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MEANING OR MOANING? AN ETHNOGRAPHIC NOTE ON A LITTLE-UNDERSTOOD TRIBE

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Meaning is what essence becomes when it is divorced from the object of reference and wedded to the word.

Quine — Two dogmas of empiricism.

Was it the Queen of Hearts or Humpty Dumpty who liked changing the rules to suit their position? An unworthy doubt sometimes creeps into mind that “meaning” is so slippery a word that those who use it may find they are unwittingly wearing Lewis Carroll’s cap. The history of anthropology is littered with the wreckage of theories, the ambiguity of the core concepts of which was as essential to their initial appeal as it was to their eventual decline. But anthropologists, understandably, prefer their working concepts on the hoof, so to speak, and are suspicious if they are neatly stuffed for inspection. There is a drawback though to the comfortable stance that what is meant by meaning should be evident to an idiot. Not only does this let idiosyncratic interpretations of culture pretend to infallibility, but it may make what is being talked about quite obscure. The term itself has a curious ancestry. As Harold Bloom remarks “the word *meaning* goes back to a root that signifies ‘opinion’ or ‘intention’, and is closely related to the word *moaning*. A poem’s meaning is a poem’s complaint . . .” (1979: 1, italics in the original; see also Onions 1966). In fact still more lies behind the usage.

A short survey of popular theories of meaning may help to highlight some of the problems, and the unstated presuppositions. Like the tiger’s tail, it is quite possible — if dangerous — to seize upon a convenient notion without bothering about what it may entail and commit one to what it may. Ethnography poses a double difficulty.

Research requires the study of indigenous categories and cultural assumptions, while anthropology itself is part of a changing, and internally diverse, Western academic tradition. This makes the problem of translation in its broadest sense more serious than is often recognized. It is easy to assume that our academic, and cultural categories are self-evident and to overlook how far a "double hermeneutic" is inescapable.¹ A more critical ethnography would have, as it were, to confront both aspects (e.g. Needham 1976). Sadly space does not permit a full demonstration of the argument.² So I shall confine myself to the less evident part of the problem. The issue may be cast into striking relief by treating Western philosophers and their work, not as beyond scrutiny, but more familiarly as the rather pedantic elders of a little known tribe on which the ethnographic record is slim.

My argument in short is that meaning, as it tends to be used, is a weak notion as it is far from clear, and indeed far from culturally neutral. Among the different intellectual traditions in the West, those of most immediate interest may be glossed a little simplistically as the Anglo-Saxon analytic, the German hermeneutic, and the French semiological. As we shall see, despite differences all run into similar kinds of problem. What is remarkable to an outsider is how far certain key concepts are at times regarded as unproblematic. Most theories also tend to have an Achilles' heel. For they rely at some point upon culturally specific, and questionable, metaphysical assumptions (in Collingwood's sense, 1939 and 1946), which may be at odds with those of the culture under study. It is a matter of debate whether it is legitimate to ignore the existence of such possible differences.

This issue is not new, of course. Recent attempts to present the problem in epistemological terms (Foucault 1967, 1970; Kuhn 1962, 1977), or to rephrase it by deconstructing the analyst's categories (Derrida 1972, 1976), run into difficulties of their own however (Culler 1981; Lakatos & Musgrave 1970; Putnam 1981; Newton-Smith 1981). It is arresting to see meaning itself as an aspect of an existence which is not self-evident. So I shall confine myself to the less evident part of the problem. The issue may be cast into striking relief by treating Western philosophers and their work, not as beyond scrutiny, but more familiarly as the rather pedantic elders of a little known tribe on which the ethnographic record is slim.

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congruent with reality. On one view the weakness of this position is that in translation, rather than being a conveniently neutral medium, reality lands up becoming a further language, so doubling the steps of translation (see Gellner 1970: 24-5 below). It is increasingly hard these days to live in an uncomplicated world of facts admired impartially by judges of impeccable taste. The drawback of such cheerful philistinism is nicely described in the popular Malay proverb:

Seperti katak di bawah tempurong
Like a frog under a coconut shell
(he thinks that he sees the whole world)

Meaning has many senses in English. It is "a very Casanova of a word in its appetite for association" (Black 1968: 163; for some reason, meaning inspires sexual metaphors). So it may help to look at

TABLE I
Common English uses of "to mean"

Example	Approximate Synonym	Comments
1. I mean to read this book.	Intend (Ba, P2, L2, L7)	cf. L6
2. He never says what he means.	? (L3)	2 & 3 are related but far from identical
3. She rarely means what she says.	Intend? (L4)	
4. What did he mean by wrinkling his nose?	Signify? (Bc)	cf. L8. This is also a necessary condition
5. Those black clouds mean rain.	Sign (P3) Signify (Bb; L9)	
6. $m = 2n$. That means that m is even.	Shows (Bg)	Note sig- nificance v. signify
7. Fame and riches mean nothing to a true scholar.	Have no value/ significance (L8, P1)	
8. ... he, I mean the Bishop, did require a renite	Refer to (Bd)	

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vernacular use as a start. Some of the more obvious are given in Table I. From this alone "to mean" is roughly synonymous with: intend, signify, show, have value (or significance), refer to, stand for. Meaning also stretches to cover causation. Clouds are a necessary condition of rain, not an arbitrary signifier. This issue of the "motivation" of signs will crop up in due course. It should be apparent though that English usage (as those of other European languages) may include several senses and distinct kinds of relationship.

