

from: BEYOND THE SYMBOL MODEL (John Stewart, Ed.), 1996.
Albany: SUNY

The Communicative Dictionary:
A Collaborative Theory of Meaning¹

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If a word exists in the forest, and no one is there to hear it, does it have meaning? Our answer is No. Language does not exist in a vacuum and does not occur independently of its users. In this chapter, we will outline a theory that casts meaning as a collaborative creation of interlocutors. First, we will briefly summarize existing theories of meaning, with an emphasis on their limitations for actual language use. Then we will present and illustrate our collaborative theory, concluding with implications for the manipulation of meaning.

Previous Approaches to Meaning²

Meaning is "In" Words

In response to the question, "How do we know what a word means?" most people would probably suggest looking it up in a dictionary. That is, words "have" meanings accessible to us through dictionaries. This intuitive notion is reflected in traditional semantic approaches, which have been realized by reduction to "the study of the semantic *properties* of natural languages" (Crystal, 1991, p. 310; italics added). That is, meaning has been described as metaphorically "contained" in linguistic structure (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 206; Reddy, 1979). Since Aristotle defined words as the smallest significant units of speech (Kess, 1992, p. 196), many linguists and language philosophers have shared the belief that meaning is "in" words (e.g., Jackson, 1990, p. 3; O'Grady & Dobrovolsky, 1992, p. 229; Tough, 1977, p. 31). Nelson (1985, p. 8) summarized this perspective:

Psychological and linguistic models have usually been based on the assumption that words have enduring and conversational meanings that can be represented in static structures. . . .

Plausible as this view is, it has some serious limitations. As Yule (1985, p. 91) pointed out,

we cannot assume that there is some God-given, meaningful connection between a word in a language and an object in the world [because] in order to hold that view, you would be forced to claim that God is an English speaker.

Another problem is that, even within one language, a word can have more than one dictionary definition, which creates potential lexical ambiguity; for example, "We were surprised to see a crane in the empty lot." The polysemic nature of words such as "crane" presents a challenge because all of the possible meanings would have to be "in" the word, and yet there is no way to determine the appropriate meaning by looking at the word in isolation.

In our view, the "meaning in words" approach also fails because it focuses on the abstract nature of language, independent of its use and users. First, far from being the passive consumers of dictionary meanings, language users constantly change word meanings, creating new words and constructing entirely new meanings for old words (which is one reason dictionaries periodically require new editions). The relationship between dictionary users and dictionary editors is a reciprocal rather than unilateral one. Second, there is an implicit assumption in this and most other approaches that we always speak "properly," only using words with accepted meanings in an explicit manner within grammatically constructed sentences. However, anyone who transcribes actual conversation encounters a great deal of what Chomsky called "degenerate speech" (Ellis, 1985, p. 130), such as poor word choices, ungrammatical or incomplete sentences, and even non sequiturs—all of which the interlocutors nonetheless understand and build upon.

Meaning is "In" Words and Their Context

As a result of some of the problems mentioned earlier, there are theories that widen the word container and treat meaning as "in" the word plus its context (cf. Kess, 1992; Yule, 1985). *Linguistic* context refers to the text surrounding the word of interest and can resolve many instances of lexical ambiguity. Thus, in the sentence "I will light the fire," the linguistic con-

text makes it evident that "light" is being used as a verb and therefore does not mean "illumination" (noun) or "of little weight" (adjective). However, linguistic context will not help clarify the meaning of "Visiting relatives can be boring," in which "visiting" illustrates syntactic ambiguity. Presented on its own, this sentence could equally mean "the act of going to visit relatives is boring" or "relatives who come to visit are boring." One way to resolve the meaning would be to invoke the situational context (e.g., the speaker's in-laws are arriving). *Situational* context includes

the total non-linguistic background to a text or utterance, including the immediate situation in which it is used, and the awareness by speaker and hearer of what has been said earlier and of any relevant external beliefs or presuppositions. (Crystal, 1991, p. 79)

One immediate problem is that "total non-linguistic background" excludes almost nothing and is therefore useful mostly as a post hoc explanation. Situational context may narrow the possibilities somewhat, but in many cases we could always find something in the situational context that would "explain" virtually any meaning.

A deeper problem is that at least two distinct kinds of situational context are being blurred together: (a) *static* features of the previous text or physical situation in which a word occurs (e.g., when standing on a ski slope, the word "cat" is likely to mean the machine that grooms the hill), and (b) *dynamic, social* features created within the dialogue by the interlocutors; the latter are central to our theory. The failure to distinguish between these illustrates what Linell (1982) called the "written language bias" in linguistics, which casts language as static and monologic, with an explicit context. Spoken language, in contrast, is dynamic, dialogic, and inherently interactive; we will propose that the participants constantly create, draw upon, and update their own context, on-line.

Meaning is "In" the Speaker's Intention

Do words mean or do people mean? (Nelson, 1985. p. 9)

A third approach, grounded in spoken language, radically relocates meaning as "in" the speaker's intentions (Grice, 1989). That is, knowing what the speaker meant to say is sufficient to determine the meaning of an utterance.

"When I use a word," Humpty Dumpty said in a rather scornful tone, "it means what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less." (Lewis Carroll; from Yule, 1985, p. 92)

This approach solves not only lexical but also syntactic ambiguity without invoking context because, even if an utterance has two possible interpretations, there can only be one intended meaning.³ The speaker knows what he or she meant, and that determines the utterance's meaning.

