
Philosophy, Language, Linguistics and the Ontology of Meaning: A Discourse on the Pragmatic Theory of Meaning

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Abstract

Language, linguistics and philosophy have a melting point and this is predicated on the fact that while language is about the development, acquisition, maintenance and use of complex systems of communication, linguistics is the scientific study of language. Philosophy pries into both in the form of philosophy of language and philosophy of linguistics. Both are interested in philosophical questions about the structure of language, ontology of meanings, the relationship between language and the world and language and thought respectively. And an important variable that underlines these activities is the ontology of meaning and the discourse on the ontology of meaning has led to a whole lot of theories of meaning and their practical implications especially the pragmatic theory. This informed the intention of this paper which interrogates the ontology of the pragmatic theory of meaning using the critical analytic model. The pragmatic theory of meaning states that the meaning of a term or concept can be explicated in terms of the practical effects associated with the object of the conception. From the analysis, it was palpable that despite the various objections to the pragmatic theory of meaning, it is still one of the foremost theories of meaning based on the currents and its embracing mode as it also remains an evergreen catalyst for language, linguistics and philosophy.

Keyword: Language, Linguistics, Philosophy, Meaning, Pragmatics, Theory.

Introduction

The questions concerning the philosophy of language and linguistics such as whether words can represent experience have been debated at least since Gorgias and Plato in ancient Greece. Scholars like Rousseau averred that language is emotive, that is, it originates from our emotions but Kant was of the opinion that language originates from rational and logical thought. Some contemporary scholars like Wittgenstein went ahead to argue that philosophy is really the study of language and this makes it easy for one to understand why some philosophers of linguistics like Ferdinand de Saussure and Noam Chomsky feature comfortably within philosophical discourse. This underscores why philosophical investigations about the ontology of language and linguistics have become more and more compelling in the last few centuries. The considerations about language are objects for various areas of scientific research as well as for theoretical questioning. Philosophical study of language sheds light on many different fields like education, linguistics, sociology, politics, psychology, etc. In a sense, where there is human life, there exists a trace of language because language is the most distinctive capacity of man. Philosophy of language provides a deep background for both other fields of philosophy and various scientific studies.¹ Man, among all the creatures is regarded as a speaking animal because he makes use of thought and spoken language. He is able to communicate his desires and wishes, sensations of pain and pleasures, state and conditions which he finds either commendable or regrettable. He is the only being that is able to communicate and express feelings in writing and has the ability to improve on the language with the aid of philosophy as a tool.

¹ Baykent, Ufuk Özen, *An Introductory Course to Philosophy of Language* (Newcastle, U.K: Cambridge scholars' Publications, 2016), 65.

This indeed has exposed the implication of philosophy for language and philosophical linguistics. Now an important aspect of language that philosophy, linguistics and language both interrogate is the issue of meaning. Without meaning, there is no language, communication and also no philosophical speculation. It is consequent upon this that this paper interrogates the foremost pragmatics theory of meaning. This theory was championed by the pragmatic tradition in philosophy led by Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914),² who first defined and defended this theory and his close friend and colleague William James (1839–1914)³ and John Dewey⁴ (1859–1952) who was one of American pragmatism's early founders and arguably the most prominent American intellectual for the first half of the twentieth century.⁵ Unlike the former two proponents, John Dewey's pragmatism or *cultural naturalism*, which he favored over *pragmatism* and *instrumentalism* may be understood as a critique and reconstruction of philosophy within the larger ambit of a Darwinian worldview. The pragmatic theory states that the meaning of a concept of term can be explicated and appreciated from its practical effects and implications. But there have been concerns that this approach restricts meaning to a particular angle of reality but the counter argument seems to state that it seems to be the only theory that appeals more to people especially in the modern and contemporary

². Charles Sanders Peirce, "Harvard Lectures on Pragmatism," in *The Essential Peirce*, vol. 2. ed. The Peirce Edition Project (Bloomington IN: Indiana University Press, 1903/1998), chs. 10-16; Charles Sanders Peirce, "What Pragmatism Is," in *The Essential Peirce*, vol. 2. ed. The Peirce Edition Project (Bloomington IN: Indiana University Press, 1903/1998), 331-345. Charles Sanders Peirce, *The Writings of Charles S. Peirce: A Chronological Edition*, eds. M. Fisch, C. Kloesel, E. Moore, N. Houser et al. (Bloomington IN: Indiana University Press, 1982); Charles Sanders Peirce, *The Essential Peirce*, eds. N. Houser and C. Kloesel Vol. 1 and the Peirce Edition Project Vol. 2, (Bloomington IN: Indiana University Press, 1992-94).

