Chapter 18

VALUE, CONTEXT, AND THE ORIGIN OF MEANING: SPOKEN VS. WRITTEN LANGUAGE

...Here we see a semantics which not only drains the concept of 'truth' of any moral content but divorces statements from their communicational context altogether.

(Roy Harris, General Linguistics, 1987: 159)

There are four parts to the meaning of a word or lexical item. They are, what I choose to call, the tag, category, significance, and context.

The tag is the name given any discrimination of any part of the environment. It is arbitrary to any language or group and may be a sound, symbol or both. It is objective to the extent that it is socially shared.

The category is the primary algorithmically based part of speech. The fundamental categories in English are noun and verb, reflecting the incorporating and extension, ordering and chaos aspects of the algorithm. All other categories such as modifiers and determiners are secondary. Categories, like tags, tend to be objective to the extent that they are socially shared in a language.

The other two parts, significance and context have objective aspects, but tend to be primarily highly subjective.

Significance and context are the two aspects of meaning that will be further dealt with in this chapter. They are often overlooked, underappreciated, or ignored in theoretical linguistics.

UNIVERSAL GRAMMAR AND THE PROBLEM OF MEANING

The universal grammar as proposed by Chomsky, along with its various offshoots, simply cannot account for the meaning of words. That is, how
words get their meaning to begin with. It is not good enough in addition to syntax to just acknowledge and analyze an additional so-called semantic component. One must account for the origin and the strength of the meaning.

The origin and strength are found in how the sensory input (coded context) along with the phonetics and/or symbols associated with the words or utterances, are programmed in the framework of the primary algorithm to the subroutines of the second algorithmic matrix (e.g. keyed to somatic markers per Damasio 1994), and stored in long-term lexical memory. There are many considerations other than narrowly linguistic ones that go to explain this aspect of linguistics. The input of all five senses, visual, touch, sound, scent, taste may be programmed into the meaning of the words. All these accompanying sensory factors are encoded in part or whole to a word when it is learned and are available when the word is repeated.

This coded context is of fundamental significance with the basic vocabulary we get in our early childhood experiences. Words carry or suggest all these multiple sensory experiences plus their second algorithmic links of value and meaning (cf. Damasio 1994; Adolphs, et al. 1996). Our subsequent word accumulation and increasingly sophisticated, acquired syntax build upon and acquire meaning in part through extension and association with the basic language learned early in life.

THE NATURE OF SEMANTICS

The words semantics and meaning are generally taken to be synonymous or nearly so. There are two aspects to both, however, which are rarely if ever distinguished. There is objective meaning and subjective meaning. The distinction is part and parcel of the well-known fact and value dichotomy. The linking of the two brain algorithms reveals that the separation of the two is artificial. Their linkage can be expressed in a spectrum as follows:

- Objective \(\rightarrow\) Subjective
- Fact \(\rightarrow\) Value
- Primary algorithm \(\rightarrow\) Second algorithm

In our interpretations we may move closer to one extreme or the other, but the linkage is unbreakable. Moving too far in either direction only creates distortion. In a naturally, initially acquired language the two are blended. Any naturally acquired language is representational, however, and communication of meaning relies implicitly upon two key and largely unclarified assumptions. They are:

1) a commonly shared perceptual apparatus of the five senses coupled with a commonly shared cognitive/emotional substrate (which as assumed could only be innate or part of the protein expression of the genetic informational matrix; i.e. the primary and second algorithms).