Speech act theory proposes that messages carry not only content but also intent (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969). That is, meaning is equated with *illocutionary force*, which is what the speaker intends to say with an utterance, regardless of the particular words he or she chooses. In the classic example of "Can you reach the salt?" the speaker is not asking for information about the hearer's arm length but is politely requesting that the hearer pass the salt shaker.

Austin (1962) briefly mentioned *perlocutionary* force, which is what the speaker hopes the effect of the utterance will be on the hearer; however, this notion has received little attention in linguistics (J. Kess, personal communication, 1992). Our criticism is that the hearer, while acknowledged, is still definitely a minor player who simply catches (or misses) the ball that is thrown. Suppose, for example, the hearer responded to "Can you reach the salt?" by answering "Yes" without passing the salt. Presumably, this hearer would be seen as incompetent, and the speaker would have to become explicit about his or her intentions (e.g., "No, I mean please pass me the salt"). Suppose, however, that the speaker's request was not well formed (e.g., one might simply say "Salt?" in an informal dialogue); the hearer might still pass the salt. Who gets credit in this case?

Meaning is Created By and For the Interlocutors

Our talk exchanges do not normally consist of a succession of disconnected remarks, and would not be rational if they did. They are characteristically, to some degree at least, cooperative efforts. . . . (Grice, 1975, p. 45)

Clearly, the change from "meaning-in-words" to "meaning-in-speakers" is a major step from language in the abstract to language in use, but speech act theory implies that the main language user is the speaker. We will take one further step to include the *interlocutor* as well, treating both participants as an inseparable unit. In brief, we will propose that the meaning of an utterance depends on both the speaker and the addressee; it exists only "in" their interaction. Meaning cannot be explained by the *illocutionary* force or *perlocutionary* force of an utterance but by what we might call *interlocutionary* or *interactional* force.

One possibility of such an approach began with experimental research

by Clark and his colleagues. Rather than casting addressees as "mute and invisible" (Clark & Wilkes-Gibbs, 1986, p. 3), they proposed that "speakers and their addressees . . . collaborate with each other moment by moment to try to ensure that what is said is also understood" (Schober & Clark, 1989, p. 211).

In their first experiment, Clark and Wilkes-Gibbs (1986) asked dyads (who were visually separated by a partition) to work together on a task requiring that the speaker be able to refer unambiguously to the odd geometric figures they had to talk about. Over a series of trials with the same figures, the dyads used fewer words and fewer turns to identify each figure. The change in number of turns is particularly important: While the dyad initially took several steps to agree on how to refer to a figure, later they could just use this agreed-upon term to expedite their reference. For example,

Speaker: Okay, and the next one is the person that looks like they're carrying something and it's sticking out to the left. It looks like a hat that's upside down.

Addressee: The guy that's pointing to the left again?

Speaker: Yeah, pointing to the left, that's it. (laughs)

Addressee: Okay. (p. 23)

Later, the speaker could say simply "the guy pointing left." Notice the contributions of both people as the dyad collaboratively created a term to refer to this figure.

In the next phase, Schober and Clark (1989) used the same task to investigate how well third parties would understand the dyad's collaboration. They identified two kinds of listeners: the *addressee*, or interlocutor with whom the speaker is actually talking, and the *overhearer*, or outsider who hears this conversation. As before, the addressees achieved virtually 100 percent accuracy working with the speaker. Each of Schober and Clark's overhearers listened, live or on audiotape, to the dialogue of one speaker and addressee. Some overhearers were in the same room behind another partition, and others had exactly the same information from an audiotape and even the advantage of being able to pause the tape when they wished. However, their average accuracy was significantly less than the addressees achieved. Being present in the room or being able to pause the tape had no benefit, but coming in late (i.e., hearing only the second half of the trials) was much worse (88 to 68%).

There are two crucial empirical findings here: First, words, context,

and speaker's intention are not sufficient explanations because these were identical for both addressees and overhearers, yet overhearers did not understand the meaning of all of the references. There was a significant advantage to being in the original dyad, that is, to having been part of the collaborating pair who tailored the meanings for themselves. Second, the accuracy that overhearers did achieve depended on their access to this collaboration. They did fairly well if they heard it all, but if they missed the actual collaboration in the first few trials, they understood much less of what the speaker was talking about.

Thus, in these two experiments, Clark, Schober, and Wilkes-Gibbs were able to capture evidence of the process of collaboration. They looked closely at how dyads actually performed meaning and found evidence not consistent with previous theories. They showed, both in the dyad's communication over time and in the problem of the overhearers, that unique meaning was being created that could only be attributed to the moment-by-moment interaction.

Clark and Schaefer (1987) identified a unit of conversation they called a *contribution*, which is accomplished by speaker and addressee together, a process that consists of a minimum of three parts:

(a) A presents *u* for B to consider.

(b) B accepts *u*.

(c) A accepts that B accepts *u*.

During the presentation phase, A places her utterance *u* into consideration.

During the acceptance phase, B needs to accept *u* in a *unilateral* acceptance.

For *mutual* acceptance, however, A must accept that B has actually understood. (p. 127)

As will be seen, we will apply these three steps to the establishment of meaning.