³. William James, *Pragmatism: A New Name for some Old Ways of Thinking* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1907/1975); William James, *The Meaning of Truth* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975).

⁴. Citations to John Dewey's works are to the thirty-seven-volume critical edition *The Collected Works of John Dewey, 1882–1953*, edited by Jo Ann Boydston (Southern Illinois University Press, 1969–1991).

⁵. Lamont, Corliss, "New Light on Dewey's *Common Faith*," *The Journal of Philosophy* 58, no. 1 (1961): 21–28. doi:10.2307/2023566.

world. More still, the proponents posits too that, it also seems to cut across the epochs in philosophy, various traditions, movements, schools and discipline including language and linguistics. These polemics accounts for why this theory is famous and it also informed the disposition to interrogate critically this theory of meaning. By way of schema, the paper will highlight the interface between philosophy and language which is a well celebrated area in philosophy together with linguistics. After this interface the discourse will continue and flow to other aspects of the paper especially as it concerns the pragmatics theory of meaning.

The Interface between Philosophy and Language

The literal meaning of philosophy does not end in the love of wisdom but rather it goes into the critical enquiries in order to know what makes a thing right or wrong and what makes it that which it truly is.⁶ Language on the other hand is a universal phenomenon of all cultures. Ludwig Wittgenstein in his *pictorial theory* of language defines language narrowly as the totality of propositions and by proposition he meant that a description cannot legitimately be used for any other purpose than to describe a perceptible existing condition in this world of our experience. The philosophical study of language is as old as philosophy itself. Thus according to J.R. Searle, Plato was concerned with language in the Euthyphro when he inquired about the meaning of 'piety' or the concept of 'pious' which is expressed in the Greek word *hosion*. Plato also seems to have elucidated a theory of meaning in the Phaedo where he claims that the meanings of general terms have the nature of forms in the world of ideas, that is, they are objectified and eternal beings.

⁶ Matthew Orhungur, *Understanding the Philosophy of Education* (Ibadan: Spectrum Books Limited, 2013), 2.

Philosophy of language is closely related to some other disciplines in philosophy like logic, epistemology, ontology and philosophy of mind. The questions about the nature of justice, knowledge or being are of great interest and debate in the history of philosophy. Finding the appropriate answers is, in a sense, a problem of understanding the question. For instance, Wittgenstein claims that the question of “what is knowledge?” is meaningless when considered as a philosophical question. According to A.R. Lacey, philosophy of language is a separate study of language, a recent offshoot of logic connected also to epistemology, metaphysics and philosophy of mind. It also asks general questions about language as such about a particular language.

One of Aristotle's fundamental convictions is that the structures of language, thought and reality are the same. He never doubts that we do have knowledge and that the structures of human knowledge are congruent with the structures of reality. How else could our minds ever come to know or understand nature if there were not some affinity between them? When we reason from one proposition to another proposition, we are not simply going from one mental item to another. Instead, we are going from one piece of information about the world to other facts that are true of the world. We need to add language to harmonious picture. Thus the structure of language more or less divides reality at its joints. Language is important because knowledge does not consist of mute, mystical insight but the ability to discourse intelligently about the world. Language must have the same structure as thought.⁷ The connection between philosophy and language also cuts across metaphysics as well. One problem facing the metaphysician is the limit of language and the meaning of terms and expressions. This problem has burdened all creative thinkers, for as Whitehead said; the history of ideas

⁷. William Lawhead, *The voyage of discovery: A Historical Introduction to Philosophy* (United States of America: Wadsworth Thomson Learning, 2002), 72.

has been the constant “struggle of novel thought with the obtuseness of language.” The problem is that Whitehead thought the concepts and their associated terms we have used for thousands years to think and speak about reality have given us a misleading picture of its structure. This is because our conceptual equipment is infected with the questionable philosophical assumptions and contains the sediment of philosophical ideas that have made their mark on culture.

