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The Generals of Convention and the Particulars of Nature: Meaning from a Peircean View

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Introduction

Plato's View of Language

In the *Cratylus* Plato has Socrates discuss the nature of names. In the course of the Socratic discussion, some significant issues are raised, but the essential point seems to revolve around two questions which may well be even more important today than they were those thousands of years ago.

Questions of Convention-Particular vs. Natural-General

On the one hand, there were two opposing views regarding the nature of names. One view holds that 'there is no name given to anything by nature; all is convention and habit of the users,' while the other view has it that 'things have names by nature, and that not every man is an artificer of names, but he only who looks to the name which each thing by nature has and is able to express the true forms of things in letters and syllables.' So the question is raised: do names exist by convention (habit) or by nature? A second theme which bears on the essential nature of names can be found in these two opposing points of view:

[Do] the things differ as the names differ? you give one name and I another; and are they relative to individuals, as Protagoras tells us? For he says that man is the measure of all things, and that things are to me as they appear to me, and that are to you as they appear to you.'

The other view is that

things are not relative to individuals, and all things do not equally belong to all at the same moment and always, they must be supposed to have their own proper and permanent essence.

These two questions, 1) do names exist by convention or by nature, and 2) are words particular to what individual men think or are they generals with 'their own proper and permanent essence,' will be this paper's subject of discussion, for these questions bear directly on the nature of language and therefore not only on how language is used synchronically and how it changes diachronically, but also on how certain universally observed facts, such as ambiguity (homonymy) and equivalence (synonymy), anomaly and puns, irony and lying, might be explained.

The Platonic View of Language: Convention-Particular vs. Natural-General

A careful examination the *Cratylus* reveals that Plato was proposing an either-or question with respect to language: Either language is conventional and particular, or it is natural and general. Today almost all linguists hold that the meanings of words (to the degree that meaning is discussed at all) are strictly conventional (arbitrary), and that meaning is to a large degree particular to individuals, since each individual has had an essentially different world of experience from his neighbor. The other possibility suggested by Plato—that the meaning of names is natural and general—is not today widely held, although onomatopoeia is acknowledged as a characteristic of minor importance to language.

Another View of Language:
Convention-General vs. Natural-Particular

What both Plato and modern linguists have failed to recognize, however, is the fact that logically, four possibilities exist, two more than what Plato originally discussed. Schematically we may represent those possibilities as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conventional</th>
<th>Conventional</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>General</td>
<td>General</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plato</td>
<td>Plato</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natural</td>
<td>Natural</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General</td>
<td>Particular</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1

The upper right and lower left categories represent the two alternatives suggested by Plato, but the remaining two categories deserve scrupulous consideration, because these give us deep insight as to the nature of language.

Two Kinds of Meaning

I would like to suggest that the two categories that have traditionally been ignored recommend themselves to further investigation, since the very meaning in language can be identified with the help of these categories. In a word, what we have found is that meaning is not a simple, single idea, but is basically divisible, based on the two non-Platonic categories of Figure 1: One kind of meaning I have called instructional meaning, and it is CONVENTION and GENERAL, while the other I have named interpreted meaning, and it is NATURAL and PARTICULAR.¹

The Habitual (Conventional) Nature of Words

The conventional/general nature of instructional meaning of a word is essentially what Peirce (Ms. 693b, 1904:99-100)² calls the logical interpretant, the essence of which is habit:³

Now a thought such as the meaning of a word is obviously of the nature of a habit. We may define a meaning as a possible habit how a general conventional sign shall be applied.

Peirce (5:400)⁴ makes it perfectly clear that this kind of meaning, instructional meaning, is based on his notion of habit:

What a thing means is simply what habit it involves. Now, the identity of a habit depends on how it might lead us to act, not merely under such circumstances as are likely to arise, but under such as might possibly occur, no matter if contrary to all previous experience.

