

I. A. Richards

1893–1979

Ivor is an
awesome name!

Ivor Armstrong Richards was born in England and educated at Magdalen College, Cambridge. He studied philosophy under G. E. Moore, whose powerful influence extended as well to Bertrand Russell and many of the analytic philosophers of Russell's generation. At Magdalen, Richards met fellow student C. K. Ogden, with whom he would coauthor two books and, in later years, develop the "Basic English" project, through which Richards hoped to improve international understanding. After completing his undergraduate degree in 1915, Richards pursued medical studies with the intention of becoming a psychoanalyst. Tuberculosis kept him out of the First World War, although it did not prevent him from becoming an avid mountain climber. After the war, Richards dropped his medical studies and passed up an opportunity to become a professional mountaineer in order to become a lecturer in English and moral philosophy at Magdalen, his old college. He soon became a leading figure in the development of modern literary criticism. No field of study seemed foreign to him, and his many books and articles are marked by his continuing enthusiasm for psychology, linguistics, anthropology, information theory, and philosophy.

In *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* (1936), Richards defines rhetoric in two ways: as "how words work in discourse" and as "the study of misunderstanding and its remedies." These definitions summarize two distinctive features of Richards's work: first, his theory that the meaning of words is a function of their interpretation in context and, second, his mission to promote better understanding by criticizing impediments to understanding and by creating tools for effective communication.

Richards's idea that meaning is a function of interpretation takes shape in *The Meaning of Meaning* (1923; excerpted here). In this wide-ranging and much-admired book, Richards and coauthor C. K. Ogden explain that words are symbols or signs, and signs require interpretation: "Throughout almost all our life we are treating things as signs. All experience, using the word in its widest possible sense, is either enjoyed or interpreted (i.e., treated as a sign) or both, and very little of it escapes some degree of interpretation."¹ Meaning does not reside in the words or signs themselves; to believe that it does is to fall victim to the "proper meaning superstition," the belief that words have inherent meaning. Following a model derived from pioneering semiotician C. S. Peirce, Ogden and Richards propose that signs refer to a mental image (the *reference*) that itself stands for something in the world (the *referent*). The "reference" of a sign is by no means a unique thing. The interpreter understands the sign in *context*, which may be the surrounding verbal context, in the case of words; the experiences associated with the sign; or both. That these concepts are so familiar to us today may well owe something to Richards's boldness in combining ideas from psychology, philosophy, linguistics, anthropology, and literary criticism in this early work.

¹I. A. Richards and C. K. Ogden, *The Meaning of Meaning* (1923; 8th ed., New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1946), p. 50.

Ogden and Richards go on to discuss the relationships among signs, thoughts, and things (some of this discussion is included in our excerpt). They review the state of research in what we now call semiotics, summarizing and comparing the ideas of Peirce, Ferdinand de Saussure, Edmund Husserl, and others. They set forth a behavioristic theory of interpretation-in-context—an extension of association psychology—in which a cluster of ideas rather than a single image serves as the “reference” of a word (an idea Richards repeats in Lecture II of *The Philosophy of Rhetoric*; excerpted here). In addition, they compare the many different meanings of meaning in popular, literary, and philosophical usage, and they print a striking essay by anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowsky, “The Problem of Meaning in Primitive Languages,” that illustrates the usefulness of the theory put forward by Ogden and Richards. Meaning is rhetorical, they conclude, because language is “an instrument for the *promotion of purposes*” and not simply “a means of *symbolizing references*.”²

this gets
somewhat closer to
a signification.

For Richards, as for Kenneth Burke (p. 1295), literature is a privileged form of language in that it provides cases of compressed meanings clearly in need of interpretation. The methods developed in the laboratory of criticism can then (so the argument goes) be applied to life. In applying his theories to literature, Richards creates a new kind of criticism. Poetry, Richards says in *The Principles of Literary Criticism* (1924), is like other experiences and, like them, should be analyzed as a kind of sign. Poems are complex verbal environments in which words are highly dependent on context for meaning and effect. Criticism, then, is a description of this environment, its structure, and its effects.

In *Practical Criticism* (1929), Richards reports on an experiment in which he asked students to interpret poems stripped of all “external” information, such as the author’s name and the date of composition. Richards analyzes the students’ responses, searching for impediments to the understanding of the poems. He then classifies these impediments and proffers possible remedies. His approach soon became the dominant critical method in England and the United States, challenging historicism and influence mongering with a rigorous method of close reading. By limiting context to the immediate verbal structure, Richards can focus on a reader’s experience of the poem itself and diminish the importance of historical and biographical knowledge.

But there is a difficulty here. It is clear from Richards’s own analyses of the poems that he knows perfectly well the name of the author and the historical circumstances of composition and, moreover, that he (unlike most of the students) has access to another kind of context as well: the expert’s special knowledge about what may and may not be said about a poem. The context of Richards’s experience is the “correct” context—namely, the experience of reading and studying many poems. Richards classifies as impediments to understanding those associations which come from experiences in other realms (“mnemonic irrelevances” or “doctrinal adhesions”) or from misapprehensions about what poetry is (“critical preconceptions” or “stock responses”). Thus, his psychology is like Bacon’s in that it searches for the

(Humm)

²See p. 1277 in this book.

a compromise?
a negotiation?

idols that turn our thoughts into the “wrong” channels. Meaning may thus be dependent on context, but some contexts, it seems, are more appropriate than others.

The problem of defining context appears again in *The Philosophy of Rhetoric*. Richards lucidly explains the need for a contextual theory of meaning to combat the “proper meaning superstition”—the belief that words have inherent meaning. The notion of context, which he equates with rhetoric’s attention to the effects of discourse on the audience, will become the foundation of a new rhetoric. Richards then repeats the definition of context as the set of associations clinging to a word through experience. Finally, he moves on to the “literary” sense of context, which he calls “the interanimation of words.” Of the several definitions of context he has offered, this last is the one he seems to prefer. In communication generally, as in literature, meaning depends on the immediate verbal environment, not on dictionary definitions of words. The paradigmatic case of the interanimation of words, for Richards, is metaphor. Richards, though less insistent than Nietzsche, offers “the principle of metaphor” as a model of all language. The “tenor” and the “vehicle”—the two things compared in a metaphor—mutually limit the range of interpretation. In understanding a metaphor, we do not simply apply the characteristics of the vehicle to the tenor, as might be supposed. Rather, we understand the one by the other: For example, with “My love is like a red, red rose,” we take only certain characteristics of the vehicle (the beauty of the rose, not its thorns) because of the nature of the tenor (my love). All discourse, Richards argues, works this way. We understand the meaning and connotations of a word or phrase by what surrounds it, while the surroundings are modified by the word or phrase.

In his later work, Richards continues to refine the definition of context. In *Interpretation in Teaching* (1938), he separates literary context from experiential context and observes that both are essential to understanding. And in a 1953 essay, “Toward a Theory of Comprehending” (in *Speculative Instruments*), he proposes a seven-part analysis of context based on the Shannon-Weaver model of communication. “A comprehending,” says Richards, “is an instance of a nexus established through past occurrences of partially similar utterances in partially similar situations—utterances and situations partially co-varying.”³ Richards continued to work on this model of context for many years, never satisfied that it identified all the necessary elements or their interactions in producing meaning.

The essay on comprehending was inspired, Richards says, by thoughts about translating Chinese into English. Translating and teaching languages are expressions of his attempts to apply his theories practically, to reduce misunderstanding in the world. This mission led him to create “Basic English,” a vocabulary of 850 words (later supplemented by audiovisual aids) that could be used to teach English as a second language and to make difficult texts more accessible. Richards spent three years at Harvard in the thirties working on this project, studied cartooning at the Disney studios as part of his search for effective visual aids, and traveled to China twice to study translation. He translated the *Iliad* into Basic English and pro-

³I. A. Richards, *Speculative Instruments* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955), pp. 23–24.

duced, with Christine Gibson, a series of texts and workbooks designed to teach not only Basic English but also Basic French, Spanish, Italian, Russian, and Hebrew. These projects, which dominated the last decades of Richards's life, met with little acceptance; indeed, they were viewed with dismay by those literary critics who looked for his return to the field in which he had had such tremendous influence.

Selected Bibliography

Our source for *The Meaning of Meaning* (1923) is the 1946 New York edition. The excerpt from *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* (1936) is from the 1965 reprint. Richards's other works include *Principles of Literary Criticism* (1924), *Practical Criticism: A Study of Literary Judgment* (1924), *Interpretation in Teaching* (1938), and *Speculative Instruments* (1955).

The only full-scale biography is John Paul Russo's *I. A. Richards: His Life and Work* (1989). Russo traces the development of Richards's theories and places them in historical and biographical context. Russo's annotated bibliography of Richards's works appears in *I. A. Richards: Essays in His Honor*, ed. Reuben Brower, John Hollander, and Helen Vendler (1973), which includes reminiscences by Richards's students and an interesting interview with Richards himself. A good bibliography of criticism of Richards is in Jerome P. Schiller's *I. A. Richards' Theory of Literature* (1969).

Ann E. Berthoff discusses Richards's ideas with teachers of rhetoric in mind, in her essay "I. A. Richards," in *Traditions of Inquiry*, ed. John Brereton (1985). Sonja Foss, Karen Foss, and Robert Trapp summarize Richards's work in their *Contemporary Perspectives on Rhetoric* (1985). Several earlier articles assess Richards's influence at the height of his career and his impact on rhetorical theory: Manuel Bilsky's "I. A. Richards' Theory of Metaphor" (*Modern Philology* 50 [November 1952]: 130–37) and Marie Hochmuth Nichols's "I. A. Richards and the 'New Rhetoric'" (*Quarterly Journal of Speech* 44 [February 1958]: 1–16), both reprinted in *Contemporary Theories of Rhetoric*, ed. R. L. Johannesen (1971), and Daniel Fogarty's "I. A. Richards' Theory" in *Roots for a New Rhetoric* (1959). Stanley Edgar Hyman gives a lucid account of Richards's critical method in *The Armed Vision: A Study in the Methods of Modern Literary Criticism* (1948).

has much been
made of why or
of how this work
fits into his larger,
other projects

I. A. Richards and C. K. Ogden

From *The Meaning of Meaning*

Throughout the Western world it is agreed that people must meet frequently, and that it is not only agreeable to talk, but that it is a matter of common courtesy to say something even when there is hardly anything to say. "Every civilized man," continues the late Professor Mahaffy, to whose *Principles of the Art of Conversation* we

owe this observation, "feels, or ought to feel, this duty; it is the universal accomplishment which all must practise"; those who fail are punished by the dislike or neglect of society.

