Meaning from a holistic, evolutionary, socio-cognitive perspective

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The present paper propounds a holistic, evolutionary, socio-cognitive construal of meaning, grounded in a parallel model of understanding and explaining language in general.

Meaning is conceived here as a dynamic, three-dimensional epiphenomenon of human (re)cognizing and interpreting capacities, a particular communicative context, and a socio-cultural situation, which, like language, is circumscribed within history and, what is more, is history in the making. The three interdependent dimensions are, respectively, cognitive, interactive, and intercognitive or intersubjective. Micro constituents of the latter plane are the plethora of interaction events taken jointly, and filtered severally, albeit unconsciously, through the sieve of social functionality, which is 'decided' in parole on the basis of a number of governing social and psychological tendencies. Individual speakers engaged in the hermeneutic process of communication are the rational activators and cells in a relational interaction network, responsible for the maintenance of the conventional and dissemination of the innovative. Their (unconscious) goal is twofold. From the standpoint of the encoder, it is exerting social influence (Keller 1994) via semiotic meaning construction. From the vantage point of the decoder, it is abducing – sometimes by way of negotiation – the speaker-intended meaning of the construct. The 'interpretandum', susceptible of multifarious readings, may diverge not only from the speaker's intentions but also from linguistic conventions, which, if reproduced on a larger scale, may lead to 'resemanticization'. Short-term or small-scale pulsation of the sign is an everyday phenomenon, written into the very marrow of language, and its long-term, or large-scale pulsation, which is a consequence of the former, is the very flexibility which, despite socio-cultural changes, enables us to attain whatever we wish, using the very same, if already different, language.[1] Change, or evolution, which originates as an innovation, is thus an inherent property of language and meaning, which takes shape in cognition, and root in interaction, or which dies from disuse at the stage of (pre)variation.

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[1] The term 'pulsation' is used, e.g., by Adamska-Sałaciak (1992:35). The terms 'short-term' and 'long-term' are used by Itkonen (1982) as modifiers of teleology.

Meaning is thus construed as an encyclopedic, multidimensional phenomenon, whose intercognitive intelligibility issues from tradition and whose inherent dynamism is due to its perpetual, interactive construction via interpretation, guided by the cognitive abilities of the interlocutors, their background knowledge, and their sensitivity to context. Both denotation and connotation are considered equally constitutive of the "emergent", "contextual" (Langacker 1987:157) semasiological structure – constituting meaning on the move. Which focal or peripheral properties are actuated depends on the specific interactive situation. Context, naturally, incorporates, apart from an array of paralinguistic factors, also co-text, viz. syntagms of signs, which acquire their actual reading through mutual interaction (cf. Stubbs 2001). Being ultimately the byproduct of what "second-generation" cognitive linguists, such as Lakoff and Johnson (e.g., 1997, 2002), describe as the "embodied mind", intercognitive meaning can be graphically illustrated by means of a "usage model", developed by Langacker (e.g., 1988c), and modified and supplemented by the present author to make it suitable for the overall construal of meaning espoused here. The paper rounds off with an example.

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