Summary of Previous Research: Perspectives on Meaning

We view this historical sequence of theories as a refinement of perspective on how meaning exists and for whom. To say that words or words-in-context "contain" meaning is to take what we call an entirely *outsider* perspective. Everyone stands outside the words (and their context), which have encapsulated meanings completely independent of their users. We are all outsiders who observe or manipulate these containers. The shift to speaker's intention creates the speaker as an *insider* with special authority

on what the meaning is. Words are not independent, preexisting capsules; the speaker determines what they mean. The rest of us, including the addressee, remain outsiders, who must figure out (and defer to) the speaker's intended meaning. The work of Clark's group clearly demonstrates that both the speaker and addressee are insiders, creating their meanings together, and the rest of us (as overhearers) are always outsiders.

We propose that the insider and outsider perspectives always coexist, that both are valid, and both are common in our everyday experiences. We speak with others, and we overhear others speaking. When conversing in a group, we can actively take part in a dialogue (as an insider) and then be a third party to one (an outsider). As interlocutors, we are the insiders, and the ultimate criterion for the meaning of our words and actions is our understanding and use of them; it cannot be imposed from outside. When we are talking with another person, the meaning we create and accept together *is* the meaning of our words and actions. When we are outsiders observing or overhearing people talk, our best chance at inferring their meaning is by observing their exchanges. In the next section, we propose that an outsider must observe at least three utterances by speaker and addressee to understand their meaning. Later, we will return to the insider perspective.

Semantic Collaboration

Suppose we observe the following exchange between a couple at dinner:

A: [looking up] Uhhh, salt?

At this point, the question could have several plausible meanings: A is unsure that he wants salt; he wonders if B thinks that salt is needed; he is asking whether any salt is available; he is offering her salt; he is asking whether the substance available is indeed salt or whether the name for the substance (in English) is salt. A speech-act theorist might hypothesize a request for salt, albeit a poorly formed one. As outsiders, we must be officially undecided, based on the data available. The next utterance is:

B: Here [passing salt shaker].

The interlocutor reacts as if A had requested salt, ignoring all other meanings. As outsiders, the array of possible meanings has been considerably narrowed for us. We can now be fairly sure that A meant "Please pass me

the salt." It is vital to note that we are inferring this meaning retroactively and from B's reaction as much as from A's utterance. We also need the next step:

A: [taking it] Thanks.

The speaker's word and action confirm that he had indeed meant to request that B pass the salt. If this were not the case, A would have said something like "No, I meant you should add some salt" or "No, I wondered whether you think this needs salt?" or the like. Because of these possibilities, the third step is essential for us, as overhearers, to be reasonably sure we have understood.

Thus, the *effective meaning* of an utterance is only known to us by observing a process of *semantic collaboration* that consists of three steps in a fixed order:

1. Utterance
2. Reaction
3. Confirmation

Step 1 is A's utterance, of which we wish to know the meaning. Utterances can be defined in the linguistic sense as "a stretch of speech about which no assumptions have been made in terms of linguistic theory" (Crystal, 1991, p. 367) or simply as "things spoken" (Swannell, 1986, p. 622). In addition to this broad linguistic definition, we will also include all nonverbal communicative acts (i.e., excluding adaptors). Thus we include such communicative acts as gestures, facial displays, eye contact, intonation, and so on (Bavelas & Chovil, 1993), including those that occur without words. In step 1, Interlocutor A offers the utterance.

Step 2 is B's reaction to the utterance. Any utterance of A's, regardless of its form, has a range of possible interpretations. Even putting aside unintelligible, disordered, or obstructed speech (for which clarification might be requested), it is probably impossible to utter anything in conversation that has only one interpretation. The possible interpretations include one or more literal meanings that a dictionary would permit and could be multiplied by the range of interpretations that each listener could imagine. Interlocutor B responds (verbally and/or nonverbally), and this reaction reflects one of the possible interpretations. It may consist of a request for clarification, a formulation or reformulation (Davis, 1986, p. 47), or other explicit comment, but most often it will simply be appropriate continuation. That is, B goes on as if there were one clear meaning.

usually building on A's utterance. However, considering the range of possible interpretations and therefore reactions, there is also a powerful potential for misinterpretation at this point. How do we know their communication was successful? Was the reaction appropriate?

In step 3, Interlocutor A confirms (verbally and/or nonverbally) the appropriateness or inappropriateness of Interlocutor B's reaction to A's original utterance. Confirmation may be explicit or, more commonly, may also be exhibited by appropriate continuation, in which no objection is offered to the reaction. A builds on B's reaction, and dialogue proceeds smoothly and on track. The observer now understands what is meant. For the insiders, the steps of the "salt" exchange may easily have passed unnoticed, with no mystery or plausible alternatives. Still, step 3 was crucial to their semantic collaboration and their accomplishment of effective meaning because both A and B must give observable evidence ("mutual acceptance") of a shared meaning. The process of semantic collaboration is illustrated in Figure 1. When all three of these steps are in alignment, the effective meaning of the utterance has been accomplished, and communication is thus deemed successful.