Meaning may also be applied to quite separate aspects of discourse. We may need to distinguish between the meanings of words, sentences and whole texts. To Ricoeur the whole difference between semiotics and semantics is that between simple signification (what he dismisses as the "unidimensional approach") and the almost infinitely variable relationship between subject and predicate by which all propositions are formed (1976: 6ff.) Beyond that there is a clear sense in which the meaning of sentences cannot be taken out of context. Context, however, presents some unpleasant problems of its own. For the present it is useful to note that the different levels at which it is possible to speak of "meaning" are often muddled.

If uses of meaning appear confused, perhaps an analytical approach of the kind favoured in British or American philosophy may help? There are at least seven main theories. A short summary may be useful as it separates some of the central issues; and if we distance ourselves a little by treating philosophers ethnographically, we find that they unwittingly offer all sorts of clues as to their presuppositions which might otherwise escape notice.

Perhaps the most plausible view is that words are a way of talking about things. In "Denotation Theory" words have meaning by denoting things in the world, the object being the meaning (Russell 1905; cf. Lyons 1977: 177-215 on confusions between denoting and referring). Matters are not so simple however. For how does one speak, for instance, of past events and imaginary objects? It is hard, by this approach, to cope with words like "and" or "if", which have no physical counterparts, but being logical connectives ought be included in a comprehensive theory of meaning. The stress on physical objects turns out not to be accidental. The same object may be appreciable in different ways; and it is common to distinguish between the reference and the sense of a term (Frege 1892, translated 1960) which may be variously interpreted but is widely treated as close to the difference between extension (what a word denotes) and intension (what it connotes in J.S. Mill's parlance).³ The dichotomy between semiotics (semiology) and hermeneutics can

be related to these two ways of defining things (cf. Guirard 1975: 40-44). Intensional meaning is often expressed in terms of properties which may be described further as subjective, objective or conventional in their link to an object (Copi 1978: 144). It is possible to trace intension, with its emphasis upon essential properties, back to Greek theories of essence (Quine in my opening quotation). So the link between words and things is not as straightforward as might seem; but the history of the connexion is ancient. If words do not simply refer to things, what then is meaning? On one reading:

Once the theory of meaning is sharply separated from the theory of reference, it is a short step to recognizing as the primary business of the theory of meaning simply the synonymy of linguistic forms and the analyticity of statements: meanings themselves, as obscure intermediary entities, may well be abandoned. (Quine 1953: 22).

If words do not simply name things, do they name ideas instead? This view, which goes back to Locke (e.g. Staniland 1972: 28-52), was more recently espoused by Sapir (1921) where he tied meaning to the mental images of objects. Images of a thing vary, however, between people; and many words cannot be imagined at all. One version of "Image Theory" substitutes "concept" for "image" and on this de Saussure based his theory of language (for good critiques see Black 1968: 152-6; Kempson 1977: 16-17). For his distinction of *significant:signifié* is that of sound:concept (Baldinger 1980: 1-7; Lyons 1977: 96-98). The reliance of de Saussure and some of his successors upon a rather steam-age theory of meaning is rarely made explicit.

The two approaches so far discussed try to fix the meaning of words. The next set are concerned with sentences, or propositions (what may be wrong with reducing the former to the latter is discussed in Quine 1970: 1-14). These theories seem to ground themselves in some form of "reality" or, as Putnam put it "a world which admits of description by One True Theory" (1981: xi). The crudest version, "Causal Theory", tries to derive meaning from causation. The meaning of a statement is the response(s) it induces (Stevenson 1944). One way of whiling away a dull afternoon is in inventing expressions to which no sane man could possibly respond.

A more serious contender is "Verification Theory". This sets out to define the meaning of a proposition by its correspondence with reality. In its classic form "the meaning of a proposition is the method of its verification" (Schlick 1936). This view has an obvious appeal in the natural sciences; but it is harder to see how it would comfortably fit cultural discourse. There are many things which are

beyond verification even in principle, such as past, or unobservable, events. The original version has been refined in various ways (a “weak” version of the criterion of verifiability has been proposed by Ayer 1936) perhaps the best known being Popper’s preference for “falsifiable” over “verifiable”. So, for a sentence to have meaning, what it says must in principle be falsifiable by facts. This is potentially a useful way of scrutinizing certain kinds of theory (see the debate between Kuhn and Popperians in Lakatos & Musgrave 1970) but, on at least one interpretation, it would leave every novel, poem or religious belief as meaningless. It would seem then that theories of meaning may at best only work for a given problem. If so it might be inappropriate to try to apply them generally.

The work of the Logical Positivists points to a fascinating problem. Members of the school such as Carnap set out explicitly to produce a system free of metaphysical assumptions (the title of one work was “The elimination of metaphysics through logical analysis of language” 1932, translated 1959), and further held that all metaphysical statements were meaningless. It is questionable whether they succeeded in this. If one is empiricist enough it is perfectly possible to regard physical objects as metaphysical assumptions in their own right. For instance:

Physical objects are conceptually imported into the situation as convenient intermediaries – not by definition in terms of experience, but simply as irreducible posits comparable, epistemologically, to the gods of Homer . . . in point of epistemological footing the physical objects and the gods differ only in degree and not in kind. Both sorts of entities enter our conception only as cultural posits. (Quine 1953: 44).

If the philosophical elders are not unanimous, it seems at least that most have strong, and partly assumed, beliefs of a distinctive kind.