¹There is another kind of meaning, termed paradigmatic meaning which has to do with the structure and organization of the elements of the code. For further discussion see Robertson (to appear).
²Because I do not have the manuscripts, I have taken the Ms. quotes from Johansen (1985).
³This is Jakobson's notion of general meaning, Gesamtbetentung or invariant. See Jakobson 1936.
⁴This is taken to mean volume five, paragraph 400 of Peirce's Collected Papers.
Habit (convention) is also by nature general, in this sense: the more efficient the habit the fewer the contexts that will impede its successful operation. Thus, when a child acquires the habit of writing, it makes no difference whether the medium is pencil or chalk, or whether the place of writing be paper, blackboard or sand, or whether he is using the fine-tuned muscles of his hand or the major muscles of his arm; the generalized set of instructions (i.e. the habit) is there to be followed and thus embodied in any appropriate setting, regardless of the specific qualities of the materials of writing. It is the act of generalization, or habit formation which is so important for our understanding of meaning, since 'the most important operation of the mind is that of generalization' [Peirce 1.82]. This would be the category of general convention, the upper left-hand corner referred to earlier in Figure 1.

In contrast to instructional meaning discussed earlier, there is another kind of meaning which is natural and particular, or the category of the lower right corner in Figure 1. Just as following the habitual set of instructions of writing can produce, given the appropriate circumstances, an actual result whose instance occurs at a specific point in time and space, so the instructional meaning of a word, then, as a habit, a general, can also produce a specific result particular to a given point in time and space.

The relationship between instructional meaning and interpreted meaning might be brought into relief with the following brief non-linguistic example:

I am walking down the street and I see a red and white symbol painted on a window of a business, so:

![Figure 2.](image)

From the information, I infer a set of instructions: "Look inside for a barber shop." This would be the instructional meaning for the sign. I then follow the instructions by looking inside the real-world window to see if I can locate all the expected accoutrements of a barber shop: the barber, the chair, the mirrors, combs, scissors etc. On looking for such elements of the real world I would have arrived at an interpretation of the instructions and thus would have achieved the interpreted meaning. It is important to recognize that each time I view that sign, or another sign like it, I might wind up with a different interpreted meaning, because the time, circumstances, and in short, the referential world is always in a state of flux. Thus the resulting interpretation has all the characteristics of the lower right category of Figure 1: It is natural--found in the naturally occurring elements of the world; and particular--located at a specific point in time at a specific place in the world.

The difference between the two types of meanings is easily demonstrated. On the one hand the habit that is constituted of a set of instructions is a general. It is neither temporal nor locational, nor is it specifically a part of the existential world. On the other hand, the results of following the instructional meaning are the opposite of general and conventional, in the sense that the particulars may or may not be known in detail before hand, and also in the sense that such particulars are existential, temporal and locational.
Finally, one important difference between instructional and interpretational meaning remains to be discussed. Instructional meaning is essentially below consciousness and therefore not immediately available for conscious inspection, whereas interpreted meaning is oppositely conscious and consequently available for our investigation. This distinction between the conscious and the unconscious in habitual behavior becomes obvious as one thinks of behaviors typical to habits. If I am riding a slightly out-of-control bicycle, I have the sudden urge to right the bike by turning the handle bars to the right or left, whichever is gravitationally appropriate. In such a circumstance I might well be consciously aware of making such a turn, especially if I am paying close attention to the process of riding, but I am certainly not aware of that general, habitual set of instructions which is responsible for the urge to make such gravitational adjustments in the first place. Note that such interpretational turns on a bicycle are specific and naturally defined tokens of that general type—the set of instructions which the constitutes the skill of bicycle-riding.

Now, in language we similarly have an urge to respond, say, to an interlocutor's conversational remark, and do so as smoothly as we turn the wheel of a bicycle to keep it from falling over, but we are not consciously aware of the general set of instructions (i.e. the habits) associated with each of the words (much less the skill/habit of putting words together) that goes into making up our conversational response. We have no idea what the the precise conversational words will be before they emerge, (in fact we are sometimes surprised by them, positively or negatively) nor can the interlocutor think of their instructional meaning in the process of interpretation. Rather, his interpretation, which is available for conscious reflection and consideration, results from a highly general set of instructions which are otherwise below consciousness.

The challenge for the linguist who is interested in meaning is, of course, to come to a conscious understanding of habitual, instructional meaning, since it is hidden from conscious evaluation, just as the biologist is interested in finding the hidden, but general sets of instruction that constitute the genetic code.1 This problem, however,has its solution if we take our cue from Peirce's suggestion that meaning is habit, and that 'the identity of a habit depends on how it might lead us to act.' Thus, by observing carefully how a particular word causes us to act—that is, if we carefully observe what kind of interpreted meanings result from the several interpretations based on different contexts in which such a word can appear, we can come to a conscious understanding of what the instructional meaning of the investigated word is.