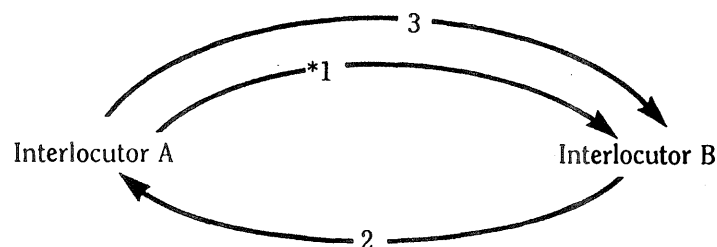


Figure 1. The process of semantic collaboration

The earlier description of semantic collaboration has several corollaries that should be made explicit:

1. All utterances are subject to semantic collaboration to establish their effective meaning.
2. In communication, only effective meaning matters: literal translations of utterances could be imposed linguistically but have no intrinsic communicative status.
3. Our ability to use or to understand a wide variety of figurative, indirect, and colloquial forms of language (metaphor, humour, polite requests, etc.) depends on the process of semantic collaboration.

4. When the collaboration is successful, there will be only one effective meaning for that utterance (at that time). An apparent exception is irony, but Coates (1993) has shown that, in natural dialogue, the interlocutors actually collaborate on one effective meaning, which is an inversion of the usual meaning.
5. Violation of steps 2 or 3 of semantic collaboration interferes with the accomplishment of effective meaning. We deem this unsuccessful communication because there is no agreed-upon meaning. Utterances presented under these conditions are prone to misinterpretation and even manipulation.

The reader may have noticed that, with its inclusion of the addressee, the collaborative theory also becomes potentially more behavioral than earlier approaches. That is, to include both speaker and addressee requires either that we jump from one mind to the other or that we step outside to describe the observable manifestations of their communication. We will take the latter approach, which contrasts with an intrapsychic approach as follows:

| Observable Process (outsider view) | Inferred Mental Cause (insider view) |
|---------------------------------------|--|
| 1. Utterance | 1. Speaker's intended meaning |
| 2. Reaction | 2. Addressee's interpretation of the underlying meaning |
| 3. Confirmation | 3. Speaker's interpretation of addressee's understanding |

Although the focus of our theory is on observable social interactions, it neither precludes the reality of the internal processing of language nor the validity of the effects that such workings have on our use of language. Indeed, these two approaches (observable and inferred) can be seen as compatible and even complementary. However, to focus solely on a cognitive or psycholinguistic perspective can be problematic when analysing actual communication. Often the fact that communication is inherently social and observable is forgotten or ignored. For example, the speaker's intended meaning often has primacy in traditional approaches, but it is not an observable process. Unless one is a mind-reader, there are only two ways to know the intended meaning of an utterance; one is either (a) the speaker or (b) an observer or participant in the process of semantic collaboration. As we pointed out in the "Uhhh, salt?" example at the beginning of this section, we have a better chance of inferring A's meaning from B's

reaction and A's confirmation than we would from speculating about A's initial utterance in isolation.

To summarize this section, our title suggests a new conception of *dictionary*, which challenges the primacy of a dictionary in its standard form as a reference for use in everyday communication. There are classically two ways to characterize dictionaries in linguistics: The *standard dictionary* is a bound, alphabetized collection of words that constitute a language, with their individual definitions and grammatical properties; it may also include examples of applications for each word. The *mental lexicon* (according to psycholinguists) is the cognitive form of the standard dictionary. This is the theoretical dictionary in each person's mind that "contains" the words and images (cognitions) of his or her experience.

The *communicative dictionary* reflects the effective meanings accomplished through semantic collaboration. This metaphorical dictionary is both variable and transient; that is, it may be different for every dyad and may even disappear as soon as they have finished a conversation. The process of semantic collaboration creates a communicative dictionary, but the "definitions" in this metaphorical dictionary are written in disappearing ink, which will fade with the life of the interaction but can be revived by reuse. Therefore, the communicative dictionary is always being created and recreated by dyads within the contexts of infinite interactions. Common ground (Clark & Marshall, 1981) between interlocutors may consist of expedited (re)collaboration of effective meaning during subsequent interactions.

As we suggested earlier, standard dictionaries can be thought of as part of the process we are describing. Consider that people were speaking English long before the first formal dictionaries in the eighteenth century. These dictionaries simply documented the meanings of words as they were being used at that time. However, people kept using words and, in the process, changing meanings as well as creating new words, which constantly necessitated new editions and even new kinds of dictionaries. This is a larger-scale version of the same process we are describing, in which people collaboratively change and even create the meanings of words. Dictionaries may eventually record some of these changes. Thus, compiling a standard dictionary is like taking still photographs of each of the major scenes in a moving picture. These photographs would not include how the movie got from one scene to the next (nor any of the minor scenes). Useful as they are, standard dictionaries are always limited to describing what a meaning has become after a sufficient number of people have used it for a sufficient amount of time (necessarily an outsider perspective). They never attempt to capture the innumerable transient and idiosyncratic uses in all of the conversations that occur at any given moment. Our metaphor of a

communicative dictionary is an attempt to legitimate these "insider" usages and especially to draw attention to the process that creates them.

To summarize, "language" is an abstraction; it is realized only in its actual and dynamic form, communication. Indeed, the nature of language (and meaning) can only truly be elucidated through analysis of communicative acts. The collaborative theory of meaning proposes that *effective meaning is accomplished by interlocutors through the process of semantic collaboration, and this mutually accepted effective meaning exists within the life of the interaction*. Their interaction is therefore the necessary context in which interlocutors accomplish the effective meaning of communication. Although we can attempt to communicate in the absence of this process, mutually agreed-upon (and therefore useful) meaning can only be established when the conditions of semantic collaboration are satisfied in their entirety.