All this might seem far from anthropological *terra firma* (if that it be). Not only is knowledge of our own ideas beginning to seem increasingly relevant to a study of meaning, let alone in other cultures; but it seems that our ideas are collective representations which impose stark limits on what we think. This comes out clearly in the most elegant of the reality-based of the “Correspondence Theories”. Rather simply put, a true proposition is in correspondence with reality, a false one not. The argument developed by Tarski (1944) and Davidson (1967) is too complex to discuss here (for good accounts see Lyons 1977: 10-13, 154-173; Kempson 1977: 23-46). Several points are relevant though. First translation is held to be possible by virtue of it being possible to specify conditions of truth valid for all possible worlds (presumably this ought to

include the ethnographer’s culture of study; one trusts this is not an impossible world). Second the theory applies to sentences, not propositions, so it is necessary to remove the ambiguity of the former. To cope with this demand, it is necessary to focus on the truth or falsity of sentences under a given interpretation. Other sentences may have indeterminate reference. So, to fix the meaning of a sentence, we have to posit, however temporarily, a separate interpretation, or specify a reference. If ambiguity still remains, this is held to be the fault of the component expressions, or of grammatical structure (Lyons 1977: 169-70). Language it seems must be made transparent whatever the cost. Procrustes and his bed-technique seem kind by comparison.

The difficulties of correspondence theory have been neatly put by Gellner:

Language functions in a variety of ways other than “referring to objects”. Many objects are simply not there, in any obvious physical sense, to be located: how could one, by this method, establish the equivalences, if they exist, between abstract or negative or hypothetical or religious expressions? Again, many “objects” are in a sense created by the language, by the manner in which its terms carve up the world of experience. Thus the mediating third party is simply not to be found: either it turns out to be an elusive ghost (“reality”), or it is just one further language, with idiosyncracies of its own which are as liable to distort in translation as did the original language of the investigator. (1970: 25).

The difficulties include then how truth is to be understood and the problems in moving from sentences in actual (natural) languages to notionally context-free true propositions. The loss is that all religious, moral and aesthetic statements become beyond the pale, which leaves us poor anthropologists driven back to ecology, with even such trusty standbys as power looking distinctly green at the gills.

The last approach we need to consider puts meaning firmly within culture and habits of language use; for which reason perhaps it has a degree of popularity among anthropologists. After proposing, in his complex “Picture Theory”, that meaning was achieved by a homology between reality and the structure of language, Wittgenstein emerged with his second, or “Use Theory” (1958, 2nd edn 1969; 1953, 2nd edn 1958; in each case the latter differs slightly). It has kinship links with verification theory in the stress upon method, but improves on it by locating meaning in the use of words in a language. So meaning is not a kind of object in the natural world, but a part of cultural convention. Language is used in a rather special sense though. For, in any society, there are many different

systems of verbal signs, each with rules of proper use. Meaning depends then not on a pan-cultural convention, but upon employment in a particular context (Wittgenstein 1969: 17). Wittgenstein refers to each set, and “also the whole, consisting of a language and the actions into which it is woven (as) the ‘language game’” (1958: I, 7 my parentheses). These games include: giving orders, describing objects, reporting events, forming hypotheses, making up stories, translating, praying etc. (1958: I, 23). “The speaking of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life” (1958: I, 23) and “what has to be accepted, the given, is – so one could say – forms of life” (1958: II, 226e). Different sets of terms cannot be directly compared; for language use depends on a context.

Once again Gellner is conveniently on hand to note the drawbacks.

if “meaning = use”, then “use = meaning” . . . if the meaning of expressions is their employment, then, in turn, it is of the essence of the employment of expressions (and by an independent but legitimate extension, of other social behaviour), that it is meaningful. (1973a: 55).

The danger has a parallel with Durkheim’s link of morality with society. If what is moral is simply social, then the social is *ipso facto* moral, or at least no institutional practice can ever be questioned on moral grounds. Here, it becomes impossible to question meaning. Other theories had too little, this has too much. Gellner also remarks on difficulties in grounding the theory. For

. . . forms of life” (i.e. societies, cultures) are numerous, diverse, overlapping, and undergo change. (1973a: 56)

. . . the point about forms of life is that they do not always, or even frequently, accept themselves as given . . . On the contrary, they often reject their own past practices as absurd, irrational, etc. (1973a: 57)

Wittgenstein may well have intended “form of life” to refer to narrower contexts than a whole culture (1958: II, 174e; Winch 1958: 41 applies the term to institutions such as “art” or “science”), but this may not escape Gellner’s trap entirely. For, while the diversity of uses of words in different activities is important, it raises awkward questions about how activities are linked. The theory appeals to an unanalysed notion of “context”. As it is used here context takes at least three forms: the place of any term within a semantic field, or contrast set; the place of this set within a system of activity; and the place of the activities within an encompassing culture.⁴ To invoke context as “given” may be a starting point, it is hardly a conclusion.

The purportedly “hard” Anglo-Saxon analytical philosophy has

difficulty in defining meaning because of a bad tendency to do so by reference to ostensibly self-evident constructs (reality, truth, life) which invariably turn out to be dubious. Is it possible that approaches which were designed specifically to study meaning fare any better? Hermeneutics started out as biblical exegesis but has been developed into a general science of understanding (Schleiermacher 1838), into the methodological basis of *Geisteswissenschaften* (Dilthey 1958), into a way of understanding human existence (Heidegger 1927), and even into a method of studying social action as text (Ricoeur 1979). In its most simple formulation it looks promising (Geertz 1973; cf. Hobart 1983) provided one does not look too close.