A Discussion of the Lexical Meaning of Go

To show how this view of meaning can apply to an analysis of language, the next portion of this paper will treat the instructional and interpretational meanings of the word go.2 As a mere first approximation, we might deductively suggest that go has the following instructional meaning (to be amended later): Look for a change in state of the subject of the predication. When we say 'change in state' it is important to specify that such change can be locational, temporal, psychological, physical or mental.

Thus in the following sentences, one sees a change in state:

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1We might note, incidentally, that the quest for the instructional meaning of the genes, whose interpretational result is the morphology of the body is significantly like the instructional meaning and the resulting interpreted meaning proposed here. Furthermore, just as geneticists do not begin regularly to understand the exact process by which the instructional genes produce the observed bodily morphology, so it is not entirely clear exactly how the instructional meaning gets realized as interpreted meaning. We just know that if a set of instructions are scrupulously and intelligently followed we arrive at particular results. The important point here is to recognize that we, like the geneticists, must understand the structural content of the paradigm of the instructions before we can understand how those instructions are realized. The upshot of all this is, quite simply, unless and until linguists take up the study of meaning, linguistics will remain at a level of understanding equivalent to pre-Mendelian genetics.

2I would like to thank the students in my Linguistics 533 Semantics class who came up with some of the sentences that will be used in this paper.
1. John went over the top.
2. John went over the rough draft.

In the first example it is probable that one would interpret John's going over as physical, where he with his body actually moved from point A to point B, and this because the top instructs us to see something large and physical, as e.g. a hill or wall. A normal interpretation of the second sentence, however, would probably result in a mental interpretation where he with his body did not physically crawl over every line and period of the rough draft. Rather, we see an interpretation where the change of state was a mental change, and this because rough draft instructs us to see the written page. Nonetheless, in both instances, one sees a change in state in John, one physical and one mental.

In sentences like the following the change is once again external and internal, but in this case the subject is inanimate, thus resulting in a different kind of physical and mental contextual interpretation for go:

3. The fruit is going cheap.
4. The fruit is going bad.

In 3 above, one sees a change in state with respect to the fruit, but it is given in terms of moving from seller to buyer (as inferred from the adjective cheap). In 4, the internal state of the fruit is changing, in this case it is changing from useable to unusable fruit. But in both cases, the external and the internal, one sees a change in state.

In the following two sentences, we again see a more physical interpretation of the word go as against a more abstract interpretation.

5. As cars go, they generally heat up.
6. As cars go, this one is cheap.

In number 5 above, owing to the description of cars heating up, we are instructed to infer a physical going of the car, since such existential movement would result in mechanical heat. In 6, however, the change of state is anything but physical, though it is still a change in state, since one is instructed to contrast mentally the price of this car in particular with the prices of the general, run-of-the mill car. Note that the sentence 'His house went cheap' is similarly a change in state.

It should be clear by now that the interpretation of the habitual instructions of a particular word is accomplished by bringing to bear all the information, linguistic, experiential, inferential—in a word, all the information at the interpreter's command. The meaning (i.e. the instructions) of go does not change, but the type of interpretation that is accomplished does change, depending on the context. Consider for example the two sentences

7. It just went to pieces.
8. He just went to pieces.

It is clear that the more literal interpretation as given to sentence 7., where it was transformed from a whole to a series of parts (something like Oliver Wendell Holmes' one-hoss-shay), results from the instructional meaning of it, whereas the more metaphorical interpretation (again a transformation, but in this case, from a whole person to less-than-functional person) is the result of the instructional meaning of he, where we are less likely to interpret an auto-self-dismemberment, than a mental falling apart. But, the point is that the seeming homonymous go's are as illusory as the Piagetian child's imagined change in volume of water when it is poured into a different shaped container.

There is another instance of the use of go which requires a slight amendment to the originally given instructional meaning, which we will formulate as follows: View the subject of the predication in two different states. Thus, in the previous examples, one is instructed to see John in two different states,
physically by going over the top, or mentally, by going over the rough draft, and so on. The reason for this slight amendment comes from a consideration of a slightly different kind of interpretation found in the following sentences:

9. The new song goes something like this: ...... 
10. "...then he says 'ô'dono', and I goes 'wáča tákan abáwu l" 
11. Spanish poems go differently than ours. 
12. A circle goes like this. 
13. My new design goes like this. 