There is no doubt an Art in saying something when there is nothing to be said, but it is equally certain that there is an Art no less important of

Just so!

saying clearly what one wishes to say when there is an abundance of material; and conversation will seldom attain even the level of an intellectual pastime if adequate methods of Interpretation are not also available.

Symbolism is the study of the part played in human affairs by language and symbols of all kinds, and especially of their influence on Thought. It singles out for special inquiry the ways in which symbols help us and hinder us in reflecting on things.

Symbols direct and organize, record and communicate. In stating what they direct and organize, record and communicate we have to distinguish as always between Thoughts and Things.¹ It is Thought (or, as we shall usually say, *reference*) which is directed and organized, and it is also Thought which is recorded and communicated. But just as we say that the gardener mows the lawn when we know that it is the lawnmower which actually does the cutting, so, though we know that the direct relation of symbols is with thought, we also say that symbols record events and communicate facts.

By leaving out essential elements in the language situation we easily raise problems and difficulties which vanish when the whole transaction is considered in greater detail. Words, as every one now knows, "mean" nothing by themselves, although the belief that they did, as we shall see in the next chapter, was once equally universal. It is only when a thinker makes use of them that they stand for anything, or, in one sense, have "meaning." They are instruments. But besides this referential use which for all re-

flective, intellectual use of language should be paramount, words have other functions which may be grouped together as emotive. These can best be examined when the framework of the problem of strict statement and intellectual communication has been set up. The importance of the emotive aspects of language is not thereby minimized, and anyone chiefly concerned with popular or primitive speech might well be led to reverse this order of approach. Many difficulties, indeed, arising through the behaviour of words in discussion, even amongst scientists, force us at an early stage to take into account these "non-symbolic" influences. But for the analysis of the senses of "meaning" with which we are here chiefly concerned, it is desirable to begin with the relations of thoughts, words, and things as they are found in cases of reflective speech uncomplicated by emotional, diplomatic, or other disturbances; and with regard to these, the indirectness of the relations between words and things is the feature which first deserves attention.

This may be simply illustrated by a diagram, in which the three factors involved whenever any statement is made, or understood, are placed at the corners of the triangle, the relations which hold between them being represented by the sides. The point just made can be restated by saying that in this respect the base of the triangle is quite different in composition from either of the other sides.

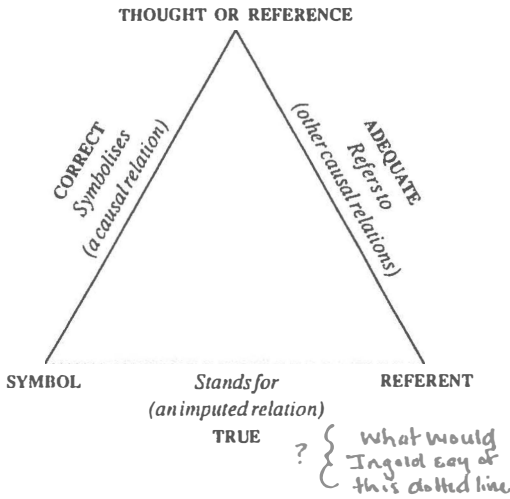
Between a thought and a symbol causal relations hold. When we speak, the symbolism we employ is caused partly by the reference we are making and partly by social and psychological factors—the purpose for which we are making the reference, the proposed effect of our symbols on other persons, and our own attitude. When we hear what is said, the symbols both cause us to perform an act of reference and to assume an attitude which will, according to circumstances, be more or less similar to the act and the attitude of the speaker.

Between the Thought and the Referent there is also a relation; more or less direct (as when we think about or attend to a coloured surface we see), or indirect (as when we "think of" or "refer to" Napoleon), in which case there may be a very long

¹The word "thing" is unsuitable for the analysis here undertaken, because in popular usage it is restricted to material substances—a fact which has led philosophers to favour the terms "entity," "ens" or "object" as the general name for whatever is. It has seemed desirable, therefore, to introduce a technical term to stand for whatever we may be thinking of or referring to. "Object," though this is its original use, has had an unfortunate history. The word "referent," therefore, has been adopted, though its etymological form is open to question when considered in relation to other participial derivatives, such as agent or reagent. But even in Latin the present participle occasionally (e.g., *vehens* in equo) admitted of variation in use; and in English an analogy with substantives, such as "reagent," "extant," and "incident" may be urged. Thus the fact that "referent" in what follows stands for a thing and not an active person, should cause no confusion. [Au.]

you can
now SR/
OOO
approaches
literary
criticism
could
emerge

Sheldrake [Barad might ask if, in fact, we've tested the dotted-ness of this is & in fact, a fact?



chain of sign situations intervening between the act and its referent: word—historian—contemporary record—eyewitness—referent (Napoleon).

Between the symbol and the referent there is no relevant relation other than the indirect one, which consists in its being used by someone to stand for a referent. Symbol and Referent, that is to say, are not connected directly (and when, for grammatical reasons, we imply such a relation, it will merely be an imputed, as opposed to a real, relation) but only indirectly round the two sides of the triangle.²

²An exceptional case occurs when the symbol used is more or less directly like the referent for which it is used, as for instance, it may be when it is an onomatopœic word, or an image, or a gesture, or a drawing. In this case the triangle is completed; its base is supplied, and a great simplification of the problem involved appears to result. For this reason many attempts have been made to reduce the normal language situation to this possibly more primitive form. Its greater completeness does no doubt account for the immense superiority in efficiency of gesture languages, within their appropriate field, to other languages not supportable by gesture within their fields. Hence we know far more perfectly what has occurred if a scene is well reenacted than if it be merely described. But in the normal situation we have to recognize that our triangle is without its base, that between Symbol and Referent no direct relation holds; and, further, that it is through this lack that most of the problems of language arise. Simulative and nonsimulative languages are entirely distinct in principle. Standing for and representing are different relations. It is, however, convenient to speak at times as though there were some direct relation holding between Symbol and Referent. We then say, on the analogy of the lawnmower, that a Symbol refers to a Referent. Provided that the telescopic na-

It may appear unnecessary to insist that there is no direct connection between say “dog,” the word, and certain common objects in our streets, and that the only connection which holds is that which consists in our using the word when we refer to the animal. We shall find, however, that the kind of simplification typified by this once universal theory of direct meaning relations between words and things is the source of almost all the difficulties which thought encounters. As will appear at a later stage, the power to confuse and obstruct, which such simplifications possess, is largely due to the conditions of communication. Language if it is to be used must be a *ready* instrument. The handiness and ease of a phrase is always more important in deciding whether it will be extensively used than its accuracy. Thus such shorthand as the word “means” is constantly used so as to imply a direct simple relation between words and things, phrases and situations. If such relations could be admitted then there would of course be no problem as to the nature of Meaning, and the vast majority of those who have been concerned with it would have been right in their refusal to discuss it. But too many interesting developments have been occurring in the sciences, through the rejection of everyday symbolizations and the endeavour to replace them by more accurate accounts, for any naive theory that “meaning” is just “meaning” to be popular at the moment. As a rule new facts in startling disagreement with accepted explanations of other facts are required before such critical analyses of what are generally regarded as simple satisfactory notions are undertaken. This has been the case with the recent revolutions in physics. But in addition great reluctance to postulate anything *sui generis* and of necessity undetectable³ was needed before the simple natural notion of simultaneity, for instance, as a two-termed relation came to be questioned. Yet to such questionings the theory of Relativity was

ture of the phrase is not forgotten, confusion need not arise. In Supplement I., Part V. *infra*, Dr. Malinowski gives a valuable account of the development of the speech situation in relation to the above diagram. [Au.]

³Places and instants are very typical entities of verbal origin. [Au.]

due. The same two motives, new discrepant facts, and distaste for the use of obscure kinds of entities in eking out explanations, have led to disturbances in psychology, though here the required restatements have not yet been provided. No Copernican revolution has yet occurred, although several are due if psychology is to be brought into line with its fellow sciences.

It is noteworthy, however, that recent stirrings in psychology have been mainly if not altogether concerned with feeling and volition. The popular success of Psychoanalysis has tended to divert attention from the older problem of thinking. Yet in so far as progress here has consequences for all the other sciences and for the whole technique of investigation in psychology itself, this central problem of knowing or of "meaning" is perhaps better worth scrutiny and more likely to promote fresh orientations than any other that can be suggested. As the Behaviorists have also very properly pointed out, this question is closely connected with the use of words.

But the approach to Meaning, far more than the approach to such problems as those of physics, requires a thorough-going investigation of language. Every great advance in physics has been at the expense of some generally accepted piece of metaphysical explanation which had enshrined itself in a convenient, universally practised, symbolic shorthand. But the confusion and obstruction due to such shorthand expressions and to the naive theories they protect and keep alive, is greater in psychology, and especially in the theory of knowledge, than elsewhere; because no problem is so infected with so-called metaphysical difficulties—due here, as always, to an approach to a question through symbols without an initial investigation of their functions.

We have now to consider more closely what the causes and effects of symbols are.⁴ Whatever

may be the services, other than conservative and retentive, of symbolization, all experience shows that there are also disservices. The grosser forms of verbal confusion have long been recognized; but less attention has been paid to those that are more subtle and more frequent. In the following chapters many examples of these will be given, chosen in great part from philosophical fields, for it is here that such confusions become, with the passage of time, most apparent. The root of the trouble will be traced to the superstition that words are in some way parts of things or always imply things corresponding to them, historical instances of this still potent instinctive belief being given from many sources. The fundamental and most prolific fallacy is, in other words, that the base of the triangle given above is filled in.

The completeness of any reference varies; it is more or less close and clear, it "grasps" its object in greater or less degree. Such symbolization as accompanies it—images of all sorts, words, sentences whole and in pieces—is in no very close observable connection with the variation in the perfection of the reference. Since, then, in any discussion we cannot immediately settle from the nature of a person's remarks what his opinion is, we need some technique to keep the parties to an argument in contact and to clear up misunderstandings—or, in other words, a Theory of Definition. Such a technique can only be provided by a theory of knowing, or of reference, which will avoid, as current theories do not, the attribution to the knower of powers which it may be pleasant for him to suppose himself to possess, but which are not open to the only kind of investigation hitherto profitably pursued, the kind generally known as scientific investigation.

