

*For a long time I have been trying to think about MEANING IN LANGUAGE, and for instance I published a book on first-phase Chomsky and an essay on his later delusions, also a book about the theory and practice of Bible translation. I feel the urge to try to get a bit further, and these stirrings are offered as a Christmas competition in the hope that others will join in by way of comment, development, intelligent contradiction. The prize for anything I think interesting is publication on this home page. Copyright will remain with contributors. I hope that by the time of the muddy ebb of Boxing Day there may be something here to provoke you to thought. What else is a publisher in the world for?*

Ian Robinson      *Fourth Sunday in Advent 2015*

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## *The Fallacy of Saying Anything*

WE TAKE IT FOR GRANTED that we can say things and write things. (One of the basic instincts of philosophy ought to be to look hard at what we take for granted.) If so where are the things?

Elsewhere I have criticised the Aristotelian notion which by way of Saussure goes into modern linguistics, that language *codes* pre-existing ideas in such a way that the listener/reader can decode the language back into the original ideas. This connects closely with the ingrained notion that form and content are distinguishable. The content is the idea, the form (in the old cliché) the clothing in which we dress the content. But where is the content before it gets dressed? Plato's statue released from the stone block: is the statue the form or the content? Are form and content distinguishable either in the original block or in the statue?

If we ask what anybody means, we take the "what" to be this pre-linguistic idea. Well, where is this WHAT?

Translation, it is often supposed, can be a variety of ways of putting the same thing in a different language. Where is this same thing? The snag for the linguists and philosophers is that there is no way of getting at any underlying content but by giving it expression, that is, giving it a form. If we can only find meaning in expression, nothing is added to our notion of what anything said or written means by supposing that the meaning underlies the expression.

(This is not to say that all thought goes on in language. Which drawer is the sheet in? I look without saying anything to myself. What shall I eat? I may just have a vision of a sausage. This needs following but not just here. The questions immediately raised are about what happens in language.)

But if uses of language are themselves meaningful, how are we to think about them so as to get some understanding of meaning in language?

Philosophy of language, and its practical branch linguistics, offer to give a properly scientific understanding of language. How can this not mean an explanation of how we come to mean, when we write or speak? But both philosophy of language and university linguistics are quite incapable of fulfilling any such offer.

All these years the empiricists have been getting away with the fancy that the only proper use of language is to make verifiable propositions about the external world. (That proposition itself is not about the external world though I believe it to be verifiable.) If this belongs anywhere in the world of mind it is as a declaration of ethical commitment and certainly not scientific. Neither linguistics nor empiricist philosophy is empirical. They don't try to see language steadily and see it whole.

Linguistics is powerless to explain what any actual locution or piece of writing means and why. Since the great advances of Port Royal, linguistics has been good at syntactic analysis and has achieved the concept of the well-formed sentence. This need not even raise the question what a sentence means. Grammarians of any era will for instance distinguish the imperative from the indicative, and will observe rules for the the formation of interrogatives. It would be going too far to say that this has nothing to do with meaning; but TG grammar and its developments cannot begin to say what. An order can be given by an interrogative. "May I suggest that you get the hell out of here?" The efforts of semanticists to explain the conceptual structure of words don't even get as far as good dictionary definitions, let alone raising the question how we actually make sense by writing words. In one form of empiricist philosophy of language (including Wittgenstein's in the *Tractatus*) the meaning of a noun is its referent, and there it is, waiting for a proposition to be made about it! Without any dispute about dictionary definition, the meaning of *cat* need not have anything to do with any referent. *The cat sat on the mat* is a meaningful formation and a well-formed sentence, but though it uses definite articles does not normally make any proposition about any cat or any mat. (Could all this be what Leavis had in mind with "the critic as anti-philosopher" and "philosophers are always weak on language"?)

The idea that the proper function of language is to make verifiable propositions about the external world is, as an account of how language comes to be meaningful, just grotesque. As if lies, declarations of love, prayers, everyday gossip, are without meaning! As if the toddler beginning “Mamamamamam” is not really beginning to talk! (Call it a vocative if you like, but what does it mean?) Another Christmas game is to speculate on the origins of language. I rather fancy the fancy that language originated in lies: that the system of signals by which our ancestors in the caves pointed out to one another where to find food became language when somebody discovered deception.

Literary critics can make a much better shot at discussing how language comes to mean, though not by trying to turn literary criticism into a natural science. Properly observed, the iambic pentameter is as much a unit of meaning as the well-formed sentence.

And truth about the external world need not take the form of verifiable proposition. “Earth hath not anything to show more fair” than London appeared to Wordsworth from Westminster Bridge. Was his exclamation meaningless? Any reader can understand it. But how does it come to be meaningful?

Has *love* any meaning? Look it up in a dictionary? Better to read the New Testament. Or *Emma*. And look at your life (which you can hardly read these books without doing). This is one of the reasons literature and religion are important: they can show us what words mean, that is, what they do for the whole community; which is more than can be said for linguistics or empiricist philosophy.

All meaning in language depends on context, at all levels from the immediacy of a conversation to a place in an epic poem and place in a life and a language. Nobody has ever discovered a way of describing the process except from within. The best way of showing understanding of a conversation is to continue it. The only way to show understanding of a poem is to discuss it with others who have been able to read it. This is not an admission that we cannot discuss meaning. It only means that the way proposed as unique by the empiricists is cripplingly restricted.

The question I put to the happy few is: CAN ANY SENSE BE MADE OF THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN FORM AND CONTENT? Please don't waste time on bottles. The bottle is the form, the beer is the content? No, they are different things. Ask instead whether the form of the bottle is different from the substance of the bottle. But if the whole form/content distinction is a fallacy, where shall we go for the truth?

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