With these particular sentences, what we have is a repetition of an instance. With each of the examples, one sees an original (the song, the previously said wáča tákan abáwu l, the genre of Spanish poems, the new designs, and the book/movie/painting) and one sees a repetition of that original. Thus, as per the redefinition of the set of instructions, we see the subject of the predication in two different states, one in its original state and one in its repetitious state, just as we see John in two different states in the plain, vanilla use of go: John went over the top.

The definition is need of further even revision, however, as we consider sentences such as the following:

15. The wolf-dog went wild. 
16. The wolf-dog went tame. 
17. The geranium went brown. 
18. The geranium went green. 
19. The milk went bad. 
20. The milk went good. 
22. John went good. 
23. John went insane. 
25. Mary went grey. 
26. Mary went brunette.

The odd numbered sentences above are easier to get an interpretation for than the even numbers. To understand why we must explore in more detail the instructional value habitually associated with the word go, since there remains a part of that meaning to be defined. In addition to 'viewing the subject of the predication in two different states,' it is necessary to view those two states as belonging to a closed system. That is, a wolf-dog normally might be thought of as having the internal capacity to revert to his wild state, whereas the taming of such an animal requires some intelligence beyond the dog's; such taming would seem unlikely to happen to such an animal on its own. Similarly, plants going brown or people going insane or grey or bad do so independently of any outside intervention, whereas plants turning green might require extra fertilization or light or warmth or some other outside influence, just as people becoming sane or changing hair colors to brunette also are thought of as having to have something outside themselves to make the change. Of course, it would be possible to change the setting and therefore the system so the a plant could go green, as e.g.

27. Keep fertilizing that plant, and it'll go green,

1Of course it is possible take a more literal view, and see a locative go, as e.g. Mary went (to the party as a) blonde.
just as people could go same in the mythical Land of Ozlandia. And of course, a baby born with dark hair might well go brunette on losing its baby hair. Thus, if people do not normally see an item as having the internal capacity for change, or if the reason for change is not immediately obvious as part of the systematic view, it is difficult to get an interpretive meaning if go is used as its predication, whereas if the situation is such that change or at least the reason for change is seen as an inherent part of the system, then go is entirely appropriate.

The following sentences further illustrate the above point:

28. Betty went pregnant.
29. Betty got pregnant.
30. Betty went mad.
31. Betty got mad.

In the above sentences, it is clear that Betty's pregnancy is not entirely of her own making, thus subjecting sentence 28 to contradictory instructions. Mad, on the other hand, is interesting because the instructions associated with go call up the variant crazy, since in our culture such behavior is viewed as happening without necessarily having to have an outside influence, whereas the variant angry is naturally elicited by get which apparently has as part of its habitual instructions something like 'effort beyond the norm,' as e.g. John went out the door, vs. John got out the door.

We therefore expand the instructional meaning of go as follows: View the subject of the predication in two different states. The difference between those states must be due to a cause which is internal to the subject or the subject's immediate environment.

It is important to recognize the the set of instructions for go are constant, regardless of the environment, but the interpretation of those instructions is subject to tremendous variation, which variation is contextually driven. Consider, for example, the following sentences:

32. Will John go?
33. Will this car go?
34. Will this player-piano go?
35. Will this piano go?
36. Will green go?
37. Will this pile of trash go?

Thus, for example, the normal reading for sentence 32 might be in a more expanded version will John go (e.g. to the party)? The instructional value of go is present, since a) John's physical existence in two locational states is in question, and b) the reason for those two potential locational states is clearly internal to John: his ability to move from point A to point B. On the other hand, if this car is substituted for John the reading changes, since cars' abilities are substantially different from people's. Nonetheless, the instructional value of go is again obvious, since a) two states are in question (can the stopped state be transformed to a started state), and b) the car's ability to start (without outside support, e.g. changing the battery, adding gas etc.) is also in question.