Normally, whenever we hear anything said we spring spontaneously to an immediate conclusion, namely, that the speaker is referring to what we should be referring to were we speaking the words ourselves. In some cases this interpretation may be correct; this will prove to be what he has referred to. But in most discussions which attempt greater subtleties than could be handled in

⁴Whether symbols in some form or other are necessary to thought itself is a difficult problem, and is discussed in *The Meaning of Psychology* (Chapter XIII.) as well as in Chapter X. of the present work. But certainly the recording and the communication of thought (telepathy apart) require symbols. It seems that thought, so far as it is transitive and not in the form of an internal dialogue, can dispense with symbols, and that they only appear when thought takes on this monologue form. In the normal case the actual development of thought is

very closely bound up with the symbolization which accompanies it. [Au.]

a gesture language this will not be so. To suppose otherwise is to neglect our subsidiary gesture languages, whose accuracy within their own limited provinces is far higher than that yet reached by any system of spoken or written symbols, with the exception of the quite special and peculiar case of mathematical, scientific, and musical notations. Words, whenever they cannot directly ally themselves with and support themselves upon gestures, are at present a very imperfect means of communication. Even for private thinking thought is often ready to advance, and only held back by the treachery of its natural symbolism; and for conversational purposes the latitude acquired constantly shows itself to all those who make any serious attempts to compare opinions.

We have not here in view the more familiar ways in which words may be used to deceive. In a later chapter, when the function of language as an instrument for the *promotion of purposes* rather than as a means of *symbolizing references* is fully discussed, we shall see how the intention of the speaker may complicate the situation. But the *honnête homme* may be unprepared for the lengths to which verbal ingenuity can be carried. At all times these possibilities have been exploited to the full by interpreters of Holy Writ who desire to enjoy the best of both worlds. Here, for example, is a specimen of the exegetic of the late Dr. Lyman Abbott, pastor, publicist, and editor, which, through the efforts of Mr. Upton Sinclair, has now become classic. Does Christianity condemn the methods of twentieth-century finance? Doubtless there are some awkward words in the Gospels, but a little "interpretation" is all that is necessary.

Jesus did not say "Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth." He said "Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth *where moth and rust doth corrupt and where thieves break through and steal.*" And no sensible American does. Moth and rust do not get at Mr. Rockefeller's oil wells, and thieves do not often break through and steal a railway. What Jesus condemned was hoarding wealth.

Each investment, therefore, every worldly acquisition, according to one of the leading divines of the New World, may be judged on its merits. There is no hard and fast rule. When moth and

rust have been eliminated by science the Christian investor will presumably have no problem, but in the meantime it would seem that Camphorated Oil fulfils most nearly the synoptic requirements. Burglars are not partial to it; it is anathema to moth; and the risk of rust is completely obviated.

Another variety of verbal ingenuity closely allied to this, is the deliberate use of symbols to misdirect the listener. Apologies for such a practice in the case of the madman from whom we desire to conceal the whereabouts of his razor are well known, but a wider justification has also been attempted. In the Christian era we hear of "falsifications of documents, inventions of legends, and forgeries of every description which made the Catholic Church a veritable seat of lying."⁵ A play upon words in which one sense is taken by the speaker and another sense intended by him for the hearer was permitted.⁶ Indeed, three sorts of equivocations were distinguished by Alfonso de Liguori, who was beatified in the nineteenth century, which might be used with good reason;⁷ a good reason being "any honest object, such as keeping our goods, spiritual or temporal."⁸ In the twentieth century the intensification of militant nationalism has added further "good reason"; for the military code includes all transactions with hostile nations or individuals as part of the process of keeping spiritual and temporal goods. In wartime words become a normal part of the mechanism of deceit, and the ethics of the situation have been aptly summed up by Lord Wolseley: "We will keep hammering along with the conviction that 'honesty is the best policy,' and that truth always wins in the long run. These pretty sentences do well for a child's copybook, but the man who acts upon them in war had better sheathe his sword for ever."⁹

⁵Westermarck, *The Origin and Development of Moral Ideas*, Vol. II., p. 100. [Au.]

⁶Alagona, *Compendium Manualis* D. Navarri XII., 88, p. 94. [Au.]

⁷Alfonso di Liguori, *Theologia Moralis*, III., 151, Vol. I., p. 249. [Au.]

⁸Meyrick, *Moral and Devotional Theology of the Church of Rome*, Vol. I., p. 3. Cf. further Westermarck, *loc. cit.* [Au.]

⁹*Soldier's Pocket Book for Field Service*, p. 69. [Au.]

The Greeks, as we shall see, were in many ways not far from the attitude of primitive man towards words. And it is not surprising to read that after the Peloponnesian war the verbal machinery of peace had got completely out of gear, and, says Thucydides, could not be brought back into use—"The meaning of words had no longer the same relation to things, but was changed by men as they thought proper." The Greeks were powerless to cope with such a situation. We in our wisdom seem to have created institutions which render us more powerless still.¹⁰

On a less gigantic scale the technique of deliberate misdirection can profitably be studied with a view to corrective measures. In accounting for Newman's *Grammar of Assent* Dr. E. A. Abbott had occasion to describe the process of "lubrication," the art of greasing the descent from the premises to the conclusion, which his namesake cited above so aptly employs. In order to lubricate well, various qualifications are necessary:

First a nice discrimination of words, enabling you to form, easily and naturally, a great number of finely graduated propositions, shading away, as it were, from the assertion "X is white" to the assertion "X is black." Secondly an inward and absolute contempt for logic and for words. . . . And what are words but toys and sweetmeats for grown-up babies who call themselves men?¹¹

But even where the actual referents are not in doubt, it is perhaps hardly realized how widespread is the habit of using the power of words not only for *bona fide* communications, but also as a method of misdirection; and in the world as

it is today the naive interpreter is likely on many occasions to be seriously misled if the existence of this unpleasant trait—equally prevalent amongst the classes and the masses without distinction of race, creed, sex, or colour—is overlooked.

Throughout this work, however, we are treating of *bona fide* communication only, except in so far as we shall find it necessary in Chapter IX. to discuss that derivative use of Meaning to which misdirection gives rise. For the rest, the verbal treachery with which we are concerned is only that involved by the use of symbols as such. As we proceed to examine the conditions of communication we shall see why any symbolic apparatus which is in general use is liable to incompleteness and defect.

But if our linguistic outfit is treacherous, it nevertheless is indispensable, nor would another complete outfit necessarily improve matters, even if it were ten times as complete. It is not always new words that are needed, but a means of controlling them as symbols, a means of readily discovering to what in the world on any occasion they are used to refer, and this is what an adequate theory of definition should provide.

But a theory of Definition must follow, not precede, a theory of Signs, and it is little realized how large a place is taken both in abstract thought and in practical affairs by sign-situations. But if an account of sign-situations is to be scientific it must take its observations from the most suitable instances, and must not derive its general principles from an exceptional case. The person actually interpreting a sign is not well placed for observing what is happening. We should develop our theory of signs from observations of other people, and only admit evidence drawn from introspection when we know how to appraise it. The adoption of the other method, on the ground that all our knowledge of others is inferred from knowledge of our own states, can only lead to the *impasse* of solipsism from which modern speculation has yet to recoil. Those who allow beyond question that there are people like themselves also interpreting signs and open to study should not find it difficult to admit that their observation of the behaviour of others may provide at least a framework within which their own introspection,

¹⁰As the late C. E. Montague (*Disenchantment*, p. 101) well put it, "the only new thing about deception in war is modern man's more perfect means for its practice. The thing has become, in his hand, a trumpet more efficacious than Gideon's own. . . . To match the Lewis gun with which he now fires his solids, he has to his hand the newspaper Press, to let fly at the enemy's head the thing which is not." But this was a temporary use of the modern technique of misdirection, and with the return of peace the habit is lost? Not so, says Mr. Montague. "Any weapon you use in a war leaves some bill to be settled in peace, and the Propaganda arm has its cost like another." The return of the exploiters of the verbal machine to their civil posts is a return in triumph, and its effects will be felt for many years in all countries where the power of the word amongst the masses remains paramount. [Au.]

¹¹*Philomythus*, p. 214. [Au.]

* frank recognition of the
world outside us

that special and deceptive case, may be fitted. That this is the practice of all the sciences need hardly be pointed out. Any sensible doctor when stricken by disease distrusts his own introspective diagnosis and calls in a colleague.

There are, indeed, good reasons why what is happening in ourselves should be partially hidden from us, and we are generally better judges of what other people are doing than of what we are doing ourselves. Before we looked carefully into other people's heads it was commonly believed that an entity called the soul resided therein, just as children commonly believe that there is a little man inside the skull who looks out at the eyes, the windows of the soul, and listens at the ears. The child has the strongest introspective evidence for this belief, which, but for scalpels and microscopes, it would be difficult to disturb. The tacitly solipsistic presumption that this naive approach is in some way a necessity of method disqualifies the majority of philosophical and psychological discussions of Interpretation. If we restrict the subject-matter of the inquiry to "ideas" and words, i.e., to the left side of our triangle, and omit all frank recognition of the world outside us, we inevitably introduce confusion on such subjects as knowledge in perception, verification, and Meaning itself.¹²

If we stand in the neighbourhood of a cross road and observe a pedestrian confronted by a notice *To Grantchester* displayed on a post, we commonly distinguish three important factors in the situation. There is, we are sure, (1) a Sign which (2) refers to a Place and (3) is being interpreted by a person. All situations in which Signs are considered are similar to this. A doctor noting that his patient has a temperature and so forth is said to diagnose his disease as influenza. If we talk like this we do not make it clear that signs are here also involved. Even when we speak of symptoms we often do not think of these as closely related to other groups of signs. But if we

say that the doctor interprets the temperature, etc., as a Sign of influenza, we are at any rate on the way to an inquiry as to whether there is anything in common between the manner in which the pedestrian treated the object at the cross road and that in which the doctor treated his thermometer and the flushed countenance.