The difficulty is that the different schools, apart from internal shades of emphasis, are in bitter disagreement on what, in fact, meaning is and how (far) it can be known at all. One view is that the observer cannot escape the historical, or social, circumstances in which he lives and which limit his understanding (Bultmann 1957; Gadamer 1965). So there is no privileged position from which meaning can be known “objectively”. Against this, and closer to Dilthey (and his disciple Betti 1962), Hirsch has recently sought to counter this argument by distinguishing the significance of a work in any possible context, from its meaning, here understood philologically as the original intention of the author, which is in theory at least open to validation (1967: 8ff.). To confuse matters, Ricoeur, while preferring the traditions of Schleiermacher and Dilthey, has the task of rescuing hermeneutics as a general theory of understanding (*Verstehen*) of culture, from the narrow philological grip of his apparent ally (who rightly saw the dangers in prostituting the concept; on Ricoeur, see his 1979: 88ff.). The fury of the debate between rival, and sometimes allied, schools (see Kernode 1981 on Juhl 1980) makes it clear that if hermeneutics can provide a clear statement about meaning it will be over the dead bodies of its own proponents. As a schoolboy I heard a popular rumour that Charles Atlas, the original body-builder, had strangled to death due to the overdevelopment of his neck muscles. The growth of hermeneutics threatens at times to bring about its suffocation in much the same way.⁵

There is an interesting connexion between hermeneutics and the use theory of meaning. In the notorious notion of the “hermeneutic circle” the interpreter is faced with the apparent paradox that the meaning of the words depends upon the meaning of the sentence of which it is part; while the sentence meaning depends in turn on its constituent words. So understanding is circular and, to compound

the metaphors, requires an intuitive leap to grasp whole and part together (cf. Ricoeur 1981: 57, on the subject "entering into" the knowledge of the object). Similar problems apply between sentence and text; and presumably between text and culture. To approach meaning requires "pre-understanding" by the interpreter (Bultmann 1957: 113; cf. Betti 1962: 20-1 who objects to this whole idea) of the context of any utterance. So, once again, context descends as the *deus ex machina* to resolve the seemingly intractable problems of meaning. Text being philoprogenitive, it has spawned con-text and, for general edification, pre-text and inter-text (Culler 1981: 100-118; if pre-text = pre-understanding, does text = understanding?). Gellner, among others, has made the point that the distinguishing feature of most social anthropology – typified by functionalism – is its stress on context in analysis (1970; 1973a; 1973b). It is not unamusing, therefore, to see hermeneuts and philosophers find the answer to their problems in a concept which anthropologists have been enthusiastically dissecting in numberless specialized ways for decades. There are, it would seem, Frankensteins afoot hoping to breathe life back into the dismembered corpse of context.

In view of the difficulties in getting the semantic band wagon onto the road, it will hardly come as a surprise that much of the successful work has been phrased in terms, not of meaning, but of signification. (Wilden has argued that signification is simply the digital counterpart of meaning in analogic coding, 1972.) There will be, I fear, a sense of *déjà vu* when it turns out that those who agree that language, and indeed culture, should be approached semiotically disagree as to how signification is to be understood (see Lyons 1977: 95-119; also Baldinger 1980). The problems may be exemplified by a short look at the work of de Saussure, because of his great impact in anthropology. Just how closely apparently unrelated schools are actually providing alternative formulations of similar problems comes out in the following citation.

... semiotic systems are "closed", i.e., without relations to external, non-semiotic reality. The definition of the sign given by Saussure already implied this postulate: instead of being defined by the external relation between a sign and a thing, a relation that would make linguistics dependent upon a theory of extra-linguistic entities, the sign is defined by an opposition between two aspects, which both fall within the circumspection of a unique science, that of signs. These two aspects are the signifier – for example, a sound, a written pattern, a gesture, or any physical medium – and the signified – the differential value of the lexical system ... In a word, language is no longer treated as a "form of life", as

Wittgenstein would call it, but as a self-sufficient system of inner relationships. (Ricoeur 1976: 6)

Here we find a third possibility. Meaning is no longer to be defined by either an external "reality", or an external context. Instead it is to be defined within language itself by splitting the latter according to a questionable connexion (see Image Theory). The effect, in fact, is just to shift the problem of context from an external one to an internal. Chronos only swallowed his children; Logos seems to have swallowed his mother.

In view of its importance, it is useful to examine some of the details of de Saussure's scheme more carefully. For a start, what exactly is the signified? On examination it turns out to be nothing other than our old friend "concept" *en haute couture*. If I may introduce Ogden and Richards' "triangle of signification" (Lyons 1977: 96-99; Baldinger 1980) it becomes clear that the third angle (the reference) is largely ignored which distracts attention from the nasty problem of what it is in things that are indicated by concepts. Once we ask about the properties of objects, we are plunged into ancient, but still thorny, controversies about universals and particulars (e.g. nominalism versus realism) and definitions (whether essential, linguistic or prescriptive) which have raged since the great Greek philosophers. In sticking their heads in the semiotic sand, anthropologists leave the large, and juicy, part delectably exposed to predators.

On another score, it has become a cliché of structuralist argument that the link between signifier and concept is arbitrary. This assertion is worth looking into. The arbitrariness of the linguistic sign is often treated as synonymous with the conventionality of the relation of form and meaning. As Lyons notes, however, the two terms are far from identical. For instance, in England the association of wisdom and owls is conventional but certainly not arbitrary (1977: 104-5). The possibility that the relation of sign and object was not arbitrary was recognized by Pierce in his notion of "icon" (that he should describe the resemblance as "natural" is illuminating, but inaccurate as it depends on cultural definitions of natural). Much attention has been given to these non-arbitrary, or 'motivated', connexions (e.g. Ullmann 1962: 80-115) between form and meaning, maybe because they held out the promise of being able to reduce meaning to hard, unambiguously definable, relations. (There is another set of relations, closely related, but more resistant to pigeon-holing – namely those between meanings, which are customarily sentenced to the woolly world of figures of speech.) Once again the opposition between de Saussure and Pierce is not without deeper, if often unremarked

(cf. Boon 1979), philosophical roots. As Benoist has made plain, the problem was aired as long ago as Plato's dialogue, the *Cratylus*, as to whether the relation of names and things is natural or conventional; whether they are based in *physis* or *nomos* (*techné*).