Sentence 34 (will this player-piano go) is similarly interpreted, but sentence 35 (will this piano go) again has a highly divergent interpretation, because of the different ways of viewing a mechanical piano as against a simple piano that is played. Again, however, the instructional meaning of go is accurate, since a) one sees the potential for two locative states: one where the piano currently is and a second where it might be if it will fit, and b) whether or not such a locational transformation is possible, given the piano's size and shape, and the delimiting size and shape of the projected destination.

If green is substituted for piano the interpretational reading changes again, but the instructional value of go does not. Thus, the two states in question are a) green outside the context in question and b) green in that context; the second half of the instruction is bound up in the question of whether the intrinsic qualities of green are such that they will not clash with the other colors of the potential setting.
Finally, if this pile of trash is substituted for green, the context again gives a completely new interpretation based on the same, habitual set of instructions. Here again we see two locational points (where the trash is and its potential future location), and it is certainly internally capable of being subject to such a move.

In all these instances, however, it should be emphasized that more than one interpretation is possible. Interpretations of a given set of instructions are infinite. Thus, given the right mind-set with respect, say, to sentence 32 (will the car go), any of the above interpretations are possible. If the car were animate (like Walt Disney's Herbie) we could say 'Will the car (Herbie) go?'; if we're having a hard time deciding whether it will fit into a parking space, we might say 'Will the car go?'; if we are not sure whether our car is fancy enough to warrant driving the queen in the annual Fourth of July parade, we might say 'Will the car go?'; and if it is in very bad shape, the auctioneer might ask on the foreclosure of our property, 'Will the car go?' The point is that in this view of meaning—the view that a sign's meaning is the habitual set of instructions—the potential for interpretation is infinite. Thus, when I as a speaker encode linguistic information to be interpreted, the interpretation on the part of the hearer is itself probabilistic, since he can only guess at what my projected interpreted object might be. Despite such probability, language turns out to be a remarkably sure-footed medium of communication.

This view of the meaning of go is further underscored when we look at the sentence:

38. The cow went to town.
39. The cow went "moo".
40. The cow went all over the floor.
41. The toy car went all over the floor.

Sentences 38 and 39 have already been discussed, but sentence 40 deserves some comment. This euphemistic view of go is reasonable, given the instructional meaning, since the two states are imaginable, as is the internal capability. Note that, in the particular case of 40, the words all over the floor certainly increase the probability of such an interpretation. On the other hand, when cow is replaced by toy car, the interpretation is likely to change again, since the instructional value of toy car is substantially different from that of cow.

One of the most significant uses of the lexeme go is in certain so-called periphrastic future constructions like

42. I'm going to [əm ɡána] eat about six this afternoon,

as opposed to the less analytic future

43. I will [əl] eat about six this afternoon.

The two constructions with going to and will are not strictly synonymous, as is evident from the following two sentences:

44. This species of honey bee will gather most of its food supply in the early spring or late fall.
45. This species of honey bee is going to gather most of its food supply in the early spring or late fall.

46. John will almost always buy a sandwich at this vending machine around noon.
47. John is almost always going to buy a sandwich at this vending machine around noon.

The difference between 44 and 45 is striking. Whereas 44 seems to have for its interpretational object the speaker's opinion regarding a general truth about this species of honey bee, 45 seems oppositely to have reference to the particular acts of this species which, starting now, are going to take place this particular spring and this particular fall. Sentence 46 also instructs the interpreter to see John's
behavior as general, as does sentence 47. The difference, however, lies in the fact that in 47 one sees a beginning and an end point, which one does not necessarily see in 46.

Thus, the instructional meaning of will + VERB differs from that of be going to + VERB, even though they both signal a temporality of the irrealis. The logical reason that be going to should so signal time to come has obviously to do with the instructional meaning of be going and to in conjunction with the following verb. The meaning of go, suggests that the subject be considered in two different states, which is seen in the present vs. time to come. The reason that the temporality should be in the irrealis of time (not the present or past) has to do with the instructional meaning of to, which signals a kind of imperfective. To demonstrate this, I sometimes ask my students which person they would prefer to be in the following sentences:

48. John started to drink the poison.
49. John started drinking the poison.

Of course, starting to drink the poison is less dangerous than starting drinking the poison, since to puts an imperfective distance between the subject and the action described by the verb. Similarly, walking to the door is somehow leaves more distance between the walker and door than does walking on the door.

