refer to a generalized suffusion throughout human relations, we can say that it is multi-dimensional. These dimensions deserve study even if this puts us somewhat in rivalry with sociologists. Beyond the narrower linguistic contexts, the fuller contexts can be studied, involving the total evaluational processes of people in a cultural environment. Fries calls this "social meaning" but notes that it "is not a completely satisfactory term." [32] I suggest that to

[27] "Language Design," in *Journal of the Acoustical Society of America*, XXII (Nov., 1950), 703.

[28] Barbara Worsley-Gough, *Public Affairs* (London, 1932), p. 149.

[29] The background of this word is found in my study, "An Account of the Word 'Semantics'," in *Word*, IV (Aug., 1948), 78-97.

[30] "Speech and Language," in *Journal of the Acoustical Society of America*, XXII (Nov., 1950), 712.

[31] I used the term *semantic value* in my paper, "English Words with Constituent Elements Having Independent Semantic Value," in *Philologica: the Malone Anniversary Studies*, ed. T. A. Kirby and H. B. Woolf (Baltimore, 1949), 306-312.

[32] *Structure of English*, pp. 293-96, esp. p. 295, footnote 21.

speak of "dimensions" of meaning, to be labeled when we identify them, would be a solution.

Alfred Korzybski, when operating in the larger context of the relationship of the individual to cultural and philosophical systems, found that "theories of meaning" were too restricted, and he had to move on to terms like these: "neuro-semantic and neuro-linguistic living reactions of Smith $_1$, Smith $_2$, etc., as their reactions to neuro-semantic and neuro-linguistic environments as environment." [33] I would like to raise the question here whether the term *neuro-linguistic* would not be useful in some contexts among linguicists? We know, of course, that anything *linguistic* is in the last analysis embedded in a conditioning of the nervous system; therefore *neuro-linguistic* ought to be tautological. But when the point needs emphasizing, as it often does, the word *neuro-linguistic* is available. Moving in a sphere well beyond linguistics, in metalinguistics if you wish, Korzybski found the term *evaluation* most serviceable of all. It functions in the unitary, non-split outlook, drawing together "body/mind," "emotion/intellect," etc., in the reaction of the organism-as-a-whole. When, as students of language, we hold ourselves strictly to our descriptive work, both lexicological and structural, we need not lose sight of these larger considerations and can take pride that our findings are central to the full interpretation of human life.

IN CONCLUSION: 1. The retaining of the word *meaning* for use in the abstract, generalized application, describing a necessary component of the data of language itself, is justifiable. This wards off the threatened criticism that "meaning is left out of account."

2. Beyond this one application, however, the word *meaning* seems to cause havoc and confusion wherever it is used. It can hardly be used without implying, structurally, that a mentalistic entity corresponds to a form. Such mentalistic entities are beyond the reach of scientific investigation; instead, we have to find some formulation that makes investigation possible.

3. In the study of lexicon, there should be a re-emphasis on context and the function of symbols in personal and social situations. Since "the dictionary" is the most usual tool that people encounter when they turn their attention to language, the conventional listing of so-called "meanings" or "senses" sets the verbal pattern that creates "entities" out of symbolical relationships.

4. In syntax too the term *structural meaning* has its dangers, in appearing to establish entities. A greater reliance upon words like *relation* and *function* would serve to put analysis upon a sounder basis.

5. In areas beyond linguistics, such phrases as "the meaning of life" or "the meaning of it all" have a hallowed, dedicated ring about them. If they are to be transmuted into usable formulations, the terms *evaluation* and *orientation* represent a sounder approach.

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[33] *Science and Sanity*, Introd. to 2nd ed., p. x.