Hemogenes versus Cratylus, Saussure versus Pierce: western knowledge since the Greeks has always put, and tried to solve, the question of the relationship between culture and nature. Is culture rooted in nature, imitating it or emanating direct from it? Or, on the contrary, is culture at variance with nature, absolutely cut off from it since the origin and involved in the process of always transforming, changing nature? The matrix of this opposition between culture and nature is at the very matrix of Western metaphysics. Metaphysics constitutes it, or, in virtue of a circular argument, whose name is history, is constituted by it. (1978: 59-60).

At every turn the close link between meaning, or signification, and notions of essence, truth and so forth have lurked near the surface of discussion, Benoist brings out clearly just how much current debates depend on conveniently forgotten, or worse unrealized, philosophical conundrums. Our intellectual ostrich seems to bury his head ever deeper.

No account of signification would be complete without reference to the work of Lévi-Strauss, the more so as he has often been held to dismiss meaning as unimportant to his style of analysis. Sperber has, rightly, questioned how seriously the parallel between linguistics and structuralism should be taken. For

. . . despite a terminology borrowed from linguistics, symbols are not treated as signs. The symbolic signifier, freed from the signified, is no longer a real signifier except by a dubious metaphor whose only merit is to avoid the problem of the nature of symbolism, not to resolve it. (1975: 52)⁶

Further

. . . the fundamental question is no longer "What do symbols mean?" but "How do they mean?" . . . (but) the question 'how' presupposes the knowledge of 'what'. Saussurian semiology therefore does not *in principle* constitute a radical break, but rather a shift in interest . . . I say 'in principle' because in fact, Saussurian semiologists have completely left aside the what-question, and have studied not at all 'How do symbols mean?', but rather 'How do symbols work?' In this study they have established, all unknowing, that symbols work without meaning. Modern semiology, and this is at once its weakness and its merit, has refuted the principles on which it is founded. (1975: 51-2, emphases in the original)

The logical glue which holds together symbols, signs and meaning

seems in danger of dissolving. It also seems that metaphor, for which Lévi-Strauss has a penchant in his analyses, may also be an unacknowledged part of his own method.

It is increasingly common to speak of a "paradox" in structuralist, and semiotic, perspectives. After all "what is it that enables one to say that language speaks, myth thinks, signs signify?" (Culler 1981: 31). At this point meaning once again creeps in.

Treating as signs objects or actions which have meaning within a culture, semiotics attempts to identify the rules and conventions which . . . make possible the meanings which the phenomena have. Information about meaning . . . is therefore crucial . . . (1981: 31)

Certain forms of communication may be reflective (cf. Jakobson 1960; Hawkes 1977: 81-7; Guirard 1975: 7) and threaten to violate the codes on which they are founded, as may happen in poetry or literature. In so doing it

. . . reveals a paradox inherent in the semiotic project and in the philosophic orientation of which it is the culmination. To account for the signification of, shall we say, a metaphor is to show how the relationship between its forms and its meaning is already virtually present in the systems of language and rhetoric . . . Yet the value of metaphor . . . lies in its innovatory, inaugural force. Indeed, our whole notion of literature makes it not a transcription of preexisting thoughts but a series of radical and inaugural acts . . . The semiotics of literature thus gives rise to a 'deconstructive movement' in which each pole of an opposition can be used to show that the other is in error but in which the undecidable dialectic gives rise to no synthesis because the antinomy is inherent in the very structure of our language. (Culler 1981: 39)

My apologies for this long citation. It serves the purpose, though, of making clear that the elegancies of post-structuralism look at times very much like the more palaeolithic versions of the hermeneutic circle.

Why should approaches to meaning, however egregious they set out to be, land up looking so similar? The reason may be that they depend upon similar implicit metaphysical assumptions. Lyons touches the point neatly when he asks simply whether the signifier should "be defined as a physical or a mental entity?", or indeed "what is the psychological or ontological status of the signified?" (1977: 99). While semiotics may have started out as a critique of the view that "concepts exist prior to and independently of their expression" (Culler 1981: 40), they end up falling into the opposite trap, for "expression now depends on the prior existence of a system of signs" (1981: 40).⁷ So, what status does what have? It is on this

question that that impenetrable writer, Derrida, to my mind makes one of his most useful suggestions. It is a pervasive "metaphysics of presence" which creates these seeming paradoxes, or contradictions.

The problem may be seen to lie in the western tendency to construe being (what exists) in terms of what must be experienced as present. The notion of meaning, Derrida argues, stems from this metaphysics. For we tend to think of meaning as something present to the awareness of a speaker (one might add the idea of awareness itself is compounded of presence) as what he "has in mind" (Culler 1979: 162) without recognizing how metaphorical our observation is. The difficulty is that the image of container (mind) and contents (meanings, thoughts, ideas etc.) is dangerously misleading as there are no grounds seriously to hold this position except as metaphor. Yet the two notions conveniently imply one another (Derrida 1979: 88ff.). If the relation of signifier and signified is not simple substitution, but rather involves mutual supplementation as well, then it no longer becomes self-evident that the proper sense of words, rather than the figurative, is original (Benoit 1978: 29). Put another way, how much is the priority we give to literal meaning over, say, metaphorical due to our sense that the former is somehow more "real" or present? The supposed paradoxes of semiotics become expressed in terms of figurative speech.⁶ It seems that we must pack our bags yet again.

