The Meaning of Meaning

A Study of
The Influence of Language upon Thought
and of
The Science of Symbolism

BY

C. K. OGDEN and I. A. RICHARDS

With Supplementary Essays by

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PREFACE

To the First Edition

The following pages, some of which were written as long ago as 1910, have appeared for the most part in periodical form during 1920-22, and arise out of an attempt to deal directly with difficulties raised by the influence of Language upon Thought.

It is claimed that in the science of Symbolism,[1] the study of that influence, a new avenue of approach to traditional problems hitherto regarded as reserved for the philosopher and the metaphysician, has been found. And further that such an investigation of these problems is in accordance with the methods of the special sciences whose contributions have enabled the new study to be

[1] The word Symbolism has certain historical associations through the various dictionary meanings of 'symbol,' which are worth noting. In addition to its constant underlying sense of a sign or token (something 'put together') the term has already enjoyed two distinct *floruits*. The first, traceable to Cyprian, applies to the Creed regarded as the 'sign' of a Christian as distinguished from a heathen, as when Henry VIII talks about "the three Creeds or Symbols." A mythological perversion of the derivation (1450-1550, *Myrr. our Ladye* III, 312) states that "Thys crede ys called *Simbolum*, that ys to say a gatherynge of morselles, for eche of the xii. apostles put therto a morsel." Other historical details will be found in Schlesinger's *Geschichte des Symbols* (1923).

Secondly, there is the widespread use of the adjective Symbolist in the nineties to characterize those French poets who were in revolt against all forms of literal and descriptive writing, and who attached symbolic or esoteric meanings to particular objects, words and sounds. Similarly, art critics loosely refer to painters whose object is 'suggestion' rather than 'representation' or 'construction,' as symbolists.

In the following pages, however, a standpoint is indicated from which both these vague captions can be allotted their place in the system of signs and symbols; and stress is laid upon those aspects of symbolism whose neglect has given rise to so many false problems, both in æsthetics and in philosophy.

differentiated from vaguer speculations with which it might appear to be associated.

Amongst grammarians in particular a sense of uneasiness has prevailed. It has been felt that the study of language as hitherto conducted by traditional methods has failed to face fundamental issues in spite of its central position as regards all human intercourse. Efforts to make good the omission have been frequent throughout the present century, but volumes by painstaking philologists bearing such titles as *The Philosophy of Language*, *Principes de Linguistique Théorique* and *Voraussetzungen zur Grundlegung einer Kritik der allgemeinen Grammatik und Sprachphilosophie* have, as a rule, been devoid of fruitful suggestion. They have neither discovered the essential problems nor, with few exceptions, such as Bréal's *Semantics*, opened up interesting though subordinate fields of investigation. "Breadth of vision is not conspicuous in modern linguistics," says so well-informed an authority as Jespersen in his latest work; and he attributes this narrow outlook to "the fact that linguists have neglected all problems connected with the valuation of language." Unfortunately, Jespersen's own recommendations for a normative approach, the three questions which he urges philologists to consider—

> What is the criterion by which one word or one form should be preferred to another?
>
> Are the changes that we see gradually taking place in languages to be considered as on the whole beneficial, or the opposite?
>
> Would it be possible to construct an international language?—

hardly touch the central problem of meaning, or the relations of thought and language; nor can they be profitably discussed by philologists without a thorough examination of this neglected preliminary. And, as we shall see in our ninth chapter, philosophers and psy-

chologists, who are often supposed to be occupied with such researches, have done regrettably little to help them.

There are some who find difficulty in considering any matter unless they can recognize it as belonging to what is called 'a subject' and who recognize a subject as something in which, somewhere at least, Professors give instruction and perhaps Examinations are undergone. These need only be reminded that at one time there were no subjects and until recently only five. But the discomfort experienced in entering the less familiar fields of inquiry is genuine. In more frequented topics the main roads, whether in the right places or not, are well marked, the mental traveller is fairly well assured of arriving at some well-known spot, whether worth visiting or not, and will usually find himself in respectable and accredited company. But with a new or border-line subject he is required to be more self-dependent; to decide for himself where the greater interest and importance lies and as to the results to be expected. He is in the position of a prospector. If the venture here recorded should be found to assist any others in the study of symbols, the authors will consider it justified. Needless to say they believe it to be of greater importance than this.

In order at least not to fail in the more modest aim of calling attention to a neglected group of problems, they have added as an Appendix a number of selected passages indicative of the main features of similar undertakings by other writers in the past.

Of their own contributions towards the foundations of a science of Symbolism the following seem to them to have most value:

(1) An account of *interpretation* in causal terms by which the treatment of language as a system of signs becomes capable of results, among which may be noticed the beginning of a division between what cannot be intelligibly talked of and what can.