To use an analogy, it is as though Whitehead sees reality as circular in nature, but our current conceptual categories and terms are made to hold only triangular shapes. To overcome this problem, Whitehead had to create his own technical terms, using such peculiar words as “prehension”, “nexus”, and “superject”. However, these sorts of linguistic oddities are inevitable if philosophy is the attempt to express the infinity of the universe in terms of the limitations of language. The subject of language is one which has not been studied with sufficient care in traditional philosophy. It was taken for granted that words exist to express 'thought' and generally also that 'thoughts' have 'objects' which are what the words 'mean'. It was thought that, by means of language, we could deal directly with what it 'means' and that we need not analyse with any care either of the two supposed properties of words, namely that of 'expressing' thoughts and that of 'means' things. Often when philosophers intend to be consider the objects meant by words they were in fact considering only the words, and when they were considering words they made the mistake of supposing, more or less unconsciously, that a word is a single entity, not, as it really is, a set of more or less similar events. The failure to consider language explicitly has been a cause of much of the problem in traditional philosophy.

For Jacques Derrida, assuming that language cannot go beyond itself, he concludes that the meaning of the term is a function of the place it

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occupies within a system of linguistic concepts. More specifically, terms receive their meanings from the role they play in differentiating one category of things from another. Derrida says; all such terms receive their meanings from the distinctions that are created within language. From the premise that language has no absolute, external point of reference, Derrida concludes that language is arbitrary, imposing no limits on the play of meanings and interpretations that readers may find in a text. Deconstructionists seek to reveal the incoherencies within texts, for from the conflict of multiple interpretations new possibilities of interpretation are generated. To undermine the seriousness of language and to underscore the element of play, Derrida sprinkles his writings with puns, plays on words, unlikely metaphors, amusing allusions, and phonic and typographical tricks. Derrida realizes that even his own language is infected with metaphysical pretensions. The words, essence, existence, experience, consciousness, subject and object carry with them the baggage of thousands of years of philosophical speculation and inescapably reflect the metaphysics of presence. Finding it impossible to critique philosophy without employing the traditional terms of philosophy, Derrida uses them, as he says, “under erasure.”⁸

Some of the propositions in language are on belief or perception. The philosophical analysis of an utterance like “I believe it will rain today” requires understanding the mental processes involved. Another concept in philosophy of mind is the concept of mental representation which binds the field to language. There is a relationship between mental representation of something and referring to that thing. Thus, the concept of reference and mental representation of the thing being referred to, have a bond. As for epistemology, the relation is that many philosophers agree that knowledge is propositional. When the relationship between a

⁸. Lawhead, *Voyage*, 562.

subject as a knower and an object as the thing known is considered, many argue that the object is a proposition. The argument is that for a subject to know a proposition, it is necessary that the proposition is true. Thus, the question of truth of propositions binds knowledge to language. Though there were some motivations by philosophers of the 20th century, especially from G.E. Moore, who insisted on the need for the clarification of the meanings of ordinary terms and words which we employ in everyday verbal discussions. Moore claimed that although we communicate thoughts and ideas easily by the use ordinary language it is surprising that when most persons are pressed to give the meanings of the words they employ they are unable to do so.

From the foregoing, it is apposite that the philosophy of language involves the critical or systematic and ordered methodologies through which philosophy squarely interrogates the issues of language in trying to find out the validity and authenticity of its claims. It is not out of place that philosophy and language are like two sides of a coin that cannot be separated because philosophy as the mother of all disciplines tries to bring out the best in language because if they are separated language would definitely have no sufficient claims to back up its claims. Indeed, the philosophical study of language is of utmost importance for all persons, disciplines and professions that use language, because its investigations are conceptual rather than empirical. Basically, philosophy of language is a recent offshoot of logic, connected also to epistemology, metaphysics and philosophy of mind. This means that philosophy of language is concerned with empirical investigations about languages. And it provides a deep background for both other fields of philosophy and various scientific studies.⁹ The above section has exposed and interrogated the interface between philosophy and language

⁹ Baykent, Ufuk Özen. *An Introductory Course to Philosophy of Language* (Newcastle, U.K: Cambridge Scholars' Publications, 2016), 67.

from where the impression of the philosophy of language gets its feeling. The next aspect of this paper is the analysis of the interface between philosophy of language, linguistics, philosophy of linguistics and linguistic philosophy.