On close examination it will be found that very many situations which we do not ordinarily regard as Sign situations are essentially of the same nature. The chemist dips litmus paper in his test-tube, and interprets the sign red or the sign blue as meaning acid or base. A Hebrew prophet notes a small black cloud, and remarks "We shall have rain." Lessing scrutinizes the Laocoön, and concludes that the features of Laocoön *père* are in repose. A New Zealand schoolgirl looks at certain letters on a page in her *Historical Manual for the use of Lower Grades* and knows that Queen Anne is dead.

The method which recognizes the common feature of sign interpretation¹³ has its dangers, but opens the way to a fresh treatment of many widely different topics.

As an instance of an occasion in which the theory of signs is of special use, the subject dealt

¹³In all these cases a sign has been interpreted rightly or wrongly, i.e., something has been not only experienced or enjoyed, but understood as referring to something else. Anything which can be experienced can also be thus understood, i.e., can also be a sign; and it is important to remember that interpretation, or what happens to (or in the mind of) an Interpreter is quite distinct both from the sign and from that for which the sign stands or to which it refers. If then we speak of the meaning of a sign we must not, as philosophers, psychologists and logicians are wont to do, confuse the (imputed) relation between a sign and that to which it refers, either with the referent (what is referred to) or with the process of interpretation (the "goings on" in the mind of the interpreter). It is this sort of confusion which has made so much previous work on the subject of signs and their meaning unfruitful. In particular, by using the same term "meaning" both for the "Goings on" inside their heads (the images, associations, etc., which enabled them to interpret signs) and for the Referents (the things to which the signs refer) philosophers have been forced to locate Grantchester, Influenza, Queen Anne, and indeed the whole Universe equally inside their heads—or, if alarmed by the prospect of cerebral congestion, at least "in their minds" in such wise that all these objects become conveniently "mental." Great care, therefore, is required in the use of the term "meaning," since its associations are dangerous. [Au.]

¹²This tendency is particularly noticeable in such works as Baldwin's elaborate treatise on *Thoughts and Things*, where a psychological apparatus of "controls" and "contents" is hard to reconcile with the subsequent claim to discuss communication. The twist given to grammatical analysis by Aristotle's similar neglect of Reference is dealt with in Appendix A. [Au.]

with in our fourth chapter may be cited. If we realize that in *all* perception, as distinguished from mere awareness, sign-situations are involved, we shall have a new method of approaching problems where a verbal deadlock seems to have arisen. Whenever we “perceive” what we name “a chair,” we are interpreting a certain group of data (modifications of the sense organs), and treating them as signs of a referent. Similarly, even before the interpretation of a word, there is the almost automatic interpretation of a group of successive noises or letters as a word. And in addition to the external world we can also explore with a new technique the sign situations involved by mental events, the “goings on” or processes of interpretation themselves. We need neither confine ourselves to arbitrary generalizations from introspection after the manner of classical psychology, nor deny the existence of images and other “mental” occurrences to their signs with the extreme Behaviorists.¹⁴ The double language hypothesis, which is suggested by the theory of signs and supported by linguistic analysis, would absolve Dr. Watson and his followers from the logical necessity of affecting general anæsthesia. Images, etc., are often most useful signs of our present and future behaviour—notably in the modern interpretation of dreams.¹⁵ An improved

¹⁴That the mind-body problem is due to a duplication of symbolic machinery is maintained in Chapter IV. Cf. also *The Meaning of Psychology*, by C. K. Ogden (1926), Chapter II., where this view is supported with reference to contemporary authorities who hold it. [Au.]

¹⁵In the terminology of the present work, many of the analyst's “symbols” are, of course, signs only; they are not used

Behaviorism will have much to say concerning the chaotic attempts at symbolic interpretation and construction by which Psychoanalysts discredit their valuable labours.

The problems which arise in connection with any “sign situation” are of the same general form. The relations between the elements concerned are no doubt different, but they are of the same sort. A thorough classification of these problems in one field, such as the field of symbols, may be expected, therefore, to throw light upon analogous problems in fields at first sight of a very different order.

When we consider the various kinds of Sign situations instanced above, we find that those signs which men use to communicate one with another and as instruments of thought, occupy a peculiar place. It is convenient to group these under a distinctive name; and for words, arrangements of words, images, gestures, and such representations as drawings or mimetic sounds we use the term *symbols*. The influence of Symbols upon human life and thought in numberless unexpected ways has never been fully recognized, and to this chapter of history we now proceed.

for purposes of communication. But in the literature of psychoanalysis there is much valuable insistence on the need of wider forms of interpretation, especially in relation to emotional overcharge. Cf., e.g., the late Dr. Jelliffe's “The Symbol as an Energy Condenser” (*Journal of Nervous and Mental Diseases*, December 1919), though the metaphor, like many other psychoanalytic locutions, must not be stretched too far in view of what has been said above and of what is to follow. [Au.]

the work
symbols do

I. A. Richards

From *The Philosophy of Rhetoric*

LECTURE II THE AIMS OF DISCOURSE AND TYPES OF CONTEXT

In my introductory lecture I urged that there is room for a persistent, systematic, detailed inquiry into how words work that will take the place of the discredited subject which goes by the name of Rhetoric. I went on to argue that this inquiry must be philosophic, or—if you hesitate with that word, I do myself—that it must take charge of the criticism of its own assumptions and not accept them, more than it can help, ready-made from other studies. How words mean, is not a question to which we can safely accept an answer either as an inheritance from common sense, that curious growth, or as something vouched for by another science, by psychology, say—since other sciences use words themselves and not least delusively when they address themselves to these questions. The result is that a revived Rhetoric, or study of verbal understanding and misunderstanding, must itself undertake its own inquiry into the modes of meaning—not only, as with the old Rhetoric, on a macroscopic scale, discussing the effects of different disposals of large parts of a discourse—but also on a microscopic scale by using theorems about the structure of the fundamental conjectural units of meaning and the conditions through which they, and their interconnections, arise.

In the old Rhetoric, of course, there is much that a new Rhetoric finds useful—and much besides which may be advantageous until man changes his nature, debates and disputes, incites, tricks, bullies, and cajoles his fellows less. Aristotle's notes on the forensic treatment of evidence elicited under torture are unhappily not without their utility still in some very up-to-date parts of the world.

Among the general themes of the old Rhetoric there is one which is especially pertinent to our

inquiry. The old Rhetoric was an offspring of dispute; it developed as the rationale of pleadings and persuadings; it was the theory of the battle of words and has always been itself dominated by the combative impulse. Perhaps what it has most to teach us is the narrowing and blinding influence of that preoccupation, that debaters' interest.

Persuasion is only one among the aims of discourse. It poaches on the others—especially on that of *exposition*, which is concerned to state a view, not to persuade people to agree or to do anything more than examine it. The review and correspondence columns of the learned and scientific journals are the places in which to watch this poaching at its liveliest. It is no bad preparation for any attempt at exposition—above all of such debatable and contentious matters as those to which I am soon to turn—to realize how easily the combative impulse can put us in mental blinkers and make us take another man's words in the ways in which we can down him with least trouble.

I can point this moral—call it defensive if you will—with a small specimen from one of the many little books which in the Nineteenth Century attempted a reform of Rhetoric. It is from Benjamin Humphrey Smart's *Practical Logic*, a little book written for and used for a few decades in the best young ladies' seminaries through the middle of the Nineteenth Century and now as dead as any book well can be. Smart is discussing the conduct of exposition. He has listed a number of faults commonly committed and comes to the

TENTH FAULT TO BE AVOIDED, namely: *Forgetting the Proposition*.

"Of this error," he writes, "the following instance may suffice:

Anger has been called a short madness; and people of the weakest understanding are the most subject to it. It is remarkable that when a disputant is in the

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wrong, he tries to make up in violence what he wants in argument. This arises from his pride. He will not own his error, and because he is determined not to be convicted of it, he falls into a passion.

Here (Smart comments), instead of going on to show why Anger has been called a short madness, the writer wanders into reflections which have no necessary connection with the particular proposition. He should have reasoned thus:

Anger has been called a short madness. To be convinced that the appellation is just, let us look to the effects of anger. It disturbs a man's judgment, so that he inflicts an injury on his dearest friend, who, the next moment, he loads with caresses. It makes him run headlong into dangers, which, if his mind were clear, he would be the first to see and avoid. It is true that anger does not always disturb the mind to this degree, but that it always disturbs the mind in a degree proportional to its violence, is certain; and therefore it may be justly characterised as a madness.

What necessary connection with the proposition, may we ask, has this sketch of some scenes from an early Victorian Novel? And whence comes this certainty that anger *always* disturbs the mind in a degree proportional to its violence? However, it is better perhaps to take its lesson to heart and remember that anger is not the only warping passion. Risibility and tedium, too, I think Smart would have said, can disturb the judgment.

Warned now of the dangers both of forgetting the proposition and of the "short madness" that the combative and other passions induce, let me sketch, to use Hobbes's words, a theorem about meanings which may be useful in constructing the most general problems of a new Rhetoric.

I had better put in another warning, though, here. What follows is unavoidably abstract and general in the extreme. It may therefore rather illustrate the difficulties of communicating with such highly abstract language than achieve as much communication as we would wish. If so the fault will not lie, I hope and believe, either in my stupidity or in our joint stupidity. It will lie in the abstractness of the language. It has to be abstract here. What it is trying to say cannot, I think, be

put safely in more concrete terms, for it is not talking about this or that mode of meaning but about all meanings. And I cannot here start with illustrations, because all things equally illustrate what I am saying; and how they are to be taken is just the problem. But, after this bout of abstractions, the applications I shall be making in the later Lectures will, I believe, clear up this dark patch. In brief, how we use this theorem best shows us what the theorem is.

If, then, you seem in the next half hour at times merely to be hearing words as sounds that come and go, I must beg your indulgence, or buy it with the promise that we *shall* come out again to practical problems in the everyday conduct of words. Meanwhile this very difficulty is an illustration of a chief practical problem.

What I am now going to try to say is something which, if it is right, we all in a sense know extremely well already. "It is not sufficiently considered," said Dr. Johnson, "that men more frequently require to be reminded than informed." I shall be trying to remind you of something so simple that it is hard to think of. Something as simple as possible, and, to quote Hobbes again, "clear and perspicuous to all men—save only to those who studying the hard writings of the metaphysicians, which they believe to be some egregious learning, think they understand not when they do." And it may be comforting to recall that Lotze¹ began a course of lectures on an allied subject by saying that "The simplest of the conceptions here employed, that of a thing and that of its being, however lucid they appear at first, on closer consideration grow always more and more obscure." For "always" I would say "for a time." We return to lucidity. But now to work.