(2) A division of the functions of language into two groups, the symbolic and the emotive. Many notorious controversies in the sciences it is believed can be shown to derive from confusion between these functions, the same words being used at once to make statements and to excite attitudes. No escape from the fictitious differences so produced is possible without an understanding of the language functions. With this understanding it is believed that such controversies as those between Vitalism and Mechanism, Materialism and Idealism, Religion and Science, etc., would lapse, and further the conditions would be restored under which a general revival of poetry would be possible.

(3) A dissection and ventilation of 'meaning' the centre of obscurantism both in the theory of knowledge and in all discussion.

(4) An examination of what are confusedly known as 'verbal questions.' Nothing is commoner in discussion than to hear some point of difference described as purely or largely 'verbal.' Sometimes the disputants are using the same words for different things, sometimes different words for the same things. So far as either is the case a freely mobilizable technique of definition meets the difficulty. But frequently the disputants are using the same (or different) words for nothing, and here greater modesty due to a livelier realization of the language situation is recommendable.

Hitherto no science has been able to deal directly with the issue, since what is fundamentally involved is the theory of Signs in general and their interpretation. The subject is one peculiarly suitable for collaboration, and in this way only is there reasonable hope of bringing to a practical issue an undertaking which has been abandoned in despair by so many enterprising but isolated inquirers, and of dispelling the suspicion of eccentricity which the subject has so often evoked. Historical research shows that since the lost work of Antisthenes and Plato's *Cratylus* there have been seven

chief methods of attack—the Grammatical (Aristotle, Dionysius Thrax), the Metaphysical (The Nominalists, Meinong), the Philological (Horne Tooke, Max Müller), the Psychological (Locke, Stout), the Logical (Leibnitz, Russell) the Sociological (Steinthal, Wundt) and the Terminological (Baldwin, Husserl). From all these, as well as such independent studies as those of Lady Welby, Marty, and C. S. Peirce, from Mauthner's *Kritic der Sprache*, Erdmann's *Die Bedeutung des Wortes*, and Taine's *De l'Intelligence*, the writers have derived instruction and occasionally amusement.

To Dr Malinowski the authors owe a very special debt. His return to England as their work was passing through the press enabled them to enjoy the advantage of his many years of reflection as a field-worker in Ethnology on the peculiarly difficult border-lands of linguistics and psychology. His unique combination of practical experience with a thorough grasp of theoretical principles renders his agreement on so many of the more heterodox conclusions here reached particularly encouraging. The contribution from his pen dealing with the study of primitive languages, which appears as a Supplement, will, the writers feel sure, be of value not only to ethnologists but to all who take a living interest in words and their ways.

The practical importance of a science of Symbolism even in its present undeveloped form needs little emphasis. All the more elaborate forms of social and intellectual life are affected by changes in our attitude towards, and our use of, words. How words work is commonly regarded as a purely theoretical matter, of little interest to practical persons. It is true that the investigation must at times touch upon somewhat abstruse questions, but its disregard by practical persons is nevertheless short-sighted. The view that language works well enough as it is, can only be held by those who use it merely in such affairs as could be conducted without it—the business of the paper-boy

or the butcher, for instance, where all that needs to be referred to can equally well be pointed at. None but those who shut their eyes to the hasty re-adaptation to totally new circumstances which the human race has during the last century been blindly endeavouring to achieve, can pretend that there is no need to examine critically the most important of all the instruments of civilization. New millions of participants in the control of general affairs must now attempt to form personal opinions upon matters which were once left to a few. At the same time the complexity of these matters has immensely increased. The old view that the only access to a subject is through prolonged study of it, has, if it be true, consequences for the immediate future which have not yet been faced. The alternative is to raise the level of communication through a direct study of its conditions, its dangers and its difficulties. The practical side of this undertaking is, if communication be taken in its widest sense, Education.

Convinced as they are of the urgency of a stricter examination of language from a point of view which is at present receiving no attention, the authors have preferred to publish this essay in its present form rather than to wait, perhaps indefinitely, until, in lives otherwise sufficiently occupied, enough moments of leisure had accumulated for it to be rewritten in a more complete and more systematized form. They are, they believe, better aware of its failings than most critics will suppose, and especially of those due to the peculiar difficulties which a fundamental criticism of language inevitably raises for the expositors thereof.

For two reasons the moment seems to have arrived when an effort to draw attention to Meaning may meet with support. In the first place there is a growing readiness amongst psychologists to admit the importance of the problem. "If the discovery of the psychological nature of Meaning were completely successful," writes Professor Pear (*Remembering and Forgetting*, 1923,

p. 59), "it might put an end to psychology altogether." Secondly, the realization that men of learning and sincerity are lamentably at the mercy of forms of speech cannot long be delayed, when we find for instance Lord Hugh Cecil concluding a reasoned statement of his attitude to Divorce with the words "The one thing, as it seems to me, that Christians are bound, as Christians, to resist, is any *proposal to call* that marriage which, according to the revelation of Christ, is adultery" (*The Times*, Jan. 2, 1923). The italics are ours.