Language, Linguistics and the Philosophy of Language

It is a huge oversight to be oblivious of the fact that linguist and psychologists have also been quite interested in questions regarding how men come to speak language. It becomes obvious that the kind of questions philosophers ask about language acquisition are similar to those posed by the linguists and psychologists. Therefore, answers by both the linguist and psychologist, though different in some important respects from that of the philosopher of language, can have a profound impact on answers in the philosophy of language. By contrast, although the question “are there meanings, and if so what are they?” is surely part of philosophy of language, it has become very obvious that this question cannot be answered without studying the technical apparatus available to linguists who study semantics. Linguistics, compared to philosophy of language is generally explained as the scientific study of language and languages. Traditionally, it is concerned with writing grammars and dictionaries for natural languages and with describing phonetic and phonetic systems. Less traditionally, it is concerned with universal theories of grammar and semantics that is, with describing the principles of grammar and meaning that underlie all possible natural languages.¹⁰

Philosophy of linguistics is generally viewed as a branch of philosophy concerned like philosophy of psychology or philosophy of physics with a particular branch of philosophy and/or science. The task of linguistics

¹⁰. Dan R. Stiver, *The Philosophy of Religious Language: Sign, Symbol and Story* (London: Blackwell Publishers, 2006).

is to ask for instance, what kind of fact are to be included in linguistic theory? How can these facts be established? What is the relation between facts about a particular language and fact about languages in general? However, on some occasions, the philosophy of linguistics has been identified with philosophy of language. Linguistic philosophy is the critical application of facts and techniques learned through the study of language to standard philosophical problems. And the reason why philosophers have shown more and increased interest in language and linguistics is that philosophy itself is a verbal activity as it is the verbal discussion that makes up the philosopher's laboratory in which the philosopher puts his ideas to test. Little wonder then why philosophers are especially sensitive to the flaws in the major instrument which is language and also in the activity and nature of the scientific study of this instrument which is linguistics.

Language, Linguistics, Philosophy and the Question of Meaning

Among the varieties of questions which are put forward in philosophy of language are the traditional problems about meaning. What are meanings? What is the relation between meaning and reference? Are there meanings? And if there are, what sort of entities are they? Are meanings anything at all? Are they the same as what expressions refer to? Or are they psychological entities such as ideas, images or concepts in the mind? If not, do meanings exist on their own, independent of minds, facts about the world and the linguistic signs which form the vehicle for their expression? What is the ability to speak a language and how does one acquire the ability to use words with pre-established meanings to refer to or talk about specific objects? By what criteria can we distinguish between meaningful and meaningless sentences? What is the ability to speak a language? And how does one learn or acquire it? What specific problem arises about meaning for the philosopher of language? Whereas many scholars answer these questions in the affirmative and seek to

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develop positive theories in reply to them, some scholars think that the questions are misguided. Ludwig Wittgenstein, for instance thinks that rather than inquire after the ontological status of meaning as substantive entities, we only have to “look and see” that words acquire meaning in the various context of their usage. So meaning (of words and sentences) are the products of a “language game.” And the right question to ask about word-meaning is “How do words acquire meaning through use?”¹¹ Philosophy of language is also traditionally concerned with such questions as, what is it for a linguistic expression to be meaningful? Are there specifiable criteria for determining the meaningfulness or otherwise of words and sentences? What is it for a sign to mean such and such? What is it for two expressions to have the same meaning? How does one learn or acquire a language? Is language conventional and if so, how? How does one manage to use words with pre-established meanings to talk about new experiences and refer to particular things? What is the relationship between meaning and truth? To what extent is the problem of human acquisition and use of language comparable to the linguistic “behavior” of artificial intelligence devices such as computer and robots? In seeking to answer some of these questions, the philosopher of language sometimes draws on information and technical apparatuses available to linguists and psychologists who also study language and are interested in questions about how we acquire and speak a language. Quite often too it is part of the pre-occupation of the philosopher of language to explore the relationship between meaning and use, the descriptive and non-descriptive (or non-cognitive) uses of language. It is asked, for example, is meaning the same as use? On the whole it could be said that philosophy of language is the consequences of early twentieth century philosophical concern for dismantling and deconstructing earlier metaphysical systems, and sorting out their cognitive or

^{11.} Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* trans. G.E.M. Ascombe (New York: The Macmillan Co, 1958), 31; Ludwig, Wittgenstein. *The Blue Book in the Blue and Brown Books: Preliminary Studies for the 'Philosophical Investigations* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1965), 17.

epistemological contents. Apart from the preceding characterization of philosophy of language, it is important to note that it is distinctively a sub-discipline of philosophy; its subject matter lies within philosophy. It has the task of providing an adequate analysis of basic concepts such as the concepts of linguistic meaning, connotation, sameness or synonymy of meaning and meaningfulness.¹²

