

9/11: Domain of Meaning/Domain of Language

Dwight Holbrook (School of English, Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań)

A general note

This paper first of all addresses the issue of whether presumptions about definitional parameters of language and meaning can be wedged open to allow for certain cross-disciplinary investigations discussed below, while still maintaining relevance to a linguistic context.

Of course, nobody has a monopoly on how to define such multi-layered terms as "language" and "meaning", especially if posited circumscriptions of acceptable definition (justified as disciplinary) tailor the results of investigation to a pre-determined course, raising questions of overall research objectivity.

The "language and meaning" guidelines in the PLM Seminar handout writes: "The study of language has always been a study of meaning." But what if meaning is essentially to be found in image and action, and not in language nor the chemical/neural processes of the brain? What if the study of language's meaning is essentially a solipsism -- the study of itself? Does a dictionary give meaning or merely a circular argument? The classic example: Explain sight to a blind person. Or to offer the one experiment in this paper, which is only hypothetical: Deprive a person of all five senses *from birth* yet, through computer wizardry, insert a virtual dictionary in his brain with all its definitions. What would the definitions mean? Perhaps a victim of Alzheimer's would come closest to this situation, the point being that meaning lies in experience, not in words. And finally, what if accepted methodology and guidelines for empirical studies obey the same circumscribed presuppositions as traditional notions of language and meaning?

Meaning v. Interpretation

The paradigm we take up in this study of meaning as image/act concerns the 9/11 WTC attack, with its considerable terrain of significance in experience. This paper will not attempt to deal with more than a marginal portion of this terrain, but will concentrate on carving out elements of the meaning, defending the thesis that the locus of such elements are to be found in -- or as a product of -- the event itself. For the purpose of this paper, a necessary distinction is

made between meaning and the rather nebulous word interpretation: the former is reserved for the beyond-word postulates of the event itself, while the latter is confined to the array of individual and social pronouncements on and responses to the event.

By 'beyond word' I do not mean that these postulates cannot be discussed. I mean only that their truth-origin is indefinable, based as it is on inclination, cultural predisposition, values -- all that cannot be resolved by means of debate and ratiocination. Interpretation, by contrast, involves the verbally accessible, the critique. For example, interpretation may describe 9/11 in any of various ways; it may discuss the attackers in terms of "terrorists", "cowards", or "not cowards", but it cannot recreate the experience-meaning components of the event or of its participants. Perhaps by resorting to what in the acting world is called the Stanislavski Method -- involving practical exercises with action and image -- one could.

Purpose/Methodology

The main thrust of the paper will be to focus on several meaning components of the 9/11 attack, specifics linked to the act that have no dictionary definition as regards their truth origin or cognitive understandability as to their empirical grounds, yet which, nevertheless, raise their head in the world and portend possible seismic tremors affecting fundamental truth postulates handed down as part of the legacy of Western civilization.

Three meaning components are addressed:

1. deity and civilian targeting
2. guilt by association
3. torture and information

Other components, such as surveillance, detention, human rights, equality, will not be addressed except as they are implied in the above.

There is no attempt here to present a repeatable experiment or to use a corpus of data to reach conclusions about a linguistic feature. Rather, the paper will be descriptive and proceed by example to show how language gets demarcated by action and image (their role being more

obvious in other disciplines as theater, art, religion), using features of the 9/11 event as examples. By way of conclusion, the paper will suggest that meaning can morph and mutate subsequent to the event itself, leading to adjusted preconceptions and presuppositions.