I have two sets of problems in view: one set I have just been talking about—the division of the various aims of discourse, the purposes for which we speak or write; in brief, the functions of language. The other set of problems goes deeper, and, if we can set it rightly, the problems about the language functions are best approached from it. I can indicate these deeper problems in many

¹Rudolf Herman Lotze (1817–1881), German idealist philosopher. [Ed.]

* this a pretty amazing and
useful asseption (Connections
to SR and New Utilitarianism...)

ways: What is the connection between the mind and the world by which events in the mind mean other events in the world? Or "How does a thought come to be 'of' whatever it is that it is a thought of?" or "What is the relation between a thing and its name?" The last indication may not seem to carry as far as the others; but they are all the same problem and I put the "name" formulation in because an over-simple view of naming, or rather a treatment of words in general as though they were names (usually of ideas) has been a main defect in the traditional study. These are, you will see, really deep problems. As such we shall not expect any answers which will be satisfactory. We must be content if the answers we get are to some degree useful—useful among other things in improving themselves.

I can start the theorem safely by remarking that we are things peculiarly responsive to other things. To develop this we have to consider the peculiarities of our responsiveness. We are responsive in all sorts of ways. Some of these ways are relatively simple, if cut short enough; as when we jump at a loud noise or respond to changes of temperature. But even here, if we compare ourselves to thermometers, we see that our responses are of a different order of complexity. A thermometer responds, the length of its thread of mercury varies with the temperature, but only with the present temperature—unless the thermometer is a bad one. What has happened to it in the past, what temperatures it formerly recorded, and the order in which it recorded them, all that has no bearing upon and does not interfere with its present response to changes of temperature. We can imagine, though, a thermometer that, whenever the temperature went up and down like this, *M*, did something that could only be explained by bringing in other things that happened to it in the past when the temperature went up and down so, *M*. And correspondingly did something else whenever the temperature went down and up, *W*. Such an imaginary thermometer would be on the way to showing characteristics of the behavior of living systems, of the systems which, we say, have a mind.

Now consider our own minds' simplest operations. Do we ever respond to a stimulus in a way

which is not influenced by the other things that happened to us when more or less similar stimuli struck us in the past? Probably never. A new kind of stimulus might perhaps give rise to a new kind of sensation, a new kind of pain, say. But even so we should probably recognize it as a pain of some sort. Effects from more or less similar happenings in the past would come in to give our response its character and this as far as it went would be meaning. Meaning of a lowly kind, no doubt, the kind of meaning that the least developed animals live by. It is important—and that is why I have started so far back with these elementaries—to realize how far back into the past all our meanings go, how they grow out of one another much as an organism grows, and how inseparable they are from one another.

I can make the same point by denying that we have any sensations. That sounds drastic but is almost certainly true if rightly understood. A sensation would be something that just was *so*, on its own, a datum; as such we have none. Instead we have perceptions, responses whose character comes to them from the past as well as the present occasion. A perception is never just of an *it*; perception takes whatever it perceives as a thing of a certain sort. All thinking from the lowest to the highest—whatever else it may be—is sorting.

That is an important part of the theorem because it removes, if it is accepted, one of the worst troubles which have distorted traditional accounts of the meanings of words—the troubles that gave rise to the Nominalist, Realist, Conceptual controversies best known to us through the great British philosophical battle of the Eighteenth Century about whether we have and how we come by abstract ideas and what they are.² This theorem alleges that meanings, from the very beginning, have a primordial generality and abstractness; and it follows William James in saying that the lowliest organism—a polyp or an amoeba—if it learns at all from its past, if it exclaims in its acts, "Hallo! Thingembob again!" thereby shows itself to be a conceptual thinker. It

²Realism holds that general qualities do exist; Conceptualism holds that generalizations are mental concepts; Nominalism holds that only words are general. [Ed.]

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is behaving or thinking with a concept—not, of course, *of* one. Its act is abstractive and general; disregards in some respects the former situations and so is abstractive, and applies in some respects not to one single thing but to any of a sort and so is general.

The theorem settles the Eighteenth-Century problem by standing it on its head. That problem was, How do we manage, from this particular concrete thing and that particular concrete thing and the other particular concrete thing, to arrive at the general abstract anything? The theorem holds that we *begin* with the general abstract anything, split it, as the world makes us, into sorts and then arrive at concrete particulars by the overlapping or common membership of these sorts. This bit of paper here now in my hand is a concrete particular to us so far as we think of it as paperish, hereish, nowish, and in my hand; it is the more concrete as we take it as of more sorts, and the more specific as the sorts are narrower and more exclusive.

The next step in the theorem takes us on to words and their meanings. If we sum up thus far by saying that meaning is *delegated efficacy*, that description applies above all to the meaning of words, whose virtue is to be substitutes exerting the powers of what is not there. They do this as other signs do it, though in more complex fashions, through their contexts.

I must explain now the rather special and technical sense I am giving to this word “context.” This is the pivotal point of the whole theorem. The word has a familiar sense in “a literary context,” as the other words before and after a given word which determine how it is to be interpreted. This is easily extended to cover the rest of the book. I recall the painful shock I suffered when I first came across, in a book by Dr. Bosanquet, what he called the Golden Rule of Scholarship, “Never to quote or comment on anything in a book which you have not read from cover to cover.” As with other Golden Rules a strange peace would fall upon the world if that were observed. I cannot honestly say I either practice the Rule or recommend it. There is a middle way wiser for the Children of this World. However, as I neither am nor hope to be a scholar, I have no occasion to practise it.

The familiar sense of “context” can be extended further to include the circumstances under which anything was written or said; wider still to include, for a word in Shakespeare, say, the other known uses of the word about that time, wider still finally to include anything whatever about the period, or about anything else which is relevant to our interpretation of it. The technical use I am going to make of this term “context” is none of these—though it has something in common with them as having to do with the governing conditions of an interpretation. We can get to it best, perhaps, by considering those recurrences in nature which statements of causal laws are about.

Put very simply, a causal law may be taken as saying that, under certain conditions, of two events if one happens the other does. We usually call the first the cause and the second the effect, but the two may happen together, as when I clap my hands and both palms tingle. If we are talking about final causes we reverse them, and the lecture you are going to hear was the cause of your coming hither. There is a good deal of arbitrariness at several points here which comes from the different purposes for which we need causal laws. We decide, to suit these purposes, how we shall divide up events; we make the existence of the earth one event and the tick of a clock another, and so on. And we distribute the titles of “cause” and “effect” as we please. Thus we do not please to say that night causes day or day night. We prefer to say that given the conditions the rotation of the earth is the cause of their succession. We are especially arbitrary in picking out the cause from among the whole group, or context, of conditions—of prior and subsequent events which hang together. Thus the coroner decides that the cause of a man’s death was the act of a murderer and not the man’s meeting with the murderer, or the stopping of his heart, or the fact that he was not wearing a bullet-proof waistcoat. That is because the coroner is interested in certain kinds of causal laws but not in others. So here, in sketching this causal theorem of meaning, I am interested only in certain kinds of law and am not necessarily saying anything about others. *loudly!*

Now for the sense of “context.” Most gener-

ally it is a name for a whole cluster of events that recur together—including the required conditions as well as whatever we may pick out as cause or effect. But the modes of causal recurrence on which meaning depends are peculiar through that delegated efficacy I have been talking about. In these contexts one item—typically a word—takes over the duties of parts which can then be omitted from the recurrence. There is thus an abridgement of the context only shown in the behavior of living things, and most extensively and drastically shown by man. When this abridgement happens, what the sign or word—the item with these delegated powers—means is the missing parts of the context.

If we ask how this abridgement happens, how a sign comes to stand for an absent cause and conditions, we come up against the limits of knowledge at once. No one knows. Physiological speculation has made very little progress towards explaining *that*, though enormous strides have been made this century in analysing the complexities of the conditioned reflex. The shift, the handing over, is left still as inexplicable. Probably this “learning problem” goes down as deep as the nature of life itself. We can suppose, if we like, that some sorts of residual effects are left behind from former occurrences which later cooperate with the sign in determining the response. To do so is to use a metaphor drawn from the gross behavior, taken macroscopically, of systems that are not living—printed things, gramophone records and such. We can be fairly ingenious with these metaphors, invent neural archives storing up impressions, or neural telephone exchanges with fantastic properties. But how the archives get consulted or how in the telephone system *A* gets on to the *B* it needs, instead of to the whole alphabet at once in a jumble, remain utterly mysterious matters.

Fortunately linguistics and the theory of meaning need not wait until this is remedied. They can probably go much further than we have yet imagined without any answer to this question. It is enough for our purposes to say that what a word means is the missing parts of the contexts from which it draws its delegated efficacy.

At this point I must remind you of what I said a few minutes ago about the primordial general-

ity and abstractness of meaning and about how, when we mean the simplest-seeming concrete object, its concreteness comes to it from the way in which we are bringing it simultaneously into a number of sorts. The sorts grow together in it to form that meaning. Theory here, as so often, can merely exploit the etymological hint given in the word “concrete.”

If we forget this and suppose that we start with discrete impressions of particulars (“fixities and definites” as Coleridge called them) and then build these up into congeries, the theorem I am recommending collapses at once into contradictions and absurdities. That was the fault of the old Hartleian Associationism I complained of last time.³ It did not go back far enough, it took particular impressions as its initial terms. But the initial terms for this theorem are not impressions; they are sortings, recognitions, laws of response, recurrences of like behaviors.

A particular impression is already a product of concrescence. Behind, or in it, there has been a coming together of *sortings*. When we take a number of particular impressions—of a number of different white things, say—and abstract from them an idea of whiteness, we are explicitly reversing a process which has already been implicitly at work in our perception of them as all white. Our risk is to confuse the abstractness we thus arrive at intellectually with the primordial abstractness out of which these impressions have already grown—before ever any conscious explicit reflection took place.

Things, in brief, are instances of laws. As Bradley⁴ said, association marries only universals, and out of these laws, these recurrent likenesses of behavior, in our minds and in the world—not out of revived duplicates of individual past impressions—the fabric of our meanings, which is the world, is composed.

