

MEANING AND THE UNEXPECTED

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INTRODUCTION

The traditional model for meaning (hereafter ‘TM’), as exemplified by Saussure 1995, consists of three complex steps. In the first, the speaker (“A”) formulates some thought and determines how to express that thought in “words”. In step 2, A makes a series of sounds that the listener (“B”) hears and which A believes B will “understand” in an intended way. In step 3, B hears the sound and, through some unstated process, forms a “brain state” equivalent to that which A had immediately before A transmitted the sound. The “brain state” that was transmitted from A to B is the “meaning” of the “words” used by A. The TM tacitly assumes that this process functions with 100% efficiency at all times, that A is or could be aware of his or her “brain state” or is otherwise capable of stating the “contents” of that “brain state” in words, and that B’s “brain state” is the same as A’s once A has made the appropriate sounds and B has heard the sounds Saussure 1995:11 et seq.

To see that the TM does not accurately reflect communicative behavior, we examine several examples of communicative behavior that, in one aspect or another, include or are based on some random or unexpected behavior or event. An analysis of these examples suggests that description of the process for conveying meanings that traditional linguistics uses (referred to above) is, at best, inadequate. Austin argues that when we talk about situations other than routine ones, “words fail us” Austin 1962:36. As a consequence, looking at examples of non-routine situations aids us in understanding how people communicate with each other because such an analysis might show us what people do when communicative behavior fails to achieve their goals or when the goals of the communicative behavior are, shall we say, non-traditional. While there is still considerable controversy in the tradition about the way that “words” have developed (this is not an HSL concern), we will look at some occasions in which we can determine how one or more “words” were created and what the subsequent history of those “words” was. One example is the creation of the word “Dada” by a group of artists in the early part of the twentieth century. We will see that the “inventors” of words do not always determine what, if anything, their inventions mean. In another, unrelated example, we examine an observed

incident in which a three year old child communicates with his grandmother in what the tradition would consider a grammatically proper by semantically questionable way. We will also briefly look at two phenomena which were based on the works of the Roman poet Virgil. One is a form of fortune telling called the *sortes Virgilianae* and the other is a type of poetry (*cento ex virgilio*) constructed by stringing together unrelated lines from Virgil's poetry to form new poems. The phenomena challenge the notion that "meaning" resides in "words" by showing that meaning can be constructed by selecting and joining random or seemingly random bits of text and holding them up for examination. We can, with the aid of these examples, at least speculate about what factors are missing from the TM.

Hard Science Linguistics (HSL) Yngve 1996 does not use the notions of traditional linguistics. HSL has made a radical break with traditional linguistics and, as such, tries to replace the unscientific notions of the tradition with new, scientifically justifiable linguistic findings. This paper is part of an attempt to precisely define some of the foundational problems of the tradition which the tradition has ignored for too long. While a paper of this length cannot offer definitive alternatives to the tradition, it can at least point the way toward further research and, perhaps, a path toward future sound results. This paper is presented in that spirit. While this paper discusses traditional linguistic concepts like "word" and "meaning", this should not be taken as HSL's or this author's endorsement of those concepts as they are traditionally used. Such terms are used here simply for convenience.

Many traditional linguistic studies and general human experience show that a word may have a particular meaning at one time and quite a different meaning at some other time. Usually, we think of this happening in some historical context and often assume that the transition is slow and smooth. However, this is not always the case. For instance, Austin argued that words, by themselves (the performative utterance), can "do things" in the real world besides the simple transmission of meaning and speech act theorists followed him with further development of this claim Austin 1962:220 ff; Austin 1962b. It is not clear whether or how a performative utterance or speech act is different from meaning in the sense set forth by the TM or whether the performative aspect of speech is supposed to be a separate "appendage" or characteristic of some words. Some of my previous studies have questioned whether this proposition (that words can sometimes "do things" by themselves) is correct. One study investigates communicative