Empirical Examples of the Model

This section illustrates, specifies, and expands the collaborative theory with examples from naturalistic observation and from the media; the only restriction was that examples could not be hypothetical. There are three groups of examples, illustrating *implicit* semantic collaboration, *explicit* semantic collaboration, and *problematic* semantic collaboration. For the sake of simplicity, A's first utterance (marked *A:) will always be the focus, that is, the one whose effective meaning is being negotiated. However, we want to emphasize our view that this process is actually continuous and overlapping throughout an interaction; that is, reactions and confirmations are also utterances and equally subject to semantic collaboration.

In reading these examples, the reader can either follow the step-by-step annotations or first scan the three-part sequence (in bold face) and then go back to the annotations. The first approach emphasizes the outsider view and the inadequacy of a "meaning in words" approach, while the second shows how easily meaning is accomplished in practice because the reader will usually understand the effective meaning from the entire sequence.

Case A: Implicit Semantic Collaboration

These cases represent the natural, easy flow of communication in which effective meaning is negotiated or accomplished implicitly, without the need for explicit expansion or explanation of the utterance. Reaction and confirmation are often simply appropriate continuations in the form of

another utterance; mutual understanding can be inferred by the absence of an objection. Successive utterances commonly proceed in this manner, as effective meanings are continually negotiated throughout the life of the interaction. The discourse flows smoothly, as if there were nothing to negotiate:

1. Two students entered a university computer lab where, in contrast to its usual state of occupancy, there were few students working:

*A: Wow, there's no one here!

The literal translation of this utterance is an exclamation that there are no other people present in the room, and A is surprised at this uncharacteristic state. From a quick observation, it is evident that there are in fact some people in the room; therefore A's literal utterance is untrue.

B: Well, it's Friday.

B's reaction appears to be a non sequitur; it has no relation to A's initial utterance. If B had taken A's utterance literally, the reaction would have been something like "Can't you see that person?" or "How can you say that? There are five people in here!" Instead, B may be treating A's utterance as hyperbole and surprise at the *relative* emptiness of the room and offering a possible explanation for this.⁴

A: Yeah, I guess everyone's started the weekend already.

A confirms the appropriateness of B's reaction by accepting and elaborating B's explanation that the impending weekend is responsible for the occupancy rate. Therefore, the effective meaning of "Wow, there's no one here!" = *"Isn't it surprising that there are so few people here working as opposed to the usual rate of occupancy, and I wonder what is responsible for this difference?"*

2. According to Bavelas, Black, Chovil, and Mullett (1990) equivocation is purposefully ambiguous language. These authors proposed that

equivocation may blunt the impact of a message, but we do not expect it to change the denotative meaning. Like any other indirect speech act . . . the meaning of an equivocal message should be clear to competent speakers of the language. (p. 137)

However, the method used by Bavelas et al. (1990) focused only on an initial question and the equivocal response, which we would consider the

utterance whose effective meaning is being negotiated. They did not study real dyads, which would have included B's reaction and A's confirmation, so it is not possible to know which of the interpretations was confirmed by the speaker. We would modify their proposal to say that the effective meaning of an equivocation is clear only if it is accomplished through semantic collaboration. An example of equivocation in an exchange between siblings will illustrate this process:

B: Does my hair really need help?

*A: Oh, it's not that bad.

The literal meaning of A's utterance is that something ("it") cannot be described as bad in comparison with something else. Given that "it" refers to B's hair, an appropriate response to this literal translation would be for B to express pleasure that his hair is good or to thank A for the compliment.

B: Not THAT bad? Oh, damn! (goes to wash it)

B reacts as if A had said that his hair does *not* look good because he curses and goes off to remedy the situation.

A: Well, yah, you might want to fix it. (laughs)

A confirms this interpretation by agreeing that he should wash his hair after all. Therefore, the effective meaning of "Oh, it's not that bad" = *"You could get by without washing your hair, but it looks like it needs it."* Her original utterance was equivocal and ambiguous, that is, "not bad" does not equal "good" and "not THAT bad" is an ambiguous contrast point. B reacted to A's utterance as if it meant that he should fix his hair, that is, it was in fact "bad," so we can see that this example follows the definition of equivocation given earlier.

3. Two friends were outside a professor's office, and one was checking her posted grade. When she located her score, she said:

*A: Oh, I'm dead meat!

The literal meaning is that A has suddenly proclaimed that she is the flesh of a carcass. This is obviously not a logical statement in this or any context. Even treated as an idiom, the phrase simply means she is not in a good state; it does not say exactly how or why.

B: Did you at least pass?

B reacts to A's utterance as if it were a statement regarding A's academic performance in the course, that is, the metaphor "*my performance in the course has killed me!*" because B asks A about the grade.

A: I needed to do a lot better than that.

A confirms B's reaction to this metaphor by adding relevant information. Therefore, the effective meaning of "Oh, I'm dead meat!" = "*I am in trouble because my grade reflects that I have performed poorly in this course when I needed to do well.*" This example contrasts directly with example 4, later, of explicit semantic collaboration on the metaphorical use of "dead."

Space limits preclude our illustrating implicit semantic collaboration of nonverbal acts, but an example can be found in Bavelas and Coates (1992, pp. 302-3) and another in Bavelas, Chovil, Coates, and Roe (in press, pp. 9-10).