So far two themes seem to run through approaches to meaning. Each theory tends to be grounded in another domain, so displacing the focus of inquiry. Saussurean schools of thought escape this in part and make clear the dichotomy between internally and externally defined models. More generally, whatever the approach, at each turn we are faced with problematic distinctions which have their roots in the history of Western philosophy: the reality of the physical or the mental; the relation of focus and context; natural law against cultural preferences: the essential or the nominal.

Figures of speech would seem to by-pass the hybrid problems of form versus content by being centred about content, or meaning. They offer a classification of possible forms of resemblance, and association, and so a potentially unambiguous language of critical evaluation. This promise obviously depends on exactly what figures of speech, or tropes, are or do; and the assumptions on which they rest. With the tropological phase at its peak, figures of speech are being hailed as the new philosopher's stone – gall-stone to some – and the problems tend to be shoved aside. Tropes may be brought to bear on almost anything not only within the study of discourse, but

they are used to threaten the foundations of our knowledge. They are seen as the key to epistemological shifts (Foucault 1970); they may be constitutive of all our thought (Ortony 1979; Lakoff & Johnson 1980): to the delight of many they offer to turn Lévi-Strauss's gay new structural dog into a mangy mongrel with a promiscuous pedigree reaching back to Quintilian and Aristotle (Culler 1981; Derrida 1976, 1979; Sapir 1977, cf. Crocker 1977).

The problems start when we try to find out quite what tropes are. Rhetoricians commonly hold the vast range to be reducible to four main forms: metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche and irony (the order is important as a sequence to Foucault). In Sapir's scheme, metaphor has two varieties: internal based on shared properties; and external (or analogy) where properties are secondary to the formal congruence of relationships. This latter, he argues, is central to Lévi-Strauss's analyses (1977). Metonymy is often treated as contrasted to metaphor: contiguity not shared property (Culler 1981: 189ff.). Synecdoche is the possible permutations of wholes (genus) and parts (species), and underpins classifications (Sapir 1977: 12-19). Irony is often held to stand apart. There are two obvious questions. What kinds of relationship fall to each trope? And how are the tropes related? For Sapir cause and effect, for instance, are metonymic (1977: 19-20); for Burke they are clear examples of synecdoche (1969: 508). The difficulty stems from how the major tropes themselves are to be defined. Jakobson reduces synecdoche to metonymy (1956). The Belgian rhetoricians in Liège, Group μ , after detailed review of the field, concluded that all metaphor can be reduced to synecdoche (1970 French edn; 1981 English). In the same year however, Genette traced synecdoche, metonymy and all other tropes back to metaphor (1970). Since then Eco has completed the confusion by deriving all metaphor from spurned metonymy (1979). One might be forgiven for thinking that whom God wishes to destroy, He first makes mad.

Why should such distinguished scholars disagree so strikingly? One reason is that the classical sources themselves started from different positions (Aristotle 1941; Quintilian 1921). What kind of entity (sic) are tropes in fact? Often they are treated as a simple classification of types of association: "butterfly-collecting" in Leach's sarcasm. Many of the difficulties noted above seem to stem from taking a taxonomic view of tropes. Behind this lurks the now-familiar catch. Metaphor seems to be defined in terms of "essential properties"; metonymy as the workings of chance. Once again we seem pulled towards the abyss of western metaphysics. Since Aristotle, in Derrida's view, categories themselves have been seen as the

means by

... which being properly speaking is expressed in so far as it is expressed through several twists, several tropes. The system of categories is the system of the ways in which being is construed. (1979: 91)

Figures of speech seem to bring us back to the old problems of what are properties? what is essential? what indeed is accident? Derrida would push it further and see tropes as underlying those “basic” kinds of category – substance, action, relation, space, time, accident – through which western philosophers try to capture being.

Tropes seem to have more immediate uses in creating words and images, where none were before. “Metaphor plugs the gaps in the literal vocabulary” and so is a form of catachresis – the putting of new senses into old words (Black 1962: 32). Such extensions may be almost totally constitutive when conceiving the relation between events in terms of ideas like time. This raises the possibility that language itself may be construed metaphorically. In English, Reddy has argued that our impressions of language are largely structured by the image of language as a container, the contents being ideas, thoughts, feelings, or indeed meanings (1979: 289). By pointing out that alternatives are available to what he calls the “conduit metaphor”, Reddy makes a strong case for the catachretic nature of many of our core concepts (those noted above). Foucault has sought to generalize this kind of argument by applying it to how we structure relations between classes – such as the sane and mad (1967) – or even how our basic ideas of what constitutes an explanation are made up (1970). In this view it is the image of irony which is now dominant. This produces a contrast between a surface and an interior, such that the superficial is to be explained by a deeper structure, as in the Freudian model of mind or in structuralism. The doubling will allow alternative styles of analysis: the search for formalism (perhaps Needham 1978; 1980) as against some (hidden) meaning (Geertz 1973). Metaphor seems then to make up how we see the world and how we set about studying it – even if we are not sure what metaphor is.

