CHAPTER 9

An Inferential Theory of Language

What is important in developing a realistic perception of language change is to acknowledge that the meaning of words are always contemporary and that what words mean is always open to change. And in our awareness of this change we should also recognize the role of imitation in maintaining usage. And we should also recognize too how usage relates both to memory and to being a part of a language community with a system of signs technically called our sociolect. Note how we educate usage by drilling and repeating words. And the confirmation of that adequacy of our use of conventional usages for certain circles in societies motivates the conservatism of the prescriptivists about our language usage. It is such conservatism that underpins our sense of language correctness. Repetition thus is the basis of our notion of usage.

But note that I do not want to say that we interpret usage, as I stated in my basic semiotic axiom; rather, I want to say that we interpret use in order to define usage. To repeat my basic mantra, *we interpret use; we define usage.* And if in interpreting use we find that use is conventionally repeated by others, we should then conclude that our use is usage. And a standard of usage is confirmed and legitimated by lexicographers putting usage into lexical definitions into their dictionaries.

Each of us thus has a repertoire of usage, our *personal idiolect.* We importantly perfect our idiolect in both our formal education and in our efforts at self-education. All of us have in our idiolects an ever-changing and reshaping set of words that that we use to speak and to write with. Our repertoire of written usage among those with formal education is much larger than our spoken usage primarily because a bookish vocabulary does not easily flow into our everyday speaking patterns. Written usage multiplies endlessly in the context of the historical accumulation of so many written texts. I find in my own writing that I often use words that I have never spoken before. To use them properly presumes that I think my audience has them in their reading vocabulary as well as I do. The written or reading usage of a sociolect is called the *grapholect* (Hirsch 1981).

G. E. Yoos, *Politics & Rhetoric*
© George E. Yoos 2009
Part of our language development and education, then, is about enlarging our basic repertoire of usage. Our speaking use and usage are consequently in large part determined by the local community or the area that we live in. Our personal idiolect is a product of our family and our community of close face-to-face encounters, and especially it is acquired from the local schools that we attend. We speak of this local or regional use and usage as our dialect.

Some sociolects contain hegemonic cultural and elite dialects. Such dialects are what prescriptivists choose to call good English, Spanish, Italian, Japanese, Chinese, or German. Prescriptivists, through gatekeepers or their language police, create mechanisms to put the hegemonic dialect forward as the correct standard of the sociolect. Importantly, they sanction the properties of the grapholect, its spelling and its grammar.

Historically there seems to be an obvious correlation within different language communities, where we find that the standardized grapholect inhibits language evolution and radical changes in language usage. Note how dictionaries, such as Webster’s, have been a conservative obstacle, slowing changes in the usages, especially in the spelling of the grapholect. Note the conservative absurdities in ritualistic spelling bees. Normally, we learn to spell with our fingers as we type or spell in the way we write in cursive script. And now spell checkers on word processors are making spelling and grammatical rules even more conservative still.

Interpretation is, as suggested, an umbrella term. But when it applies to language use, we need to recognize that interpretation of how language is used relates importantly to the content of what is being said as well as to what is indirectly being said. Interpretation of the meaning of what is being said indirectly always presumes an inferential theory of language. Such a view of language is presumed, where language is doing and implying something in a context of presumptions and signaled intentions. It is understood from what is going on in a communicative situation.

On the other hand, usage goes hand in hand, as we have illustrated, with a code theory of language, and especially it applies to any notion of a rule-driven semantics, with its definitional rigidities promulgated by standardizers. Codes are codes by definition. Rather than think of these theories as theories, as I eschew notions of theory in talking about language change, I prefer to think of accounts of language change not as theories that are generalized explanations but as descriptions of how meaning is both assigned and grows in an evolutionary fashion in the advance, progress, and growth of a linguistic culture.

Note that in English studies they speak of “the defined meaning,” or in other words, “defining words.” In English studies “defined meaning” is called “the denotation.” But this notion of denotation is quite unlike the logician’s notion