Case B: Explicit Semantic Collaboration

Sometimes the effective meaning of an utterance is not accomplished implicitly. Instead, B's reaction is to request explicit clarification of A's utterance or parts of it, for example, with "What does that mean?" "What do you mean (to say) by that?" or "I'm sorry, I don't follow you." In these cases, we have access to an insider's view.

4. The following example illustrates explicit semantic collaboration about different metaphorical uses of the word "dead." The dyad negotiated the effective meaning using a five-step sequence. The setting was outside a classroom where students were waiting to write an exam. Two friends were talking, and one who appeared to be either anxious or tired (or both) began the exchange:

A: Oh, I am so dead!

The literal meaning of this statement is that A is no longer alive, which is obviously not true because A is present and talking to B.

B: You're dead?

This reaction indicates that B understands that A did not literally mean that she is dead (because B did not say "What do you mean? You're alive!"), but B also communicates through use of rising intonation (ques-

tion) that it is unclear to her which metaphorical translation of "dead" is appropriate in this situation.

A: Totally dead.

A reiterates her original statement and appears not to realize that B needs further clarification of this term.

B: Are you DEAD for this exam or are you DEAD tired?

B takes the initiative and explicitly asks A to clarify the meaning of her utterance.

A: Well, both, but for this exam mostly.

A indicates that both of B's reactions to "dead" are appropriate (that is, very tired *and* likely to do poorly on the exam) but that the latter reaction is most appropriate.

B: Oh, don't worry, I'm sure you'll do fine.

Having accomplished the effective meaning of "dead" as "Oh, I'm so dead!" = "*I'm going to perform poorly in writing this exam!*" B proceeds appropriately.

5. A father (B) and a daughter (A) were sitting in a public place and starting to eat their ice cream cones:

*A: (loudly) Daddy, don't beat me!

The most obvious literal meaning of A's utterance is that B is imploring her father not to hit her.

B: (looking around nervously) WHAT, honey?!

B reacts as if he interprets the literal meaning and fears that others around them might similarly interpret A's remark. However, A's utterance does not make sense to him, so he asks for clarification (perhaps not only for himself but for those around him, too).

A: You always beat me!

A reiterates and emphasizes her first statement. She apparently does not understand that B needs clarification and interprets "WHAT, honey?!" as a request for a simple paraphrase of her initial statement.

B: What do you mean?

B still does not appear to understand what A means to say and becomes very explicit to get the information he needs from his daughter.

A: You always finish your ice cream cone first!

A responds to his request to explain what she means and finally explicates her initial utterance.

B: Oh! (displays relief)

B reacts to A's explanation as if he understands what A meant, and he indicates that he is relieved that he had initially interpreted her utterance in an inappropriate way.

A: (smiles, eats ice cream)

A confirms that B has now interpreted her utterance appropriately because she continues in her goal of finishing her ice cream faster than her father. Therefore, the effective meaning of "Daddy, don't beat me!" = *"Daddy, eat your ice cream cone slowly so that you don't finish before me."*

Case C: Problematic Semantic Collaboration

Cases that lack the alignment of the three steps of semantic collaboration are problematic because there is no clear negotiation of an utterance, and therefore effective meaning is not accomplished. Furthermore, when the three steps cannot be aligned because the setting is noncollaborative—for example, when utterances are presented through unilateral (monologic) media or in situations where power differences prevent collaboration—then misinterpretations and even manipulation may occur. These are situations where one person is "kept at bay." The following examples illustrate the inconclusive nature of utterances for which effective meaning has not been mutually accomplished, as a result of an interference with or violation of semantic collaboration.

6. This example is from an actual interaction between a pilot (B) and co-pilot (A) just prior to a fatal commercial plane crash (Goguen & Linde, 1981). The dialogue was recorded on the "black box" and was recovered at the crash site. Both A and B realized that they were lost and in trouble, and the co-pilot was trying to ascertain the plane's location:

*A: Do you have any idea of what the frequency of the Paris VOR is?

The literal meaning of A's utterance is a request for specific information about B's knowledge of the VOR (a ground radar system that would help establish the plane's location). It can be hypothesized that A is indirectly suggesting that they use the VOR. An appropriate response to the indirect request would be for B to give A the frequency or even to tune into the VOR himself. Instead, he responded:

B: Nope, don't really give a [expletive deleted].

B reacts to the literal meaning of A's utterance, that is, he indicates that he does not have the information about the VOR. Indeed, he reacts as if the co-pilot has also asked whether he *cared* about knowing the VOR frequency.

A: (silence)

Perhaps because of their difference in power and authority in the cockpit, A does not confirm B's reaction as inappropriate, nor does he initiate explicit negotiation. In fact, A's dropping the subject could be interpreted as a confirmation that B's reaction was appropriate and that A has received the information he was seeking. Therefore, the effective meaning of "Do you know what the frequency of the Paris VOR is?" was left tragically unresolved.

7. Television is a medium that particularly interferes with the process of semantic collaboration because it does not permit step 3 (A's confirmation of B's reaction) to occur. B was watching a newscast about a local businessman who was charged with murder. The accused's business partner (A) was being interviewed:

*A: He was a conscientious, fair, honest businessman on most of the business deals that he handled.

The literal meaning of A's utterance is that the accused possessed honourable qualities as a businessman most of the time. However, the construction of his praise is odd because A implies that the accused was not necessarily honourable in all of his business deals. This construction may have been used in order to defend the accused while still telling the truth (i.e., an equivocation). Alternatively, it may simply be that A does not have information on all of his partner's business deals, so he is being very precise in what he says.