It is inevitable in such a work that emphasis should be laid on what to some may appear to be obvious, and on the other hand that terms should be employed which will render portions of the inquiry less easy than others, owing to the alteration of the angle from which the subject is to be viewed. At the same time it is hoped that even those who have no previous acquaintance with the topics covered may, with a little patience, be able to follow the whole discussion, condensed though it has occasionally been in order to keep the exposition within reasonable compass. A full list of Contents, designed to be read as part of the book, has therefore been provided.

A Summary, a few Appendices on special problems, and many Cross-references have been added for the benefit of readers who have not the opportunity of devoting equal attention to every part of the field, or who desire to pursue the study further.

C. K. O.
I. A. R.

MAGDALENE COLLEGE,
CAMBRIDGE,
January 1923.

PREFACE

To the Second Edition

The peculiar reception of the First Edition of the present work by persons of the most diverse predilections, the fact that within two years of its publication it was officially used in a number of Universities, including Columbia, and in particular the marked interest which it excited in America, led the authors to meet, in New York, in the Spring of 1926, for purposes of discussion and revision. As a result it has been possible to take into account the requirements of a wider audience than that to which the book was primarily addressed. Not only have some local allusions been modified but various improvements in emphasis and structure will, it is hoped, have lightened the task of the reader.

At the same time no change in the positions maintained has been found necessary. The authors, however, have not been idle, and some reference to the supplementary works for which they have been responsible may not be out of place. *Principles of Literary Criticism* (I. A. R.) endeavours to provide for the emotive function of language the same critical foundation as is here attempted for the symbolic. *Word Magic* (C. K. O.) will present the historical and philological apparatus by the aid of which alone can current linguistic habits be explained—and it has been possible to reduce the inordinate length of an original Chapter II in view of this independent study. A general introduction to the psychological problems of language study will be found in *The Meaning of Psychology* (C. K. O.) while *Science and Poetry* (I. A. R.) discusses the place and future of literature in our civilization.

But these additions still leave much of the new ground opened by *The Meaning of Meaning* to be explored. Chief among these desiderata are the development of an educational technique whereby both the child and the adult may be assisted to a better use of language, the investigation of the general principles of notation with its bearing on the problem of a universal scientific language, and the analytical task of discovering a grammar by means of which translation from one symbol-system to another could be controlled. These are projects which demand an Institute of Linguistic Research with headquarters in Geneva, New York, and Peking.

CAMBRIDGE,
June, 1926.

C. K. O.
I. A. R.

PREFACE

TO THE THIRD EDITION

THE demand for a Third Edition affords us an opportunity of correcting a number of minor errors and discrepancies. Of the desiderata to which reference is made above, the second and the third have been the object of attention in *Basic English* (C. K. O.), a system of English adapted to the requirements of a Universal Language, and described in Vols. IX and X of *Psyche* (1928-30); with the first, *Practical Criticism* (I. A. R.), an educational application of Chapter X, is concerned, and the experience gained by its author as Visiting Professor at Peking (1929-30) makes the need for further work upon all these questions appear still more urgent.

CAMBRIDGE,
January, 1930.

C. K. O.
I. A. R.

PREFACE

To the Fourth Edition

In this edition we have removed a few inconsistencies and obscurities noted during a correspondence with Dr. Ishibashi who has translated the work into Japanese (1936).

Since the appearance of the Third Edition, *Bentham's Theory of Fictions* (C. K. O.) has focussed attention on a neglected contribution to the subject which is of more than historical interest. *Mencius on the Mind* (I. A. R.) examines the difficulties which beset the translator and explores the technique of multiple definition, which is further elucidated in *Basic Rules of Reason* (I. A. R.). *Coleridge on Imagination* (I. A. R.) offers a new estimate of Coleridge's theory in the light of a more adequate evaluation of emotive language. *Opposition* (C. K. O.) is an analysis of an aspect of definition which is of particular importance for linguistic simplification.

Cambridge,
May, 1936.

C. K. O.
I. A. R.

PREFACE

To the Eighth Edition

The curiosity aroused by references to this work in a number of popular applications of the principles of linguistic therapy here advocated, and by the widespread adoption of Basic English as an educational method, has necessitated further printings. In the four latest editions we have made a few further changes, and have expanded certain parts of Chapters II and X in separate publications —*Psyche*, Vols. XVI-XVIII (C. K. O.), and *Interpretation in Teaching* and *How to Read a Page* (I. A. R.).

Cambridge,
May, 1946.

C. K. O.
I. A. R.

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