

T E N T H

B. AUBREY FISHER • MEMORIAL LECTURE

A N N I V E R S A R Y

**RECLAIMING
COMMUNICATIVE
MEANING**

DONALD G. ELLIS

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RECLAIMING COMMUNICATIVE MEANING

DONALD G. ELLIS

I have always been troubled by an incongruity in communication studies. The incongruity is that we continually claim the complexity, multidimensionality, subtlety, and difficulty of communication; and we identify all sorts of problems that are communication problems. But it remains the case that anyone can communicate; we all engage in highly competent and successful communication everyday. We read, write, organize, instruct, charm, edify, advise, enlighten, announce, declare, and get a reliable fix on meaning everyday. How do we do this? How do we accomplish meaning?

My purpose tonight is to respond to a class of theorists who suggest that mastering meaning is impossible because of linguistic or historical forces that cannot be controlled. Literary theorists such as Derrida (1976), Foucault (1984), and Barthes (1975), and more communication oriented theorists such as Deetz (1982), Bochner (1985), Grossberg (1993), and Stewart (1986) are representative of such a perspective. There are of course important distinctions among all these theorists, but I will make no attempt to elaborate on them.

Despite their diversities each represents a shared body of reflections about the intractability of meaning. Each represents some aspect of the view that contexts, or power, or ideology, or history dissolves the possibility of fixing meaning.

The scheme to reduce all human activity to hermeneutical terms is certainly afoot. There are many who readily deny the possibility of meaning and are quick to invoke "textuality." This movement to the irrational is interesting to me. In my darker moments I see it as quite consistent with a world increasingly filled with faith healers and new age spiritualists who believe in out-of-body experiences, abduction by aliens, and past-lives psychotherapy.

But in my lighter moments I think those who counsel this despair have simply let a cynicism rather than an affirmativism get the best of them. And despite claims that meaning is not achievable, the preponderance of evidence is to the contrary.

My task tonight is to defend the status of meaning by taking a fresh look at some issues with respect to communicative meaning. My task is to reclaim communicative meaning. The following three issues organize

my thoughts: We must (1) demonstrate that the assumption of reliable meaning is a requirement for the discipline of communication. Then (2) we must formulate an epistemology that can account for meaning, and (3) reexamine some arguments for how meanings might be extracted from messages. This presentation is certainly *not* an argument that meaning is ontologically objective; nor is it the position herein that there is a singular "correct" meaning of messages. I am not suggesting that words "point" to reality in some ostensive manner. Such positions are not sustainable. I do hope to make space, however, for an argument that the process of communication is designed to produce meaning and that meaning is recoverable. I turn now to my first point that the assumption of meaning is a requirement for communication.

SEMANTIC REALISM

There is simply no such thing as communication, and certainly no such thing as a study or discipline of communication, without assuming the reality of meaning. There is no such thing as communication without the assumption that we communally inhabit a shared world of

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meanings, a world of *real* meanings amongst which we live and use, even if they are imperfect. The mere act of communication is only possible when we have common access to the semantic order of things.

Our commitment to meaning that lies behind messages is indispensable any time we move into the domain of publicly accessible communal interaction about a shared world. In other words, any time we read, write, or utilize any medium of communication we assume semantic realism. We could not even imagine any activity called communication without the assumption of a common world of meaning (semantic realism) to which we direct our individual conceptions. The objective status of this common world of meaning is an assumption, not an empirical finding. We are able to accomplish actual communication because we submit to a type of contract agreeing upon the shared world of meaning.

In a sense, when we communicate we intend to objectify. We intend to use language and a host of pragmatic features to muddle around in this shared world of meaning and make some decisions about how a speaker and hearer (or writer and reader) can coordinate their conceptions. In many cases this muddling around results in quite automatic efficiency. Langer's (1992) and Kellermann's (1992) arguments and evidence that much communication is primarily automatic is relevant here. They argue that the reservoir of meaning is simply there for community use and the extent to which so many meanings

occur with mechanical regularity is evidence of the efficiency of the shared world of meaning. When I speak or write about something—even on the basis of my own idiosyncrasies—I speak or write about the “real” thing by virtue of the conventions governing reference. Even if I am speaking about a “ghost” I am speaking about a *real* ghost by virtue of our inter-personally shared world of meaning.

Semantic realism is not mere agreement on referential meaning. Such agreement would be merely an a posteriori agreement, while our commitment to semantic realism puts things on an a priori basis. We can continue to talk about this shared thing and alter our conceptions of it but it remains a real thing that we are discussing. To communicate we do not need the same view of our subject, but only take the position that we share a world capable of being communicated about. This provides a fixed point around which communication revolves. If meaning were only based on an individual's “conception of it” then the result would be a cognitive solipsism that would by definition preclude communication.

Only in subscribing to a postulate of semantic realism can we take the view of communication that we in fact have. We need the concept of semantic stability to operate communication. A straightforward statement such as “Mary and Bill are friends” is communicative and true only if there is a world in which Mary and Bill exist, the concept of friendship is understood, and there is the ability to inter-personally share this

world. This does not mean that there cannot be an infinite number of conceptions about friendship and its expression, but that the statement is true in that it characterizes a communicable reality.