This is not quite the end of the tale. With their Nietzschean heritage, the French post-structuralists – in a mood of *fin d'épistème* – see no escape from the web of words, or tropes, what Jameson called “the prison-house of language” (1972). This gallic gloom may be a little premature. To reverse Davidson (1980), let us wonder whether, to use a principle of lack of charity, the turgid and convolute style of these writers does not serve to obscure their own Achilles' heels.

If relationships and abstract issues are conceived catachretically, why should this not hold good as well for the relationship between image and referent in Foucault's and Derrida's own models? We seem near to the self-referential paradox. What exactly is the relationship between an episteme and what it structures; or language and to what it relates? There is no reason that this must be confined to the image of a prison by which thought is kept in place. It seems that their discourse carries within it its own unexplored metaphor. Lovelace's prisoner wondered whether iron bars made a cage. Why should they not make a jemmy for a burglar, or a jail-breaker?

There is another way in which tropes may be understood. They may be treated as ways of perceiving relationships and situations from different perspectives. As such they may cover far broader areas than formal categories and may represent general processes of thinking. Burke, for instance, sees the four major tropes as examples of the more encompassing operations of: perspective, reduction, representation and dialectic (1969). This would go some way to explaining how, if they are treated as classes to be defined extensively, they run into problems.

This is not, however, how tropes are understood by most writers. Around the terms for the main tropes seem to cluster all those metaphysical problems in Western thought which have dogged meaning throughout. Even the classification is fluid. For the same distinctions may be linked to different figurative terms according to one's point of view. For instance, the accident often associated with metonymy may link the latter to metaphor (through essential as against contingent properties), or to synecdoche (contingent opposed to necessary connexion). At one level tropes come close, it would seem, to simple modes of discrimination and association. As they are defined in so many ways it is hard to find neat fit, but the four master tropes involve recognition respectively of resemblance, relationship, classification and contrast.⁹ If the familiar problems are posed (what is being talked about: essences, properties, names etc.), we seem to be back to the rondo of confused classes of the rhetoricians.

Studying Western thought with the aid of tropes may be highly informative. For both are home-grown within the same culture. On what grounds, one might ask, is it legitimate to export them to the tropics? A horrible possibility occurs as to why structuralism should have the appearance of being so widely applicable. Is it that the main tropes are truly cross-cultural? This has yet to be shown; and there are endless disputes as to how they are to be defined anyway. Or is it just that most (perhaps all?) cultures have certain cognitive

operations in some form? It would be hard to imagine a society with no notion of resemblance (and so presumably the rudiments for making connexions which look like metaphor). Might it not be the ostensible congruence of these kinds of operation which allows apparent translatability? Is the structuralist claim to be able to decode myth accurately from Indonesia to South America then false, because the constructs it uses register only gross parallels? I suspect so. One would be foolhardy indeed to assume, for instance of resemblance, that exactly what it is about a thing, or event, that enables it to be compared is necessarily the same in all cultures. In short, can we presume that other cultures have precisely the same formulations of resemblance, relationship, class, contrast and so on? Or are their views of what is essential, accidental, necessary and more sufficiently identical to our own that translation is unproblematic? There is sufficient *prima facie* evidence that ideas vary quite enough – in classical Indian metaphysics as one example (Inden 1976; Potter 1977) – for it to be folly to assume one's own cultural constructs apply across cultures instead of arguing the case. There is, after all, no reason why translation should be an all-or-nothing business. Why can there not be degrees of understanding and misunderstanding? Part of the trouble comes, it seems to me, from treating the notion of "communication" as simple fact, not sometimes as ideal only partly achieved. Because we dimly perceive something through the crude homology of formal operations in different cultures, we should not dupe ourselves that we understand very much. I think this is why tropes seem to offer a panacea, and make the formidable problems of translation look spuriously easy. If this is so, the sooner we move into a post-tropological age the better. Western philosophers may be excused ethnocentrism. Can anthropologists?

What, if anything, comes out of this look at the philosophy of meaning? The most surprising feature is how much is assumed, and how much of this disclaimed. The elimination of metaphysics – perhaps, like marital fidelity, devoutly to be desired – seems less an actuality than wishful thinking. Does what we know fare any better than what we hold to exist? There is, I think, a case to answer that the lenses in our academic spectacles are forged more figuratively than we often chose to admit. On these grounds the slightly facile image of an ethnography of philosophers will have served its purpose if it has helped to change a tired perspective.

There are other bugbears afoot. Wittgenstein's idea of the language game may have its drawbacks, but it does describe rather well what

academics sometimes do. Can we really talk of theories in general, for instance of meaning, when some of the more successful work at best in limited situations? (This may be a simple aspect of Quine's point (1951) that the entities which any theory assumes to exist are those which constitute the range of the theory's variables.) Theory may have to be very narrowly defined where successors on a single subject interpret it such that it has different ranges of application. For example Burke's processual view of figurative language saw it as framing most thought; whereas Sapir read Burke, or figures of speech, as a formal classification of symbolic associations. A more disturbing problem is what exactly is implied in the apparent universality of application of our theoretical constructs. Is it, in fact, evidence of the superior power of our analytical frameworks? The scale of Western academic resources are so great (Gellner 1973a), compared to the societies most anthropologists study, that it is possible to obliterate the nuances of a culture while seeming to explain it. What criteria are we to use to decide between rival theories, or translations (Hesse 1978)? It is easy to import our own principles of elegance, metaphysics or whatever to resolve the matter. In the end, how sensitive will Lévi-Strauss's analysis of South American myth turn out to be, and how much *lèse-majesté*?