Language, Linguistics Philosophy and the Quest for Criteria of Meaning

The quest for the criteria of meaning is simply about the requirements which a linguistic sign or a combination of linguistic signs must satisfy before it is adjudged to be meaningful or not. What precipitated this quest was nothing but the “ugly” and “disagreeable” practice and disposition by some scholars in the history of philosophy. In the ancient period, Plato has spoken of Forms, Ideas or Universals as inhabiting a timeless and space less world. Aristotle on his part distinguished between Substance and Accidents, Matter and Form.¹³ In the medieval era, the Scholastics spent so much time on speculation about the nature and activities of God, the Holy Spirits and demons. And in the early and later modern philosophy, especially in the works of Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz, Hegel, Fichte and Schelling, all the earlier controversial terms of speculation were given a renewed attention. This recurrent practice was thought in some philosophical circles to be an intolerable inbred and pompously verbose. It was therefore despised and jettisoned as 'meaning metaphysics' and this was with the impression that the ideas involved in the speculations or belief system goes beyond immediate sense experience. This was in order to then discourage and stem intolerable exercise of indulging in 'nonsensical' speculations of ideas for which

^{12.} Robert Audi, and Paul Audi, Paul, *The Cambridge dictionary of Philosophy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

^{13.} See, Anthony Kenny, *A New History of Western Philosophy: Ancient Philosophy* (United State of America: Oxford University Press, 2006).

there is not the least material evidence. It was in this wake that philosophers of language thought it wise to introduce the Ockham's Razor so as to use it to 'weed out' meaningless jargons from meaningful discourse in the enterprise of philosophy. Hence, it is then asked, by what standard should we judge certain linguistic components like; words and sentence as meaningful or meaningless.

In response to this, David Hume¹⁴ proposed a criterion for deciding the meaningfulness or otherwise of words when he wrote; “when we entertain any suspicion that a philosophical term is employed without any meaning or idea (as is but too frequent) we need but inquire from what impressions is that supposed to be derived”. This is the view that if a term does not refer to objects of immediate sense experience then it is meaningless. If it does, it is meaningful. So, if a person attaches a real meaning to a word the person must be ready to specify its object. Even this position of Hume is laced with some incongruence despite its positive outlook. This explains why in the history of philosophy, various philosophers, traditions, schools and movements have proposed various criteria for determining the meaningfulness or otherwise of statements. This disposition to proposed models is based on the fact that meaning is not just a central but a critical scheme both in language, linguistics, linguistic philosophy and philosophy of language. It is then pertinent and not surprising to note that there are a plethora of theories about the nature of meaning and about what makes a proposition or a belief meaningful or meaningless. And one of the foremost and topical theories of meaning is the *Pragmatic Theory of Meaning* and this is the concern of this paper. The logic of this theory is that meaning of a term or concept can be explicated by practical effects associated with the object of the conception. Meaning is therefore part of the process of experience, of

¹⁴ David Hume, *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, edited by L.A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 22.

living. And as part of a process, meaning is made by the process of successful experience and a successful experience is the verification process. For the most part, the pragmatists thinking about a criterion of meaning looked to experience and not to language for the source of philosophical insight. However, their understanding of experience was much broader than that of the early analysts.

The Question of the Theory of Meaning

The theory asserts that a word acquires its meaning, not by reference to any particular or universal object or by an association with some mental processes, but by the way in which it is employed in various circumstances by the speakers of a particular language. In other words, words do not have fixed meanings except within the sentence in which they occur. Wittgenstein says that the meaning of a word is its use in the language. We make things true by verifying them, a view rejected by most pragmatists. However, nearly all pragmatists do accept the idea that there can be no truths without a conceptual scheme to express those truths. That is, unless we decide upon how we are going to use concepts like 'object', 'existence' etc., the question 'how many objects exist' does not really make any sense. But once we decide the use of these concepts, the answer to the aforementioned question within that use or 'version', to put in Nelson Goodman's phrase, is no more a matter of 'convention'. If we do not at least point toward those contexts, it is far too easy to misunderstand not so much what a conceptual conclusion states as what it means, and thus to be less able to make use of it in the immediate world in which action takes place, we think, as we act.¹⁵ Donald Davidson would even think that a theory of meaning for a natural language can be provided by a theory of truth in the Tarskian style which satisfies the conditions of extensional adequacy, compositionality, and interpretation.