The imperfective/irrealis of the combination be going to VERB is particularly clear in sentences like

50. John is going to die.
51. John was going to die, ...

where in both sentences it is obvious that the verbal action is neither present nor past reality. Even though it is not future in sentence 51 because of the past tense was, it is nonetheless irrealis, because the combination of go + to results in an incompletive object, as explained above.

Discussion

The ramifications of this semiotic view of meaning are indeed far-reaching since such a theory makes it possible to define more accurately some of the traditional terms characteristically associated with the discussion of meaning. Let us consider briefly ambiguity (homonymy) and equivalence (synonymy), anomaly and puns, irony and lying.

So-called ambiguity is a necessary part of the semiotic theory of language presented in this paper, given the interpretational nature of symbols, whose essence is habit. 'A symbol is a sign which refers to the Object it denotes [i.e. interpreted meaning] by virtue of law, usually an association of general ideas, which operates to cause the Symbol to be interpreted as referring to that Object [Peirce 2.249, emphasis mine]. In effect, symbols are 'directions how to proceed to gain acquaintance with what is referred to' (5.542). Thus it is that when we hear a word, or sentence or discourse, for they are all symbol-habits or combinations thereof, we perform an act of interpretation that makes sense in terms of the specifics of the particular time and circumstances of the utterances. But what is important here is the recognition of that fact that any such interpretational act can result in more than a single interpretation, and it is exactly these different acts of interpretation which are the ambiguities referred to in the linguistic literature. That is, every set of linguistic (habitual) instructions must by definitional necessity have the potential for more than one interpretation, depending on the time, place, circumstance—in general the world of contiguity associated with the particular speech utterance—and it is the potential for these several interpretations which constitute the ambiguity referred to in the literature.

A nonlinguistic example of such interpretational ambiguity might be taken from simple mathematics. The instructions 5 + 2 = ? would normally result in an interpretational 7, but it is also possible arrive at a more complex answer, 6 + 1, or 4 + 3 or 1 + 1 + 1 + 1 + 3, and so on to interpretational infinity, if fractions or decimals are allowed to be used. And indeed, there are circumstances where the statement 5 + 2 is equivalent to 4 + 3 would be not only be right, but necessary to understanding, if e.g. reference were being made to the week days + the week end vs. the odd + the even days of the week. Similarly, with language, if I say John went with Mary, an infinity of interpretations based on the
instructional meaning of the sentence could be given, depending on the circumstances of the interpretation.

In this regard, we must point out that indeed, such potential for ambiguity is a chief strength of language, and not a weakness as some may suppose, for such interpretational richness is as necessary and as natural to language as the appropriate turning of the handle bars in response to the richness of diverse road conditions is to the skill-habit of bicycle riding. It makes no more sense for a linguistic form to be restricted to a unique interpretation than it does for handle bars on a bike to have a unique way of turning, regardless of the circumstance.

We define *ambiguity* therefore in these terms: Two or more differing interpretations that result from a single set of instructions are ambiguities.

*Homonymy* is related to the notion *ambiguity*. The question that homonymy raises, in the context of the theory set forth in this paper, is whether it is theoretically possible for given form to have more than one set of instructions (i.e. more than one habit) associated with it. In general, we might surmise from other aspects of human behavior, that it is not common for a form to have more than one associated habit. If we take, for example, the meaning of a tool to be the habit associated with that tool, we typically do not find a spoon with lead to double as a pencil, or bed with wheels to function as a cart. It is true, however, that such items as hide-a-beds and motor homes, and maybe even Maxwell-Smart telephone-shoes might exist, but it is also true that such double-duty forms are not the rule, but the exception, and in any case seem to presuppose the existence of sets of simpler formal/functional entities that can be combined to produce the more complicated tools in question. As we look at language, asking the question of whether or not a particular form two or more distinct habits, or whether it has a single, general habit, we find that, in the main, there is a tendency to generalize such that a single, unitary habit is commonly found to be its meaning. It is important to recognize that, particularly with substantives, it is possible for a form to have more than one instructionally associated object habitually associated with it, as for example, bachelor (unmarried, or degree) or bank (river, or money), but this multiplicity of referred objects must not mask the fact that they are apparently and usually codified reflections of a more general, unifying set of instructions, as e.g. bachelor = 'less than fully initiated', e.g. unmarried or not master's or Ph.D. or bank 'means of holding in what would otherwise be readily lost', e.g. bank which contains the water of a river, or bank which contains money. In any case, Jakobson and Waugh’s observation (1980:5) that 'it is a priori clear ... that a language devoid of homonyms is conceivable, whereas a purely homonymic language is a reductio ad absurdum.'