behavior in the recent controversy in the United States regarding the legality of “gay marriage” Sypniewski 2005. In some cases, a gay (or same-sex) marriage which was valid at one time according to one agency was invalidated at another time by another agency. Austin’s performative utterance theory or its subsequent development as speech act theory is inadequate to allow us to model the facts that are observed. The fact that appellate litigation may result in the reversal of a lower court decision questions the notion of the “permanency” of meaning or speech acts. If the words, once uttered, have an effect in the real world which can then be altered by something external to the original conversation or which occurs at a subsequent time or which may not even involve the person who uttered the original words, how can the traditional Saussurean model of meaning be sustained? According to the TM, for words to have the effects that Austin saw when he created his concept of performative utterances, they must have meaning but what is the meaning of the words which a speech act theorist might claim performed the act of marriage? At one point in time, following speech act theory, the words were sufficient to perform the act of marriage but some later event might have negated the marriage.

There is nothing in speech act theory which explains why a set of words pronounced in one jurisdiction might result in a valid marriage but which, if pronounced in another, would not. If the meaning of words *in a single utterance* can shift over time or space beyond the control of the original speaker, how can we account for the validity of the TM? One might, at first, say that the brain state that A transmitted to B (the meaning) was incorrect and was later corrected but this is difficult to square with the generally held notion that there is some fund of meaning that is commonly held by each member of a linguistic group, however defined. One might at first think that Austin’s proffer of marriage as an example of a performative utterance might be misplaced, but the problem we have seen here occurs with some of his other supposedly clear and strong examples as well. For instance, Austin uses a jury’s verdict as another example of a performative utterance. However, I have shown, Sypniewski 2004, that what Austin calls a verdictive (from the word *verdict*) is heavily dependant on what HSL refers to as the surroundings. Even if the same words are spoken by the same people (the jury) in one context they might not constitute an example of Austin’s performative utterance while in another they would. The words, by themselves, do nothing in Austin’s sense.

At the very least, the notion that meanings are transmitted with 100% efficiency must be revised, if by an efficient transmission of meaning one means the efficient transmission of a generally or socially acceptable meaning, whatever that may be, or at least the duplication of A's "brain state" in B's brain. The TM does not make any room for error or error correction so it does not tell us how A and B correct their joint brain states to conform to a new meaning or if, indeed, they do. More to the point, the TM raises the question of whether A and B can communicate if they are unaware of their "brain states", i.e., if they do not have a firm idea of what they are talking about. We now consider some examples of cases where this awareness is questionable.

DADA

The DADA movement (later to be superseded by Surrealism) was an extreme reaction by a number of European writers and artists to the trauma of World War I and the rapid modernization of Europe shortly thereafter. DADA was not a movement that was limited to any geographical or national area but had several centers in Europe, North America, the Middle East and Asia. At first, the artists who met in the Café Voltaire in Geneva simply thought and behaved in similar ways. After a while, they decided to form a movement or, rather, to recognize that they had already formed one. The question of a name for their radical activities arose. We have evidence (controversial though it may be – everything about the DADA movement was controversial; in a way, that was the point of the movement) about the way the "word" DADA was arrived at. The evidence is a first hand observation:

Realizing that what they had begun was greater than themselves, the group at the Café Voltaire needed a name for what they were doing. [Hugo] Ball, so the story goes, stuck a paper knife at random in a French and German dictionary and, coming across the word dada (French for hobby horse), christened the new movement Weld 1986:143.

We will see later that the element of randomness referred to in this quote may have considerable significance when analyzing the TM for its scientific soundness.

Tristan Tzara, one of the early leaders of DADA, wrote the most important of DADA's many manifestos and tried to describe DADA:

Dada does not mean anything.

If we consider it futile, and if we don't waste our time over a word that doesn't mean anything... The first thought that comes to these minds is of a bacteriological order: at least to discover its etymological, historical or psychological meaning. We read in the papers that the negroes of the Kroo race call the tail of a sacred cow: DADA. A cube, and a mother, in a certain region of Italy, are called: DADA. The word for a hobbyhorse, a children's nurse, a double affirmative in Russian and Romainian, is also: DADA... from Tristan Tzara, Dada Manifesto, 1918 in Kuenzli, 2006:197

One of the early German DADAists, Kurt Schwitters, said in his publication *Merz*:

But 'the Dadaists' conception of Dadaism varies greatly', as Huelsenbeck himself has to admit. Kurt Schwitters, Merz, 1920, in Kuenzli 2006:235

Schwitters also used the term *Merz* for his own individual work not just his publication:

Kurt Schwitters, a master of collage, collected string, matches, and refuse from the streets and incorporated them into Merz, a meaningless word with which he labeled all his collages Weld 1986:171

Francis Picabia, an important DADAist who proved influential in both Europe and the United States even after the DADA movement turned into Surrealism, described DADA this way (in one of his manifestos – manifestos were a major product of the DADA movement):

DADA, as for it, it smells of nothing, it is nothing, nothing, nothing.

it is like your hopes: nothing.

like your heaven: nothing

like your idols: nothing

like your politicians: nothing

like your heroes: nothing

like your artists: nothing

like your religions: nothing. from Francis Picabia,
Cannibal Dada Manifesto, 1920, in Kuenzli 2006:246

If it weren't for the controversies these vague descriptions led to, sometime violent controversies, we might be tempted to chalk all of this up to some sort of artistic playfulness but when looked at linguistically, we face a significant problem. How, linguistically, if the TM is accurate, do we create, on one hand, a "word" with either no fixed meaning or, perhaps, with no meaning at all which, on the other hand, a "word" which is descriptive of a movement, a way of thought, or some other aspect of reality (even if it is *surreality*, which is itself a DADAist coinage)? Non-DADAists might react this way:

A Dada manifesto informs lovers of etymology that certain blacks call the tail of a holy cow 'dada'; in one part of Italy 'dada' means mother; in Russian 'da' is an affirmation. But 'Dada' is connected neither with the one nor the other nor the third. It is simply a meaningless little word with which one can juggle a l'aise, thinking up meanings, adjoining suffixes, coining complex words which create the illusion that they refer to objects: dadasopher, dadapit. from Roman Jakobsen, Dada, 1921, in Kuenzli 2006:264

The tradition is faced with a daunting problem. Can a word with no meaning be created at all and, if so, can it be used as part of the TM? We can answer that question with a *yes* because it has already been created and used that way. We might be tempted to write off this whole incident as a special case which does not invalidate the TM were it not for a similar development originating in Russia around the same time. It was called *Zaum* (named by Alexsei Kruchenykh, a Russian Futurist poet in 1913, by combining the Russian prefix *za* "beyond, behind" and noun *ym* "the mind, *nous*") and involved the quest for 'meaningless' language Laskewicz, 1995. The Russian Suprematists, especially Kazimir Malevich, wanted language that reached 'beyond rationality' Faerna, 1996. Here we have not one isolated example but three examples (*dada*, *Merz*, and *zaum*) of attempts to create "words" without "meaning". We will not even consider famous works like Lewis Carrol's *Jabberwocky* or the large amount of nonsense, DADAist or Surrealist poetry and prose in existence.

“CONSIDERATE”

In the following brief observation, S1 is a three year old boy. He refers to S2, his younger brother. He talks to S3, his paternal grandmother; S4 is the child's aunt. S1 told me he liked S2 *cause he is so considerate*. S3 said to S1: *That is very nice thing to say but would you also consider S4 & I (S3) as being considerate?* S1 answered, *No, because you don't have any toys to share*. Having toys to share is obviously the key to being found considerate for S1. Since S1 goes to daycare, it is not difficult to suppose that his teachers told him and others in his class to be considerate and share toys with each other. S1's "brain state" to used the TM's terminology, connects toys (or sharing toys) with the sound *considerate* or some variation of that sound. To an adult, this would not occur as a "brain state". An adult using the word *considerate* would not limit its meanings to sharing toys but through his limited experience with the world (and considerable experience with other children and toys) S1 made toy sharing a significant part of his "brain state".

This little example shows that a feature of the TM is its lack of connection with the real world. For the TM (and for traditional linguistics in general), all that is important are the two "brain states" and the sound used to convey the "brain state". One might object that A and B, two people, are also important but this is not the case. In the TM, A and B do not inhabit the real world but a sort of Platonic realm in which there are no outside influences on them. Indeed, if one substituted two computers for A and B but otherwise kept the mechanism of the TM as Saussure described it, one would have a fully functional example of the TM. One would have to say that the computer that was B "understood" A's "brain state" because it was accurately duplicated (a simple computer process). This is what the TM suggests. However, anyone who has worked with computers (except for the most advanced computers with artificial intelligence and, even in this case, the TM raises questions) will admit that using the term "understanding" for what computers do is, at best, metaphorical.