¹⁵ Minich, Elizabeth Kamarck. *Transforming Knowledge* (United State of America: Temple University Press, 1990), 11.

Given a fragment of natural language, what we require in order for a theory of meaning of this sort to be constructed is that the sentences of this language be couched in a form which renders them amenable to understanding. In effect, what this requires is that the sentences be translatable into the language of symbolic logic. Now, many of the sentences of natural language do easily translate into this formal notation: any student who has taken an elementary logic course at university will be familiar with this process.

The Pragmatic Theory of Meaning

For Bertrand Russell, every word has a meaning: the entity to which it refers. This is often called the 'referential' or 'naming theory of meaning'. This definition of meaning implies that if we can understand what a sentence means, it must be composed entirely of words denoting things with which we are acquainted or definable in terms of such words. A word that directly refers to a particular entity with which we are acquainted is a 'logically proper name'. The proper name describes a particular fact in the world, and therefore the subject of an atomic proposition. Wittgenstein explained meaning in terms of the logical relations between a name and its object or between a proposition and a fact. He came to know that words and sentences do not have meanings all by themselves, for they have the meanings we give to them. They are inseparable put together to human purposes and activities, and in this view they have their life. Although the pragmatists did not think the analysis of language was the sole occupation of philosophy, they did think it was a first step to clarifying our concepts of meaning. This underscores why they developed what is known as the 'pragmatic theory of meaning', which posited that the meaning of a term or concept can be explicated by the practical effects associated with the object of the conception. Basically, the pragmatists subscribed to experience.

That is the reason why it is pertinent to state here that at the heart of Charles Sanders Peirce's pragmatism is a new explanation of how words acquire their meanings. He even went ahead to coin the word *pragmatism* from the Greek *pragma* (which means act or deed) and this was only to reiterate and emphasize the fact that words derive their meaning from actions of some sort. He posited that our ideas are clear and distinct only when we are able to translate them into some mode of operation. Take for instance, the adjectives of *hard* and *heavy* which have meaning only because we are able to conceive of some specific effects that are associated with these terms. Thus, *hard* means that which cannot be scratched by many other substances and *heavy* is something which will fall if we let go of it. To underscore the decisive role of effects in the meaning of words, Charles Sanders Peirce argued that there would be absolutely no difference between a hard thing and a soft thing as long as they did not test differently. From these noble but simple instances, Charles Sanders Peirce sought to generalize about the ontology of meaning and knowledge in general. His fundamental submission being that our ideas of anything is our idea of its sensible effects. This suggests that, if words are to have any meaning, one must be able to use the operational formula which says, if A then B, which is to say that an object or such quality imply that such effects can be expected. If a word refers to an object or a quality about which no practical effect can be conceived, such a word has no meaning.¹⁶

From the foregoing, it is positive to say that Charles Sanders Peirce was influenced by the language of science this is sequel to the fact that it is only scientific and empirical language that satisfied this pragmatic criterion for meaning. However, when this position of Charles Sanders Peirce is given a second and critical look, it becomes obvious that what

¹⁶ Williams, Michael, *Problems of Knowledge: a Critical Introduction to Epistemology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

Charles Sanders Peirce was arguing against was the kind of rationalism Descartes has firmly fixed in the theory of knowledge. To be sure, the earlier empiricists had sought to expose the deficiency of the rationalist project but Charles Sanders Peirce found the assumption of rationalism to be very much alive. Descartes has localized all thought within the mind of each person. And intellectual certainty for Descartes consisted in 'clear and distinct' ideas which the mind grasps only by intuition. For Descartes, the mind was a purely theoretical instrument that could operate successfully in isolation from environmental circumstances. Thinking for him, was basically a matter of consciousness. Against these assumptions and suppositions of Descartes, Charles Sanders Peirce argued that thinking always occurs in a context and never in isolation from it. He also reasoned that meanings are not individual or private but social and also public. And if there is no way of testing ideas by their effects or public consequences, such ideas are meaningless. For him, to be able to distinguish between meaningful and meaningless is particularly important, when various and opposing systems of thought are urged upon a person.