Tied to the notion of interpretational ambiguity is the notion of equivalence, paraphrase or synonymy. Again, we appeal to simple addition to bring the relationship between ambiguity and paraphrase into appropriate relief. We can say that $5 + 2$ and $4 + 3$ are equivalent, but they are not identical; $5$ and $5$ are identical. From the point of view of instructional meaning, $5 + 2$ simply does not mean the same thing as $4 + 3$, since the $5$ and $2$ have a different constituency from the $4$ and three, but from the point of view of interpreted meaning they both result in the same object of interpretation: $7$. Thus, in the interpretational world of particulars they are synonymous, whereas in the instructional world of generals they are only equivalent. Similarly, in language, we can say that *John is going to eat* and *John will eat* are synonymous, but this is true only in the world of interpretational meaning; they are equivalent in meaning in the world of instructional meaning, but they are certainly not identical, any more than riding a bicycle and riding a unicycle consist in identical habits.

We can define synonymy (or on the syntactic level, paraphrase), therefore, as follows: If two different sets of instructions produce the same interpretational result, such linguistic expressions are paraphrases (or synonyms) of each other.

It is now possible to understand the relationship between ambiguity and paraphrase. On the one hand, ambiguity starts with a single set of instructions but comes to two different interpretations, whereas paraphrase starts with two sets of instructions and comes up with but a single interpretation. Both of these phenomena, recognized from time immemorial, and universally present in all languages, are given fresh understanding by the Peircian notion of semiotics.
Anomaly also finds a ready explanation this paradigm of linguistic analysis as well. Quite simply, we can say that when the set of instructions is internally contradictory, anomaly results. By internal contradiction, we mean that if in following the set of instructions the interpreter can find no interpretational meaning—if there is no object in the referential world (or world of human experience) that can be found in the process of following the instructional meaning—then we have to do with an anomalous expression. Sentences such as John went tall or Go down up, would be examples of such sentences.

If in anomaly we find instructions that are contradictory such that no referential object can be found, in punning we find the opposite: more than one referential object is interpretationally required. When my nascent humorist of a child tells me that the chicken went to the other side of the road to watch the man lay bricks, the pun, lay bricks, has two compulsory interpretations, one based on the kind of laying chickens do and the other on the kind brick masons do. Thus, anomalies, e.g. square circles, (which usually are not particularly funny), are exceptions to normal linguistic behavior in having no ready objective interpretation, whereas the exceptional linguistic behavior of puns reside in the fact that more than one interpretation is required.

It should be kept in mind that up to this point we have referred only to the functional aspect of language, thus ignoring the other highly important level of semiosis: form, or in the case of language, the phonemic system. It is often true of punning that it relies on minimal phonemic differences to call to mind the compulsory plurality of interpretations that are involved in punning, as outlined above. Thus, my seven year old’s joke, ‘what kind of carnival rides does a cemetery have? a rollerghoster,’ included a switch from a voiceless to voiced velar stop, thus forcing the compulsory dual interpretation which characterize puns. The point is, simply, that instructional and interpretational meaning are absolutely necessary to an appropriate understanding of the nature of punning.

Finally, irony and lying also find ready explanation in terms of this semiotic view of meaning. Both lies and ironic statements are constituted of sets of instructions, which when followed, result in an interpretation which does not square with ontological fact. The difference between the two, however, is that with irony, the interpreter of the information has at his disposition immediate access to the ontological world so he can infer that the encoder, who assumedly knows the decoder knows of the discrepancy, can not be serious. A lie, on the other hand, leaves the interpreter only the instructions and his ability to interpret, without immediate access to the objective reality referred to. Thus, if both I and my interlocutor are observing a furious rain storm raging outside the bay window, and if I am standing in my golf clothes and holding my golf clubs, and if I say ‘what a beautiful day it is outside!’ my interlocutor takes my statement to be ironic, because I have given a set of instructions that are verifiable, but at variance with the objective world to which they refer. But if I say ‘what a beautiful day it is outside!’ over the phone in similar meteorological circumstances, where the interpreter has no means of comparing his interpretation with the objective reality of my surroundings, then I have lied.1

To summarize, we can say, simply, that questions of ambiguity, synonymy, anomaly, punning, irony and lying—all of which are apparently universally present in all languages of the world—find clarification and explanation when considered from an instructional/interpretational point of view.