B: (Viewing at home) Oh, MOST of the deals he handled!

B seems to notice that A may have been "waffling," and she focuses on that possible meaning, that is, that the accused was dishonest in some of his business dealings. Because the medium precludes reciprocal communication, A is not aware of B's reaction. Therefore, he is unable to confirm B's reaction as appropriate or inappropriate, and they could not accomplish an effective meaning.

8. Politicians are notorious for manipulating language for their own benefit. One means of accomplishing this goal is to place themselves in situations where communication is inherently problematic, that is, where the steps of semantic collaboration are violated. The following is an example of an interaction between then-Prime Minister Brian Mulroney (A) and a reporter (B) about his planned ceremonial trip to the United States at a time when he had major problems in Canada:

B: Why are you going to the signing of the NAFTA agreement when you are not required to be there?

*A: Would you have me deny an invitation from the president of the most important country in the world?

The literal meaning of A's question is to ask whether B would feel it appropriate for the prime minister to turn down an invitation from the president of the most important country in the world (referring to George Bush and the United States). Note, however, that this utterance is not only an equivocation (i.e., A answers B's question with a question), but it also manipulates the issue by inventing an offense to George Bush and placing responsibility for this squarely on the reporter. Finally, A clearly implies that Canada (and its people) are less important than the United States (and its people). However, because of the setting, which made challenging the person holding the press conference difficult, steps 2 and 3 did not occur. Not only the reporter but also the audience viewing on television (a "col-

lective B") were unable to react effectively to A's utterance, so A did not have to confirm any of their possible reactions. In a sense, A "got away with" his statement because there was no opportunity for semantic collaboration; he avoided taking responsibility for the negative implications of his utterance. We propose that many politicians are able to manipulate language so astutely in part because they recognize the power of using ambiguous language in contexts where they will not have to answer directly for their comments, that is, when semantic collaboration is not possible.

9. A final example of problematic semantic collaboration expands on the ability of politicians to manipulate language to avoid responsibility for their statements. Former federal cabinet minister John Crosbie quipped, in a 1990 after-dinner speech in Victoria, that Sheila Copps's Liberal leadership bid reminded him of a song that goes:

*A: "Pass me the tequila, Sheila, and lie down and love me again."

The literal meaning of A's utterance is that Crosbie is having an affair with Copps and wants her to give him some tequila and to have sexual intercourse with him again. Among the reasons that this is an egregiously offensive and inappropriate comment are that (a) Crosbie and Copps are not in an intimate relationship, so his insinuation is slanderous; (b) he insults her abilities as a possible candidate by casting her in an inferior role (servant, concubine) to him; and (c) he is implying, metaphorically, that because Copps is a woman, her worth is based on her ability to satisfy a man sexually, and she should not waste her time vying for a leadership position. It is crucial to our point that the context in which the utterance was made (an after-dinner speech at which Copps was not present) and then the medium in which it was subsequently reported (newspaper) did not permit a direct reaction to A's utterance. Had he made the remark in the House of Commons, Copps would certainly have let him know her reaction, as she had done with considerable wit on similar past occasions. When Crosbie was later confronted with the widespread reaction that his remark was offensive and inappropriate, he offered the following explanation (renegotiation or confirmation):

A: I was only joking!

That is, he indicated that the collective B reaction was inappropriate. This is a case where those who choose not to believe Crosbie's explanation refuse to collaborate on the effective meaning of his initial utterance; that is,

we can never agree on its meaning. The opportunity for successful collaboration reached an impasse and was abandoned.

All of these examples demonstrate the importance of semantic collaboration for accomplishing the effective meaning of utterances in successful communication. Whereas the implicit and explicit examples of semantic collaboration illustrate the complete process, the problematic examples highlight the importance of alignment of all three steps and how misinterpretation and manipulation can result when this condition is not met. Indeed, these were the instances that originally led to our interest in the problem of meaning and to the development of this theory. The remainder of this chapter is devoted to consideration of problematic semantic collaboration in many forms of communication.

Imposing Meaning

An important feature of examples 6 to 9 is that one person's reaction was, effectively, enforced silence. In each case, we would argue, this was because that person (usually B) was denied the opportunity to collaborate, for one (or both) of two important reasons: hierarchical power or the medium of communication. The pilot's authority silenced the co-pilot; the reporter's status in a press conference made it difficult to object to the prime minister's statements; the medium of television made it obviously impossible for the viewer to negotiate the meaning of "most of his deals"; and the social setting of John Crosbie's speech operated in the same way, to exclude the listeners' reaction.⁵

If meaning were "in" words, contexts, or speaker's intentions, the reason for the silence would be irrelevant because A's utterance would have an intrinsic meaning independent of B's reaction, opinion, or even presence. However, in our view, B's right to participate in the collaboration is vital. If B's reaction is precluded, then the sequence can become:

1. Utterance
2. *Imposed* reaction
3. *Pseudo*-confirmation

all of which are controlled by A. When B is silenced, A controls the entire process and is imposing meaning rather than collaborating on meaning, making an inherently social process unilateral.