Furthermore, it is on record that William James also made his own sterling contribution to the pragmatic tradition nay the pragmatic theory of meaning. William James not only assisted Charles Sanders Peirce but he, William James became the channel through which Peirce's original thoughts about pragmatism found their way into the language and thought of a whole generation throughout the world. On this issue of meaning, William James made his startling impression known which is that meaning happens to an idea. But what was so startling about this impression was that the more traditional theories of truth took virtually the opposite view which is that meaning is a property or a quality of an idea. So, William James unvaryingly jettisoned what he referred to as the *copy-view* of meaning. This theory assumes that an idea copies reality

and an idea is therefore meaningful if it copies what is 'out there' accurately. Meaning then became the quality an idea has when it copies accurately. The assumption of the intellectualists who hold this theory according to William James is that meaning means essentially an inert static relation. When you got your true idea of anything, there is an end of the matter. Against this theory, William James brought the whole weight of his pragmatism to bare. And he restated that meaning must be the cash value of an idea. He says that what other motive could there be for saying that something is meaningful or not than to provide workable guides to practical behavior. William James would rather ask, what concrete difference its being meaningful will make in anyone's actual life; that is where meaning resides ultimately.

Now by tying meaning to life and to action, William James rebuffed the position that meaning is a stagnant property in ideas. Ideas become meaningful; they are made meaningful by events. This is why he went on to say that meaning happens to ideas. More so, to say that meaning happens to ideas is to make meaning a part of experience. Whereas the copy-view of meaning assumes that ideas really do copy what is 'out there', pragmatism says that there rarely is exact coping. For William James, ideas become meaningful as they help us to make successful connections between various parts of our experience. Meaning is therefore part of the process of experience, of living. And as part of a process, meaning is made by the process of successful experience; successful experience is the verification process. On this theory, William James would say that there are many, plural meanings, as many meanings as there are concrete successful actions. Moreover, William James would comment that meaning is bound up with the personal interest of concrete individual. That is to say, meaning is not something capricious. And as it is bound up with personal interests, meaning must lead to successful action, it must work! Invariably, a meaningful belief must work

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beneficially, just as a meaningless one will work destructively.

John Dewey on his part, denied that we ever experience isolated sense data or even single object and event. Instead, we experience contextual wholes that he called 'situations.' Experience is not made up of bits of data that bombard a passive mind, but is an arena for action in which we face practical problems, seek solution, and carry out our projects and aims. It may be helpful to use the spatial metaphor and to speak about 'inside language' and 'outside language'. To be inside means to use language as the medium of grasping the world; to be outside means to perceive language as a thing among other things of our world. To be inside is to take an expression as inseparably and unquestionably connected with its meaning, while to be outside is to perceive the connection between an expression and its meaning as an empirical fact. If we are inside a house and perceive the sky through a hole in the house's roof, then it makes no sense to ask whether we really do perceive the piece of sky we do; whereas if we are outside the house, then the question whether an inside observer can perceive this or that piece of the sky is meaningful and nontrivial. The perspective from inside is the expression-as-medium perspective; whereas that from outside is the expression-as-object perspective.¹⁷ We need the level of illocutionary acts, acts of saying something, in order to characterize such common situations as these: where the speaker says one thing but, not speaking literally, means (in the sense of trying to convey) something else instead, where the speaker means what he says and indirectly means something else as well, and where the speaker says something but doesn't mean anything at all.

¹⁷ Piotr Stalmaszczyk, *Philosophy of Language and Linguistics: The Legacy of Frege, Russell, and Wittgenstein* (Germany: de Gruyter, 2014), 200.

Moreover, the same sentence can be used to perform illocutionary acts of various types or with various contents. Just as in shaking hands we can, depending on the circumstances, do any one of several different things (introduce ourselves, greet each other, seal a deal, congratulate, or bid farewell), so we can use a sentence with a given illocutionary content in a variety of ways. For example, we could utter 'I will call a lawyer' to make a promise or a warning, or just a prediction.¹⁸ If each type of illocutionary act is distinguishable by the type of attitude expressed, there is no need to invoke the notion of convention to explain how a particular act can succeed. An illocutionary act succeeds if the hearer recognizes the attitude being expressed, such as a belief in the case of a statement and a desire in the case of a request. As an illocutionary act, a statement or an apology is successful if the audience accepts it, but illocutionary success does not require that. It requires only what is necessary for the statement or the apology to be made. As Peter Strawson explains, the effect that is relevant to communicative success is understanding or what John Austin called "uptake," rather than a further (perlocutionary) effect, such as belief, desire, or even action on the part of the hearer. Indeed, an utterance can succeed as an act of communication even if the speaker doesn't possess the attitude he is expressing and even if the hearer doesn't take him to possess it. Communication is one thing, sincerity another. Sincerity actually possesses the attitude one is expressing. Conventional illocutionary acts, the model for John Austin's theory, succeed not by recognition of intention, but by conformity to convention. That is, an utterance counts as an act of a certain sort by virtue of meeting certain socially or institutionally recognized conditions for being an act of that sort. They fall into two categories, effectives and verdictives, depending on whether they effect an institutional state of affairs or merely make an official judgment as to an institutionally relevant state of affairs. Here are