Conclusion

In the traditional view of language it has generally been thought that names are conventional and specific or in rare cases, as e.g. onomatopoeia, they are natural and general. Such a traditional view of names is contradicted by the Peircian view of naming in this: that names are conventional and general in their habitual nature, but that such general types are subject to interpretation which results in natural, specific, interpretive objects. In other words, a general set of instructions is subject to a specific

1It is tempting to say that with lying and with irony, it is the speaker’s intention that counts, and that that is the essential difference. Such a view is insufficiently explanatory, however, since intention is always present in the communicative act. When I set forth a set of instructions to be interpreted by my hearer, it is almost always true that I intend a particular interpretive result; therefore, intention is not unique to lying or irony and cannot be taken as a significant explanation.
This positive view of meaning is much more hopeful than the traditional, pessimistic American linguistic view. Contrast the approach taken in this paper to Bloomfield's view (1933[1960]:140), for example, that 'the statement of meanings is therefore the weak point in language-study, and will remain so until human knowledge advances very far beyond its present state;' that all statements of meaning must 'elude the linguist's power of definition, and in general do not coincide with the meanings of strictly-defined technical terms;' or that 'to accept definitions of meaning, which at best are makeshifts, in place of an identification in formal terms, is to abandon scientific discourse,' [Bloomfield (1933[1960]:266)]. Or consider Chomsky's long career of statements which mirror the Bloomfieldian-based, anti-semantic American structuralist tradition:

The implication that one can construct a grammar with appeal to meaning is totally unsupported. One might with equal justification ask: "How can you construct a grammar with no knowledge of the hair color of speakers?" (1957:93)

There is, at present, no way to show that semantic considerations play a role in the choice of the syntactic or phonological component of grammar or that semantic features (in any significant sense of this term) play a role in the function of syntactic or phonological rules.' (1965:226)

There is a widespread feeling that semantics is the part of language that is really deep and important, and that the study of language is interesting primarily insofar as it contributes to some understanding of these questions of real profundity. There is some merit in this view. Thus, the questions having to do with what people say and why, questions that relate to the 'creative aspect of language use,' are surely of great intrinsic interest, and are also invested with some mystery, in a sense in which the principles of rule ordering in phonology are not. If it were to turn out that the principles of phonology are considerably more sophisticated and intricate than those of semantics, that they enter into nontrivial arguments to explain surprising facts, that they give us much more insight into the nature of the organism, then phonology will be a far deeper theory than semantics, despite the more limited intrinsic interest of the phenomena with which it deals (1975:77).

The scope of the shift to a mentalist or conceptualist interpretation ... included the study of syntax, phonology, and morphology. I think it also includes much of what is misleadingly called 'the semantics of natural language'—I say 'misleadingly' because I think that much of this work is not semantics at all, if by 'semantics' we mean the study of the relation between language and the world—in particular, the study of truth and reference. ... The study of the relation of syntactic structures to models, 'pictures,' and the like, should be regarded as pure syntax, the study of various mental representations, to be supplemented by a theory of the relation these mental objects bear to the world or to the world as it is conceived or believed to be (1986:44,45).

This shockingly negative attitude toward the study of meaning is almost universally present in the history of American linguistics, and hundreds more examples of such ambivalence and negativism could be cited. We suggest that such pessimism is not only unfounded, but in fact detrimental to our basic understanding of language. The traditionally mechanistic, asemantic view of language propounded by American structuralists from Bloomfield to Chomsky, departs from premises that can only result in explanations which can rise no higher than efficient causes, whereas the semiotic, Peircean view of meaning as outlined in this paper necessarily takes into account final causes, for a true understanding of language is in effect an understanding of the end of language, which is to elicit an interpreted meaning via the habits of instructional meaning. An understanding of language is about as likely if meaning is

1I have compiled a list of such statements, and was myself quite surprised at the universality and and consistency of this Bloomfieldian view.
likely if meaning is ignored as an appreciation of chess if the checking of the king is arbitrarily eliminated from consideration.

References