Propaganda is an important instance of this imposition of meaning. A recent example was the apparently innocuous choice of name for the orga-

nization that the federal government established to advocate support for the "Yes" side in the 1992 constitutional referendum; they called themselves the "Canada Committee." This name equated a "yes" vote with Canada itself, thereby implying that a person who voted "no" on the referendum was not a (real) Canadian. The other implication was that a "yes" vote would keep Canada together as one country, while a "no" vote was a vote against the country—rather than a vote against a particular set of constitutional amendments. This is a case of a subtly imposed meaning, which there was no opportunity to reject or even challenge.

Certain forms of communication are inherently problematic because they are unilateral in nature: Television, radio, newspapers, books and articles, even art—in brief, "the media"—all eliminate the opportunity for the listener to respond immediately or effectively. The individual Bs are limited to letters to the editor, call-in programs, or reliance on a like-minded editorial commentator to challenge the original utterance. Even if these reactions eventually reach an audible threshold of collective B reaction (i.e., objection), A always has a "back door" to retreat through: "I was just joking!" or "You misunderstood me." Once the listener's reaction has been precluded, the collaborative process is fractionated, and meaning becomes instead an individual interpretive process. When the process can no longer be collaborative, the potential for manipulation of interpretations is omnipresent.

For example, advertising slogans can sculpt meanings not only about the product but about people and the world around them; for example, "Be young, have fun, drink Pepsi!" or "Don't hate me because I'm beautiful!" Notice that these ads do not characterize the product (a soft drink and a shampoo) at all. Rather they impose a link between use of the product and qualities that people might gain by using them (youth, happiness, beauty). Moreover, they imply that these particular personal qualities are everyone's ultimate goal; why not "Be mature, be serious, drink Pepsi"? And suppose, instead of a unilateral ad, a stranger said to you in person, "Don't hate me because I'm beautiful." You as B might have a variety of reactions, including explicit semantic collaboration, such as

So, are you saying that you're beautiful, I'm not, and that I am so superficial, insecure, and completely lacking in integrity as to be concerned only with your appearance? Do I look like I care? And, by the way, who invited you?

Or, simply,

Why would I, when there are clearly so many other reasons to?

When semantic collaboration is precluded, these kinds of advertising slogans and their connotations can become accepted as true because no one has or takes the opportunity to question the validity or basis of their claims; acceptance is inferred from the listeners' imposed silence and taken as acceptance or appropriate continuation. We view this use of the media to impose views on people and to regulate both the information they receive and their ability to respond as an extension of what Chomsky (1992) called "manufacturing consent."

Our final application concerns the evolution of "politically correct" language. For example, the term "man" was long accepted (or imposed) as meaning "humans" or "people," both male and female. At some point, this usage was questioned; were women collectively being excluded, subsumed, or treated as an exception to the male norm? Clearly, any members of a group (based on gender, race, handicap, sexual orientation, etc.) who are being described have a legitimate desire and right to collaborate on the terms used to describe them. For example, in the United States, there has been a change from "Coloreds" to "Negroes" to "Blacks" to "Afro-Americans" to "African Americans." People are still in the process of negotiating mutually acceptable terms for referring to each other; is the solution to impose a "politically correct" alternative?

To us, it is important and fascinating that people sometimes call themselves "niggers," "fags," or "bitches"—all terms they would presumably object to an outsider using for them. This apparent contradiction derives from the false idea that the term itself "has" an offensive meaning. That is, to see these terms as *intrinsically* offensive is the same as saying that they "contain" offensive meanings. Our alternative view is that their meaning is and will remain open to collaboration. For example, if the person chooses to use such a term in reference to himself or herself among friends, with appropriate reaction and confirmation that the term is not being used for the purpose of degradation, then the effective meaning is *not* offensive and indeed is quite different from the effective meaning of the same term in another interaction. This state of affairs may bother those who wish to legislate for or against specific, literal terms, but to us that goal is futile. We can only work together within interactions, focusing on mutual understanding as the desired goal of communication.

The ultimate goal of communication is the exchange of meaningful messages. However, when semantic collaboration is problematic, regardless of the reasons, communication serves to divide people instead of bringing them together. This collaborative theory of meaning not only redefines how meaning is accomplished in communication but highlights the interlocutors' actual, immediate interaction as the process by which language has meaning. There are no right or wrong terms or constructions in

communication, simply a need to collaborate. It is neither the speaker's sole responsibility to speak clearly and explicitly nor is it the addressee's sole responsibility to read the speaker's mind in order to interpret utterances appropriately. Instead, both are responsible for ensuring that collaboration occurs. The collaborative approach proposes that interlocutors must actively cooperate and share responsibility for the success or failure of communication.

Notes

1. This chapter is adapted from Roberts (1993). We are grateful to Dr. Herbert H. Clark for his detailed comments on our penultimate version.
2. The literature on meaning is obviously an extensive one, whereas our review will select only certain features. For a similar review, in more detail, see Kess (1992); for an analysis of the need to move past individually based theories of meaning, see Clark (1992).
3. With the possible exception of puns and double entendres.
4. We should re-emphasize here that we are not describing or speculating about the cognitive process whereby B came to this interpretation; our interest is the observable process of collaboration.
5. Enforced silence in these situations is fundamentally different from other kinds of silence in natural dialogue. For example, spontaneous silence can be a form of appropriate continuation, indicating acceptance because both people have had the opportunity to object or negotiate. Alternatively, spontaneous silence after an explicit request for a reply (e.g., "Do you forgive me?") can be an equivocation (Bavelas et al., 1990, p. 168). We are focusing here on situations that *constrain* the other person(s) to silence.

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