So much for the theorem. What are the problems we must use it to construct?

³David Hartley (1705–1757) synthesized the precepts of association psychology, which holds that repeated sensations leave images in the mind, after which the sensation immediately excites the associated image. The same linkage extends from images to words. [Ed.]

⁴F. H. Bradley (1846–1924), English idealist philosopher. [Ed.]

|| attitude

"profiting from the controversies"

Since the whole business of Rhetoric comes down to comparisons between the meanings of words, the first problem, I think, should be this. How, if the meaning of a word is, in this sense, the missing parts of its contexts, how then should we compare the meanings of two words? There is opportunity for a grand misunderstanding here. It is not proposed that we should try to make these comparisons by a process of discovering, detailing, and then comparing these missing parts. We could not do it and, if we could, it would be waste of time. The theorem does not pretend to give us quite new ways of distinguishing between meanings. It only bars out certain practices and assumptions which are common and misleading.

The office of the theorem is much more negative than positive; but is not the less useful for that. It will not perhaps tell us how to do much that we cannot do without it already; but it will prevent us from doing stupid things which we are fond of doing. So a theory of evolution at least makes it more difficult to believe that The Dog Fritz in the German account really did the children's sums for them, or reminded them to salute their "dear German flag." So even an elementary physics puts in its place among superstitions Mr. Gladstone's firm belief that snow has "a peculiar power of penetrating leather," a power not possessed by water! For lack of that knowledge of physics in Mr. Gladstone, Lord Rayleigh found it quite impossible to persuade him it was not so.

The context theorem of meaning would prevent our making hundreds of baseless and disabling assumptions that we commonly make about meanings, over-simplifications that create false problems interfering with closer comparisons—and that is its main service. In this, it belongs with a number of other theorems which may be called policeman doctrines—because they are designed on the model of an ideal police-force, not to make any of us do anything but to prevent other people from interfering unduly with our lawful activities. The organization of impulses doctrine of values for literary criticism is in the same position. These policeman doctrines keep assumptions that are out of place from frustrating and misleading sagacity. I shall be illustrating the restraint of these bullying as-

sumptions in most parts of Rhetoric later. We had one simple instance with Lord Kames's peacock's feather, last time, where what was discouraged was a naive view of imagery as the stuff of meaning.

We shall have others in discussing the claims of usage next week. Preëminently what the theorem would discourage, is our habit of behaving as though, if a passage means one thing it cannot at the same time mean another and an incompatible thing. Freud taught us that a dream may mean a dozen different things; he has persuaded us that some symbols are, as he says, "overdetermined" and mean many different selections from among their causes. This theorem goes further, and regards all discourse—outside the technicalities of science—as overdetermined, as having multiplicity of meaning. It can illustrate this view from almost any of the great controversies. And it offers us—by restraining the One and Only One True Meaning Superstition—a better hope, I believe, of profiting from the controversies. A controversy is normally an exploitation of a systematic set of misunderstandings for war-like purposes. This theorem suggests that the swords of dispute might be turned into plough shares; and a way found by which we may (to revert to Hobbes) "make use to our benefit of effects formerly seen—for the commodity of human life."

The next problem concerns what happens when we put words together in sentences. At least that is a common way of stating it. The theorem recommends us rather to turn the problem round and ask what happens when, out of the integral utterance which is the sentence, we try to isolate the discrete meanings of the words of which it is composed. That problem, the analysis of sentences and the interaction between words in the sentence, is my subject for next week. It is there that the most deep-rooted, systematic, and persistent misunderstandings arise.

A third set of problems concerns rivalries between different types of context which supply the meaning for a single utterance. These start with the plain equivocation—as when the word "reason" may mean either a cause or an argument. I am simplifying this here to make it a type of a really simple ambiguity. Actually in most occurrences it would be much more complex and not

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he gets pretty close to calling this ambiguity a resource.

strong parallels to Labov's uncertainties

ambiguity as resource

so easily cleared up, as the shifting meanings of "cause" and "argument" themselves show. The context theorem of meaning will make us expect ambiguity to the widest extent and of the subtlest kinds nearly everywhere, and of course we find it. But where the old Rhetoric treated ambiguity as a fault in language, and hoped to confine or eliminate it, the new Rhetoric sees it as an inevitable consequence of the powers of language and as the indispensable means of most of our most important utterances—especially in Poetry and Religion. And that too I shall be illustrating later.

Of course ambiguities are a nuisance in exposition as, in spite of my efforts, you have certainly been feeling. But neutral exposition is a very special limited use of language, comparatively a late development to which we have not (outside some parts of the sciences) yet adapted it. This brings me to those large-scale rivalries between contexts which shift the very aims of discourse. When the passions—the combative passion and others—intervene, either in the formation of an utterance or in its interpretation, we have examples of context action just as much as when the word "paper," say, takes its meaning from its contexts. The extra meaning that comes in when a sentence, in addition to making a statement, is meant to be insulting, or flattering, or is interpreted so—we may call it emotive meaning—is not so different from plain statement as we are apt to suppose. As the word means the missing part of its contexts and is a substitute for them, so the insulting intention may be the substitute for a kick,—the missing part of its context. The same general theorem covers all the modes of meaning.

I began tonight by speaking of the poaching of the other language functions on the preserve of pure exposition. Pure exposition has its guardian passions no doubt—though I do not know their names. But they are not often as strong as the poachers and are easily beguiled by them. It has been so necessary to us, especially since the physical basis of civilization became technical, to care at least sometimes for the truth only and keep the poachers sometimes out, that we have exaggerated enormously the extent of pure exposition. It is a relatively rare occurrence outside

the routine of train services and the tamer, more settled parts of the sciences. We have exaggerated our success for strategic reasons—some of them good, because encouraging, if we do not too much hoodwink ourselves. I have aimed at points tonight to be merely expository in my remarks, but I know better than to suppose I have succeeded. We shall find, preëminently in the subject of rhetoric, that interpretations and opinions about interpretations that are not primarily steps of partisan policy are excessively hard to arrive at. And thereby we rediscover that the world—so far from being a solid matter of fact—is rather a fabric of conventions, which for obscure reasons it has suited us in the past to manufacture and support. And that sometimes is a dismaying rediscovery which seems to unsettle our foundations.

Anyone who publishes a book with the word "Meaning" in its title becomes the recipient of a fan mail of peculiar character. In comes a dribble of letters ever after from people who are quite unmistakably lunatics. Indeed, it seems that the subject is a dangerous one. Intense preoccupation with the sources of our meanings is disturbing, increasing our sense that our beliefs are a veil and an artificial veil between ourselves and something that otherwise than through a veil we cannot know. Something of the same sort can happen in travel. Anyone who has visited a sufficiently strange country and come into close contact with its life knows how unsettling and disorienting is the recognition of the place of conventions in our mental world. And the effect is deeper as the contact is closer. Few men have come into closer and more active contact with an alien world than Colonel Lawrence and when, at the end of the Introduction to *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, he writes of the selves which converse in the void, he says, "Then madness was very near, as I believe it would be near the man who could see things through the veils at once of two customs, two educations, two environments." He is writing of fatigue, and the page reeks of the extremities of war and of the desert—the desert which pushes man down to the limits of his endurance. The meditation of a single code of meanings is not so devastating, and I have seen already enough of Bryn Mawr to

|| homo
Circles
me
thinks
Shallows

"interanimation" and
"mutual dependence"

realize that it bears no least resemblance to a desert.⁵ We may then continue undeterred by the implications of my fan mail.

The subject of the next lecture will be the Doctrine of Usage and the Interinanimation of Words and, as the rest of the course will be literary rather than philosophical and will attempt rather to practise than to theorize, I may close here with some lines from George Chapman about the theoretic principles of Rhetoric, the conduct of interpretation and "impartial contention" and their proper relation to action. It comes in a poem entitled

To Young Imaginaries in Knowledge
This rather were the way, if thou wouldst be
A true proficient in philosophy
Dissemble what thou studieth until
By thy impartial contention
Thou provest thee fit to do as to profess
And if thou still profess it not, what less
Is thy philosophy if in thy deeds
Rather than signs and shadows, it proceeds.

I must apologize if in this Lecture I have departed from the spirit of his recommendation.

LECTURE III THE INTERINANIMATION OF WORDS

I turn now to that other sense of "context"—the literary context—which I distinguished last time from the technical sense of "context," as a recurrent group of events, that is convenient for the theorem of meaning. Let us consider some of the effects on words of their combination in sentences, and how their meaning depends upon the other words before and after them in the sentence. What happens when we try with a sentence to decide what single words in it mean?

The sentence, of course, as Aristotle taught, is the unit of discourse. We can hardly give too much importance here to the influence of our modern way of separating words in writing. In conversation we do not ordinarily separate them so—unless we are asking questions about words. With languages which have not been used in writing and thus subjected to a special kind of

grammatical analysis—it is worth recalling that grammar takes its name from writing—there is often very great uncertainty as to where one word ends and another begins. The written form gives words far more independence than they possess as units of sound in speech and we derive thence a habit of supposing that they have far more independence as regards their meanings than they usually have in either written or spoken discourse.

The mutual dependence of words varies evidently with the type of discourse. At one end of the scale, in the strict exposition of some highly criticized and settled science through technicalized and rigid speech, a large proportion of them are independent. They mean the same whatever other words they are put with; or if a word fluctuates, it moves only into a small number of stable positions, which can be recorded and are anchored to definitions. That is the ideal limit towards which we aim in exposition. Unfortunately we tend—to increasingly since the Seventeenth Century—to take rigid discourse as the norm, and impose its standards upon the rest of speech. This is much as if we thought that water, for all its virtues, in canals, baths, and turbines, were really a weak form of ice. The other end of the scale is in poetry—in some forms of poetry rather. We know very much less about the behavior of words in these cases—when their virtue is to have no fixed and settled meaning separable from those of the other words they occur with. There are many more possibilities here than the theory of language has yet tried to think out. Often the whole utterance in which the co-operating meanings of the component words hang on one another is not itself stable in meaning. It utters not one meaning but a *movement* among meanings. Of course, even in the strictest prose we always have one thing that may be described as a movement of meaning. We have change as the sentence develops. In "The cat is on the mat" we begin with the cat and end with the mat. There is a progression of some sort in every explicit sentence. But in the strictest prose the meanings of the separate words theoretically stay put and thought passes from one to another of them. At the other end of the scale the whole meaning of the sentence shifts, and with it any

⁵Bryn Mawr College, where these lectures were given in 1936. [Ed.]

meanings we may try to ascribe to the individual words. In the extreme case it will go on moving as long as we bring fresh wits to study it. When Octavius Cæsar is gazing down at Cleopatra dead, he says,

She looks like sleep,
As she would catch another Antony
In her strong toil of grace.