¹⁸. Alexander Miller, *Philosophy of Language* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 89.

some examples of each:

Effectives: banning, bidding, censuring, dubbing, enjoining, firing, indicting, moving, nominating, pardoning, penalizing, promoting, seconding, sentencing, suspending, vetoing, voting.

Vindictive: acquitting, assessing, calling (by an umpire or referee), certifying, convicting, grading, judging, ranking, rating, ruling

Below are examples of the four major categories of communicative illocutionary acts, which may be called constatives, directives, commissives, and acknowledgments. Here are some further examples of each type:

Constatives: affirming, alleging, announcing, answering, attributing, claiming, classifying, concurring, confirming, conjecturing, denying, disagreeing, disclosing, disputing, identifying, informing, insisting, predicting, ranking, reporting, stating, stipulating

Directives: advising, admonishing, asking, begging, dismissing, excusing, forbidding, instructing, ordering, permitting, requesting, requiring, suggesting, urging, warning

Commissives: agreeing, betting, guaranteeing, inviting, offering, promising, swearing, volunteering

Acknowledgments: apologizing, condoling, congratulating, greeting, thanking, accepting (acknowledging an acknowledgment).

Culminating Reflections

The pragmatic theory of meaning is basically within the philosophies of

pragmatism and *pragmaticism*. It was initiated by Charles Sanders Peirce, but later developed by William James and John Dewey rebranded it with instrumentalism and semantics. The common features of this theories is its reliance on the pragmatic maxim as a means of clarifying the meanings of difficult concepts such as truth; and an emphasis on the fact that belief, certainty, knowledge, or meaning is the result of an inquiry. According to the pragmatists, knowledge and meaning is instrumental, it is a tool for organizing experience satisfactorily. They see concepts as habits of belief or rules of action and meaning for them cannot be determined solely by epistemological criteria because the adequacy of these criteria cannot be determined apart from the goals sought and values instantiated. For this linguistic tradition values, which arise in historically specific cultural situations, are intelligently appropriated only to the extent that they satisfactorily resolve problems and are judged worth retaining. According to pragmatic theory of meaning, meanings are belief that are confirmed in the course of experience and are therefore fallible, subject to revision and this explains why William James talked about pluralism of meanings.

From the thematic analysis made above, this theory of meaning explores the various aspects of our understanding of words and sentences and our ability to use them with a symbolic function. The important goal historically was to delimit the extent of human understanding, and to end a succession of principles connecting meaning with experience.¹⁹ The idea is that the meaning of a sentence is to be explained by relating it to the circumstances, under which it would be meaningful, an explanation that will involve the referential relations of its words, for there is good reason to separate the theory of linguistic meaning (semantics) from the theory of language use (pragmatics), not that they are unconnected. From

^{19.} Anthony Flew, *A Dictionary of Philosophy* (London: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1984), 78.

the flow both within the philosophy of language and philosophy of linguistics, one would notice and appreciate the alluring model and mode of operation of this criterion or theory of meaning. The reason for the seeming allure and appreciation stems from the rave of the moment and the contemporary intellectual culture and temperament coupled with its existential variables and import. As a matter of fact, people are now more and more interested in winning, gaining and making progress and marks in life, and they are not too keen about the mode and model of operation therefrom, provided it is successful and by extension beneficial according to the pragmatic model. This is the reason why these pragmatists through their theory are not just popular but also attractive, all because of their model of appreciating reality within language and linguistics and also based on the ontology of their theory of meaning. However, despite the allures of this theory, it has enjoyed more followership and it will continue to enjoy it for a long time irrespective of its seeming concerns and existential implications. Nevertheless, the contribution of this pragmatic theory of meaning towards a better understanding of language and linguistics is evergreen.

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