Our little example creates a counterexample to the TM. "Brain states" are not transmitted with 100% efficiency. One might say that this is an example of a simple mistake. After all a three year old cannot be said to function at the same linguistic level as an adult. This is precisely the point. The TM does not take linguistic experience into account. There is no room in the TM for error or, more importantly, for error correction. It is hard to imagine how a child can develop linguistically without a usable error correction method.

The TM can be described as a symbol processing model with the “words” or sounds as the symbols to be processed. Learning theorists have developed other models which challenge the validity of symbol processing. One group of such theories is called constructivism. One form of constructivism – dialectical constructivism – as exemplified by Vygotsky 1989 describes the construction of knowledge in an individual as being derived from social interaction and experience in a much more sophisticated way than the TM allows for.

Virgil

The Roman poet Virgil was considered a magus during the Middle Ages and, at times, with nearly as much reverence as a Christian saint. Even during the time of the Roman Empire, he was considered the greatest poet Rome produced. We will look, very briefly, at two phenomena associated with Virgil after his death which will show us that the TM does not explain all ways that humans communicate.

Sortes Virgilianae

The *sortes* is a form of fortune telling. The *sortes Virgilianae* is a form of fortune telling using a text of Virgil. Essentially, the *sortes Virgilianae* involved the random selection of a subtext, often a single sentence from one of Virgil’s works, most often, the Aeneid (if only because it was the largest and probably easiest to obtain of Virgil’s works). Once a text was selected, a person “interpreted” the text much like an astrologer would interpret some client’s horoscope. The unexpressed premise underlying the *sortes Virgilianae* was that the poems written by Virgil had “hidden meanings” as well as the “surface” meanings that would be apparent to the average reader.

Cento ex Virgilio

The *cento* were poems constructed from bits and pieces of other poems, in the case of the *cento ex Virgilio*, from the poems of Virgil. Originating in the Later Roman Empire and being revived in Renaissance Italy, the *cento* were poems composed, if that is the word, by taking passages from Virgil, say, and reassembling them in such a way as to create new poems with new meanings. Indeed, it was never intended that the reader should take the *cento* as anything other than “reassembled” poems. In

Renaissance books, references to the sources for each line peppered the pages.

These two historical curiosities show that, at times, people can decide that meaning can be constructed. The TM is limited in a way that suggests that once a person says words, those words will have a meaning fixed by A forever. The above two examples clearly indicate that this is not the case. The *sortes* example shows us that some people might find that certain texts have meaning far beyond that which the author intended which need to be teased out of the text. Notice the similarity between the *sortes* and the “discovery” of the word *DADA*. Both involve an act of randomness in the selection of a text. Both then conclude with an act of interpretation. In the case of the *sortes*, a hidden meaning is discovered. In the case of *DADA*, we might say that “surface” meaning was removed and, perhaps, “hidden” meaning, if there be any meaning at all, was left behind. In other words, these are two examples of the belief that meanings are not fixed and are not in the exclusive possession of a “language community”, however defined. The *cento* shows that even a highly sophisticated text is subject to manipulation, in this case, by rearrangement so that new meanings are “created” and old meanings “removed”.

Conclusion

The little examples given here are given as counter-examples to the TM. Even they show that the TM is oversimplified and cannot be considered to be scientific in any way. For HSL, that means that the TM cannot form the basis of a linguistic theory. Hard work remains. It is not enough to show that an old theory is not scientific. We should not jump to the conclusion that what we must do is to replace it. What we must do is to observe how people communicate and formulate scientific theories based on our observations. Careful work will lead to sound results but we must be careful to base our work on observations of the real world rather than on a desire to replace an unsound theory with a theory based on domain confusion. We must start without assumptions and slowly and scientifically develop a theory of how people communicate.

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