“Her strong toil of grace.” Where, in terms of what entries in what possible dictionary, do the meanings here of *toil* and *grace* come to rest?

But my subject is Rhetoric rather than Poetics and I want to keep to prose which is not too far from the strict scientific or “rigid” end of this scale of dependent variabilities. In the kind of prose I am talking now, you have usually to wait till I have gone on a bit before you can decide how you will understand the opening parts of the sentences. If, instead, I were reading you the first few theorems of Euclid, that would not be so. You would understand, as soon as I said “a triangle,” what the word meant, and though what I went on to say might qualify the meaning (“having two sides equal”), it would not destroy or completely change the meaning that you had so far given to the word. But in most prose, and more than we ordinarily suppose, the opening words have to wait for those that follow to settle what they shall mean—if indeed that ever gets settled.

All this holds good not only as to the *sense* of the waiting words but as regards all the other functions of language which we can distinguish and set over against the mere sense. It holds for the *feeling* if any towards what I am talking about, for the *relation towards my audience* I want to establish or maintain with the remark, and for the *confidence* I have in the soundness of the remark—to mention three main sorts of these other language functions. In speech, of course, I have the aid of intonation for these purposes. But, as with the meanings of words, so with the intonation structure. The intonation of the opening words is likely to be ambiguous; it waits till the utterance is completed for its full interpretation.

In writing we have to replace intonation as far as we can. Most of the more recondite virtues of

prose style come from the skill with which the rival claims of these various language functions are reconciled and combined. And many of the rather mysterious terms that are usually employed in discussing these matters, *harmony*, *rhythm*, *grace*, *texture*, *smoothness*, *suppleness*, *impressiveness*, and so on are best taken up for analysis from this point of view. Or rather the passages which seem to exemplify these qualities (or fail to) are best examined with the multiplicity of the language functions in mind. For we can obviously do nothing with such words as these by themselves, in the blue. They may mean all sorts of different things in different literary contexts.

I have been leading up—or down, if you like—to an extremely simple and obvious but fundamental remark: that no word can be judged as to whether it is good or bad, correct or incorrect, beautiful or ugly, or anything else that matters to a writer, in isolation. That seems so evident that I am almost ashamed to say it, and yet it flies straight in the face of the only doctrine that for two hundred years has been officially inculcated—when any doctrine is inculcated in these matters. I mean the doctrine of Usage. The doctrine that there is a right or a good use for every word and that literary virtue consists in making that good use of it.

There are several bones that can be picked with that doctrine—as it has been expounded in many epochs and, in particular for us, from the middle of the Eighteenth Century onwards. It is the worst legacy we have from that, in other ways, happy Century. At its best it can be found in George Campbell’s *Philosophy of Rhetoric*—otherwise an excellent book in many respects. At its worst, or nearly its worst, the doctrine can be found in most of the Manuals of Rhetoric and Composition which have afflicted the schools—American schools especially. It asserts that “Good use is the general, present-day practice of the best writers.” One bone we could pick would be with that “best.” How are they the best writers except by using the words in the best ways? We settle that they *are* the best writers because we find them using their words successfully. We do not settle that theirs is the right, the “good usage” of the words because *they* use them so. Never

*

Boo!

now just
get
through
reading
these

AWESOME

z

lovely snark!

lovely,*
just lovely

was there a crazier case of putting the cart before the horse. It is as though we were to maintain that apples are healthy because⁶ wise people eat them, instead of recognizing that it is the other way about—that it is what the food will do for us which makes us eat it, not the fact that we eat it which makes it good food.

But that is not the main bone I have to pick with the doctrine, which is that it blanks out and hides the interanimation between words. I had better cite you a sentence or two in evidence, or you may think I am inventing a ghost to exorcize. I will take them from a *Manual of Rhetoric* which carries the names of three authors: Messrs. Gardiner, Kittredge, and Arnold. And I choose this book because the regard which I have for Mr. Kittredge's name makes a doctrine which has that sanction seem the better worth refuting. The authors write: "Usage governs language. There is no other standard. By usage, however, is meant the practice of the best writers and speakers." (I have already asked what standard is supposed to settle which are the best.) They go on to consider "four great general principles of choice: *correctness*, *precision*, *appropriateness*, and *expressiveness*," which, they say, "within the limits of good usage and in every case controlled by it . . . should guide us in the choice of words." And this is what they say of correctness: "Correctness is the most elementary of all requirements. The meanings of words are settled by usage. If we use a word incorrectly—that is in a sense which does not customarily belong to it—our readers will miss our thought, or, at best, they must arrive at it by inference and guesswork."

Inference and guesswork! What else is interpretation? How, apart from inference and skilled guesswork, can we be supposed ever to understand a writer or speaker's thought? This is, I think, a fine case of poking the fire from the top. But I have still my main bit of evidence to give you. My authors say: "In studying the four great principles of choice, we observe that only the first (correctness) involves the question of right and wrong. The others deal with questions of dis-

crimination between better and worse—that is with the closer adaptation of words to the thoughts and feelings which we undertake to express. Further, it is only in dealing with the first principle (correctness) that we can keep our attention entirely on the single word."

There! that is the view I wished to illustrate. Let us not boggle about the oddities of its expression: "right and wrong," "better and worse"; or worry as to how by keeping "our attention entirely on a single word" we could settle anything at all about it—except perhaps about its spelling! The important point is that words are here supposed just sheerly to possess their sense, as men have their names in the reverse case, and to carry this meaning with them into sentences regardless of the neighbour words. That is the assumption I am attacking, because, if we follow up its practical consequences in writing and reading and trace its effects upon interpretation, we shall find among them no small proportion of the total of our verbal misunderstandings.

I am anxious not to seem to be illustrating this sort of misunderstanding myself here, unwittingly, in my interpretation of this passage. I know well enough that the authors probably had in mind such incorrectness as occurs when people say "ingenious" when they mean "ingenuous"; and I know that the Usage Doctrine can be interpreted in several ways which make it true and innocuous.

It can say and truly, for example, that we learn how to use words from responding to them and noting how other people use them. Just how we do so learn is a deep but explorable question. It can say equally truly, that a general conformity between users is a condition of communication. That no one would dream of disputing. But if we consider conformity we see that there are two kinds of conformity. Conformity in the general process of interpretation, and conformity in the specific products. We all know how the duller critics of the Eighteenth Century (the century that gave us the current Doctrine of Usage) the people Wordsworth was thinking of when he wrote his Preface, confused the poetic product with the poetic process and thought a poem good because it used poetic diction—the words that former good poets had used—and used them in the same

⁶"Because" is offering to play one of its most troublesome tricks here, of course, in the shift from "cause" to "reason." [Au.]

ambiguity
as resource

You're a better guesser when
you know you're guessing

ways. The Usage Doctrine, in the noxious interpretation of it, is just that blunder in a more pervasive and more dangerous incidence. The noxious interpretation is the common one. Its evil is that it takes the senses of an author's words to be things we know before we read him, fixed factors with which he has to build up the meaning of his sentences as a mosaic is put together of discrete independent tesserae. Instead, they are resultants which we arrive at only through the interplay of the interpretative possibilities of the whole utterance. In brief, we have to guess them and we guess much better when we realize we are guessing, and watch out for indications, than when we think we know.⁷

There are as many morals for the writer as for the reader in all this, but I will keep to interpretation. A word or phrase when isolated momentarily from its controlling neighbours is free to develop irrelevant senses which may then beguile half the other words to follow it. And this is at least equally true with the language functions *other than sense*, with *feeling*, say. I will give you one example of an erratic interpretation of feeling, and if I take it from the same *Manual of Rhetoric* that is because it illustrates one of the things to which the mosaic view or habit of interpretation, as opposed to the organic, often leads.

The Authors give the following from Bacon's *Advancement of Learning*. And in re-reading it I will ask you to note how cunningly Bacon, in describing some misuses of learning, takes back with one hand what he seems to be offering with the other, indicating both why men do prefer misuses and why they should not do so.

But the greatest error of all the rest is the mistaking or misplacing of the last or furthest end of knowledge. For men have entered into a desire of learning and knowledge, sometimes upon a natural curiosity and inquisitive appetite; sometimes to entertain their minds with variety and delight; sometimes for ornament and reputation; and sometimes to enable them to victory of wit and contradiction; and most times for lucre and profession; and seldom sincerely to give a true account of their gift of reason, to the benefit and use of men: as if there were sought in knowledge a couch, whereupon to

rest a searching or restless spirit; or a terrace, for a wandering and variable mind to walk up and down with a fair prospect; or a tower of state, for a proud mind to raise itself upon; or a fort or commanding ground, for strife and contention; or a shop, for profit or sale; and not a rich storehouse, for the glory of the Creator and the relief of man's estate.

There is much to take to heart here—especially as to the couch aspect of the Usage Doctrine, and, I must admit, the tower and fort—but what the authors say about it is this:

Here the splendor of the imagery is no mere embellishment. Without it, Bacon could not have given adequate expression to his enthusiastic appreciation of learning and his fine scorn for the unworthy uses to which it is sometimes put. At the same time, the figures elevate the passage from the ordinary levels of prose to a noble eloquence. (p. 372)

What splendor is there in the imagery? These images have no splendor as Bacon uses them, but are severely efficient, a compact means for saying what he has to say. His "enthusiastic appreciation" (a poor phrase, I suggest, to smudge over him!) of the use of knowledge and his "fine scorn" of unworthy uses are given only if we refuse to be beguiled by the possibilities of splendor in the isolated images. Loose them even a little from their service, let their "splendor" act independently, and they begin at once to fight against his intention. For the terrace, the tower and the fort, if they were allowed to "elevate," would make the misplacings of the last and furthest end of knowledge seem much grander than "a true account of their gift of reason, to the benefit and use of men"—as a terrace or tower of state or a fort will seem grander than a mere rich storehouse.