The tension between alternative positions may be reflected in differences between philosophy and anthropology. Hollis has stated one aspect of the problem clearly. He has argued that we are obliged to assume identical criteria of rationality in other cultures, as we would, in fact, be unable to know it, should alternative logics exist (1970). An analogous argument could presumably be made for meaning, but its implications are frightening. What would be the point of anthropology if, *a priori*, we could never know if other cultures had different ideas of reason or meaning, *even if they did*? Part of the impasse stems from different concerns. As I understand Hollis the philosopher's brief is to argue for parsimony, to prevent the world becoming unnecessarily, even hopelessly, complicated. The more empirical anthropological brief is to keep as much as possible of the subtlety, and lack of clarity even, of cultural discourse as she is spoke. Might it be that we try falsely to generalize issues beyond the enterprises in which they were postulated? At any rate the cost to anthropology if we accept Hollis's argument is so high that it might well be preferable to sacrifice universal notions of rationality, meaning or whatever instead.

One aspect of the metaphysics of presence is that argument is sometimes read as claim to truth. This is strange. Usually only works of such monumental dullness that no one can be bothered to

question (or read?) them remain unchallenged. The better the argument, often the more it provokes debate and eventually its own refinement or rejection. In this spirit let me phrase a conclusion in an extreme form, not because it is correct but in the hope that it will stimulate others to produce better.

In taking meaning as the theme, I chose one of many loose threads which threaten to unravel the sweater of contemporary anthropological equivocation, cynically called theory. My arguments are hardly new (Evans-Pritchard, among others, has put the case far more subtly). If they have any value though, then failure to consider the possibility that other cultures have other philosophies is, at the least, a ghastly epistemological blunder. Western philosophy seems hopelessly caught in its own toils and anthropology is -- as I am sure its wiser proponents realized -- our one chance of escaping the sheer tedium of our own thought. Anthropology stands little chance though so long as it is bent upon castrating itself on every rusting knife of intellectual fashion. As every anthropologist knows, the life of the subject hangs on ethnography, as this is our outlet from onanistic ethnocentrism. Ethnography is not much use if it is not critical; and this criticism has two aspects. Its obvious face is the reflective consideration of what to select from the richness of human action and discourse. Its hidden, almost shunned, face is the possibility of reflecting on our own categories, our self-evident assumptions -- call them philosophy or metaphysics if one will -- by which we can question the dreary shuffle which passes for the "rational" growth of knowledge. This is not a forlorn search for Shangri-La. For as most ethnographers know, we glimpse through the dark glassily real, and seemingly different, worlds. Otherwise there is the grim prospect of peddling filched fashions which become, like the Cheshire Cat, long on face, short on body. Then talk of meaning turns to moaning.

Notes

1. My special thanks must go to Professor Martin Hollis who suggested this expression and offered many useful comments; and to Dr Ruth Kempson who gave helpful criticism. The idiocies which remain are, of course, my own.
2. This version is roughly the first half of the original paper, which was too long for the present format. In the second part some simple ethnography on Balinese ideas of meaning and intentionality was introduced to argue that the kinds of difference with western views were such as to have led to wildly ethnocentric interpretations of Balinese culture.
3. cf. Lyons 1977: 177ff. where the relationship between naming, reference,

denotation and sense is looked into, for purposes of theories of linguistics.

4. The more recent work on speech acts and conversational implicature are not included in these remarks and will receive fuller treatment in a forthcoming paper on context.
5. There are so many different formulations of the hermeneutic circle that it would seem to need a critical analysis all of its own. My aim is simply to disabuse the more trusting reader of the fear that hermeneutics is some esoteric orthodoxy on which he somehow missed out. The debate within the broad tradition of hermeneutics is too rich to serve as a fossilized doorstep for "Interpretive Social Science" (Rabinow & Sullivan 1979).
Restating the terms of the debate does not help much. To read context as a set of propositions raises Collingwoodian problems of freedom from presuppositions and Quinean ones of theory dependence. One may define the hermeneutic circle in similar language as: to understand X, one must know what state of affairs would be described by X, and to know that one must first understand X. This puts great weight on "know" and "understand". (One might argue backwards that the hermeneutic circle stems from the attempt to reconcile the two notions.) "Understand" has always seemed a problematic idea to me and to be tinged with the metaphysics of presence discussed below.
6. The relationship of code, or context, to signs and symbols receives interesting treatment. "... in contrast to what happens in a semiological decoding, it is not a question of interpreting symbolic phenomena by means of a context, but -- quite the contrary -- of interpreting a context by means of symbolic phenomena." (Sperber 1975: 70).
7. As Benoist points out, the structuralists seem for the most part to have borrowed naively from linguistic models without considering how far these are rooted in western metaphysics. Derrida goes on to consider how de Saussure's stress on the spoken word as against the written is a product of his assumption that the primacy of the former is somehow linked to its greater "presence" to the experiencing mind (Benoist 1978: 28; Culler 1981: 40-1; Derrida 1976). The idea that experience is a kind of pre-cultural given might need defence in the light of the above. Culler (1979: 162-3) gives a delightful introduction to how Derrida copes with some of Zeno's paradoxes by trying to show how far they depend on presence as really real.
8. One may reach a similar position by way of "motivation". Lyons, discussing the work of Porzig, shows that the direction in which the meaning of a lexeme will be generalized cannot be determined by reference to motivation alone, but depends upon metaphoric extension (1977: 264), itself a problematic notion.
9. By contrast I refer to the range of intelligible, indeed informative, comparisons such as bitter-sweet, but hardly bitter-blue.

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