Let me go on to some further types of the mutual control and interanimation between words. So far I have considered only the influence of words actually present in the passage, but we have to include words which are not actually being uttered and are only in the background. Take the case of what are variously called expressive, symbolic, or simulative words—words

⁷See the Note at the end of this Lecture. [Au.]

which “somehow illustrate the meaning more immediately than do ordinary speech forms,” to quote Leonard Bloomfield. Examples are *flip, flap, flop, flutter, flimmer, flicker, flutter, flash, flush, flare, glare, glitter, glow, gloat, glimmer, bang, bump, lump, thump, thwack, whack, sniff, snuffle, snuff*. . . . Why should these seem so peculiarly appropriate, or fitting, to the meanings we use them for? The popular view is that these words just simply imitate, are copies of, what they mean. But that is a short-cut theory which often does not work, and we can, I think, go further and do better. As Bloomfield, in his excellent book, *Language*, says, “the explanation is a matter of grammatical structure, to the speaker it seems as if the sounds were especially suited to the meaning.” The speaker usually thinks moreover that the word seems suited because in some way it resembles the meaning, or, if this seems unpalatable, that there must be *some* direct connection between them. If it is not the sound of the word which resembles the meaning then perhaps the tongue and lip movements instead imitate something to do with the meaning and so on. Sir Richard Paget’s theories of imitative gestures are likely to be appealed to nowadays.

The most that the modern linguist—who compares the very different words which are used in different languages for their meanings—is prepared to allow towards this resemblance of sound and sense is that “we can distinguish, with various degrees of clearness and with doubtful cases on the border line, a system of initial and final root-forming morphemes of vague signification.” Note how guarded Bloomfield is over such a point.

I must explain what a morpheme is. Two or more words are said to share a morpheme when they have, at the same time, something in common in their meaning and something in common in their sound. The joint semantic-phonetic unit which distinguishes them is what is called a morpheme. It is the togetherness of a peculiar sound and a peculiar meaning for the number of words.

Thus *flash, flare, flame, flicker, flimmer* have in common the sound (fl-) and a suggestion of a “moving light”—and this joint possession is the morpheme. Similarly *blare, flare, glare, stare* have the sound (-ɛə) in common and also the

meaning “big light or noise” shall we say, and this couple—sound and meaning is the morpheme. So with “smoothly wet” and (sl-) in *slime, slip, slush, slobber, slide, slither*. But *pare, pear, pair*, though they have a sound in common, have no meaning in common, so have no common morpheme.

Of course, the existence of a group of words with a common morpheme has an influence on the formation of other words, and on the pronunciation of other words—assimilating them to the group. Thus, given *skid* and *skate*, that is a strong additional reason, against an English convention, for saying *skee* rather than *shee*.

This pedantic looking term, *morpheme*, is useful because with its help we manage to avoid saying that the sound (sl-) somehow itself means something like “smoothly wet or slippery” and gain a way of saying no more than that a group of words which share that sound also share a peculiar meaning. And that is all we are entitled to say. To go further and say that the words share the meaning *because* they contain this sound and because this sound has that meaning is to bring in more than we know—an explanation or theory to account for what we do know. And actually it is a bad explanation. For this sound, by itself, means nothing. It is not the shared sound but each of the words which has the meaning. The sound by itself either means nothing at all—as with (fl) in *flame, flare, flash, flicker*—or as with (ɛə) in *blare, flare, glare, stare* it has by itself only an irrelevant meaning, namely, that of *air*, “what we breathe.”

The theoretical position here is worth close study because it is typical of a very large group of positions in which we tend, too boldly and too innocently, to go beyond our evidence and to assume, as the obvious explanation, as almost a datum, what is really the conclusion of a vague and quick and unchecked inductive argument, often a bad and unwarrantable argument. Why should a group of words with a sound in common have similar meanings unless there was a correspondence of some kind between the sound and the meaning? That seems plausible. But state the argument more explicitly, look over the evidence carefully, and it becomes unpalatable, for then we have to notice the other words which share

the sound but do not share the meaning and the other words which share the meaning without the sound. Then we see that we have been applying to words the sort of argument which would represent a fashion as a spontaneous expression of original taste on the part of all who follow it. We find in fact that we have been looking at the problem upside down. That so far from a perceived correspondence between sound and meaning being the explanation of the sharing, the existence of a group of words with a common sound and meaning is the explanation of our belief in a correspondence.

This situation, I said a moment ago, is typical. We can hardly, I think, exaggerate in an estimate of the number of literary and rhetorical problems which, as usually formulated, are upside down in this fashion. For example, our common assumption that when a word such as *beautiful* or *art* or *religion* or *good*, is used in a great variety of ways, there will be found something in common to all the uses, something which is the fundamental or essential meaning of the word and the explanation of its use. So we spend our wits trying to discover this common essential meaning, without considering that we are looking for it, most often, only as a result of a weak and hasty inductive argument. This assumption that the same word ought to have or must have the same meaning, in an important respect, is one of those bullying assumptions that the context theorem of meanings would defend us from—in the way I discussed in my lecture last week.

But to come back to this parallel assumption that some words, apart from other words, and in their own right in virtue of their sound must mean certain things. It was Aristotle who said that there can be no natural connection between the sound of any language and the things signified, and, if we set the problem right side up and remember the other words before examining it, we shall have to agree with him. Indeed, if we ask the question fairly it becomes—when we get it clear—nearly senseless. What resemblance or natural connection can there be between the semantic and phonetic elements in the morpheme? One is a sound, the other a reference. “Is (fl-) really like ‘moving light’ in any way in which (sl-) or (gl-) is not?” Is that not like asking whether

the taste of turkey is like growing in some way that the taste of mint is not?

I conclude then that these expressive or symbolic words get their feeling of being peculiarly fitting from the other words sharing the morpheme which support them in the background of the mind. If that is so, all sorts of consequences are at once evident. In translation, for example, the expressive word in another language will not necessarily sound at all like the original word. It will be a word that is backed up by other words in a somewhat analogous fashion. Evidently again, a proper appreciation of the expressiveness of a word in a foreign language will be no matter of merely knowing its meaning and relishing its sound. It is a matter of having, in the background of the mind, the other words in the language which share morphemes with it. Thus no one can appreciate these expressive features of foreign words justly without a really wide familiarity with the language. Without that our estimates are merely whimsical.

We can, and I think should, extend this notion of a word as being backed up by other words that are not uttered or thought of. A first extension is to words that sound alike but do not share a morpheme, do not have a common meaning but only some relevant meaning. Thus *blare*, *scare*, and *dare* do not share a morpheme, but on occasion the peculiar force of *blare* may well come to it in part from the others. This, of course, is only recognizing on a larger, wider scale the principle that Lewis Carroll was using in *Jabberwocky*. Its relevance to the theory of rhymes and assonances is obvious.

Another and a wider extension would include not only influences from words which in part sound alike, but from other words which in part overlap in meaning. Words, for example, which we might have used instead, and, together with these, the reasons why we did not use them. Another such extension looks to the other uses, in other contexts, of what we, too simply, call “the same word.” The meaning of a word on some occasions is quite as much in what it keeps out, or at a distance, as in what it brings in. And, on other occasions, the meaning comes from other partly parallel uses whose relevance we can feel, without necessarily being able to state it

ambiguity
as resource

explicitly. But with these last leaps I may seem in danger of making the force of a word, the feeling that no other word could possibly do so well or take its place, a matter whose explanation will drag in the whole of the rest of the language. I am not sure, though, that we need be shy of something very like this as a conclusion. A really masterly use of a language—in free or fluid, not technical discourse—Shakespeare's use of English for example, goes a long way towards using the language as a whole.

Cleopatra, taking up the asp, says to it:

Come, thou mortal wretch,
With thy sharp teeth this knot intrinsicate
Of life at once untie; poor venomous fool,
Be angry, and despatch!

Consider how many senses of *mortal*, besides "death-dealing" come in; compare: "I have immortal longings in me." Consider *knot*: "This knot intrinsicate of life": "Something to be undone," "Something that troubles us until it is undone," "Something by which all holding-together hangs," "The nexus of all meaning." Whether the homophone *not* enters in here may be thought a doubtful matter. I feel it does. But consider *intrinsicate* along with *knot*. Edward Dowden, following the fashion of his time in making Shakespeare as simple as possible, gives "intricate" as the meaning here of *intrinsicate*. And the Oxford Dictionary, sad to say, does likewise. But Shakespeare is bringing together half a dozen meanings from *intrinsic* and *intrinsic*: "Familiar," "intimate," "secret," "private," "innermost," "essential," "that which constitutes the very nature and being of a thing"—all the medical and philosophic meanings of his time as well as "intricate" and "involved." What the word does is exhausted by no one of these meanings and its force comes from all of them and more. As the movement of my hand uses nearly the whole skeletal system of the muscles and is supported by them, so a phrase may take its powers from an immense system of supporting uses of other words in other contexts.

ex. sample
of his
method:
isolate
w/ KB

ambiguity
as resource

but control is still

the aim: see VV's response to KB

Note

The word *usage* itself well illustrates some of the more troublesome shifts of meaning. An improved Rhetoric has among its aims an improved control over these. Here perhaps a list of some of the senses of *usage* may help us in avoiding misunderstanding.

1. The most inclusive sense is "the entire range of the powers which the word can exert as an instrument of communication in all situations and in co-operation with any other words." (In this sense "Usage, and usage alone, undoubtedly controls language.")
2. "Some specific power which, in a limited range of situations and with a limited type of verbal context the word normally exerts." (This is often called a *use* or *sense* and is what the Dictionary attempts to record in its definitions, by giving other words, phrases, and sentences with the same specific power.)
3. An instance of 2, at a certain place in Shakespeare, say, which may be appealed to to show that the word can have that power.
4. A supposed fixed "proper" meaning that the word must be kept to (has in its own right, etc.). This notion is derived from 1, 2, and 3 by oversimplification and a misconception of the working of language which, typically, takes the meaning of a sentence to be something built up from separate meanings of its words—instead of recognizing that it is the other way about and that the meanings of words are derived from the meanings of sentences in which they occur. This misconception assimilates the process by which words have their meanings determined with that by which they have their spelling determined and is the origin of a large part of misinterpretation.