COMMUNICATION AND ENDLESS SEMIOSIS

One of the problems we must solve if communicative meaning is going to be stable is the problem of endless semiosis and interpretability. Messages cannot be at the mercy of incessant and equally plausible interpretations. Textualism is the notion that all messages and vocabulary are language-relative. That all messages contain gaps of indeterminacy which can never be completely filled, and therefore there is never a final resolution to the meaning of a message. This perspective emerges from the confluence of current streams in literary and critical theories (e.g. Derrida, Foucault, Rorty) that have sharply attacked representationalist views of language and opened the floodgates of interpretation. It is the position that there is no distance so great as that between two minds, and that all message recipients can do is “read” the words of the other.

I would suggest here as a resolution to this problem a distinction made by E.D. Hirsch, and some rhetorical theorists (e.g. Railsback, 1983). This is the distinction between meaning and significance. Unless you want to defend the anarchistic and baseless argument that meanings can be simply declared with Humpty-Dumpty like freedom, then it has to be possible to bind the

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semiotic process. Hirsch (1967, p. 8) writes:

“Meaning is that which is represented by a text; it is what the author meant by his use of a particular sign sequence; it is what the signs represent according to conventional techniques for establishing meaning. Significance, on the other hand, names a relationship between that meaning and a person, or a conception, or a situation, or indeed anything imaginable” (italics mine).

What changes when people interpret the words of others is the relationship between the original meaning and the interpreter, not the meaning of the words as communicated. Meaning utilizes linguistic conventions within a context to access the communally shared semantic world for a purpose; significance implies a vast array of possible relationships between a message and any number of social and intellectual categories. Significance is variable, creative, liberal, and continually enriches the way we appreciate or respond to a message. Meaning is conservative. It builds on individual and linguistic tradition and resists change.

Meaning requires a correspondence between interpretation and the text. This correspondence can be strong or weak but there is a correspondence nonetheless. On the strong side we would argue that a word or phrase was completely con-

stitutive of meaning. This would be analogous to a one-to-one correspondence between a word and its meaning, and this state is at least approached in highly technical (e.g. scientific) communication. Weaker correspondence between interpretation and text would be when a word does not uniquely constitute meaning but limits it within a range of possibilities. Lyric poetry, disordered language, and some realms of everyday interaction fall into this category. Meaning is a matter of consciousness and we are always conscious of something. This consciousness of something is not related to my momentary perceptions and mental state. If someone uses the word “computer” then I am understanding the object of my consciousness, not my perceptions or feelings. My meaning for the word “computer” does not change if I am happy or sad, tired or sick, rich or poor. When I enter into communication I enter into this shared semantic world and I direct my attention toward meaning. Meaning is something that I attend to and avert my consciousness toward.

The *significance* — as opposed to meaning — of a message is established when we connect that message to some other realm of thought. It demonstrates that a message is also “something else.” These realms are most typically — but not limited to — psychological, sociological, and intellectual perspectives. If I interpret what someone says or writes from a feminist, Marxist, psychoanalytical, or some ideological perspective then I am establishing the *significance* of the

text irrespective of its meaning. This type of analysis is a result of a suspicion that texts are open and unbounded with their “reality” deep beneath the surface. There is what might be called a hermeneutical angst that language conceals a profounder meaning. By way of example, Shah and Thornton (1994) studied magazine stories of Black-Latino interactions in magazines such as *Time*, *Newsweek*, *Atlantic Monthly*, etc. and concluded that these stories were symbolic of racial hierarchy and racial ideology in the United States. None of these stories were “about” racial hierarchy or ideology—it may have never even occurred to readers, authors, and editors that these stories were about racial hierarchy and ideology—but the conclusions are possible by taking the magazine articles (texts) as finished products and probing them in order to understand their participation in broader social, political, and ideological processes.

I think it is important that communication scholars grapple with this meaning-significance distinction as a marker of disciplinary. Neither is more important or central than the other but form a dialectical relationship that produces regular tension and should provide space for many scholars to work. Yet communication scholars should be primarily more oriented toward meaning. This is the focus on a compelling point of contact between the originator and recipient of messages. It is here where the distance between speakers and hearers or readers and writers is narrowed by intentions and circumstances. It is

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here where a “text” is an established fact that has responded to the designs of an originator. This text helps navigate the gap between an originator and recipient, as opposed to a concern with significance where the text charts the accumulation of discursive practices and becomes a node in intertextual space. The tensions between this meaning-significance dialectic should be serious but friendly.

COHERENTISM AND MEANING

Let us assume that the idea of stable meaning is a presupposition basic to the essential conceptual framework of communication, and that it undergirds our project of inquiry and knowledge about communication. It is incumbent on us, then, to explain meaning by showing how it can be reproduced and used because only if we can do this, can we claim that some meaning existed at all. But first we need an epistemology for meaning, a set of assumptions about the sources and grounds for meaning. In this section I will sketch out coherentism as an epistemology for meaning. It allows for the possibility of meaning. Coherentism is in the tradition of pragmatism and science because it is concerned with perceiving, obtaining, and validating data derived from sense experience, which is essentially what we do when we encounter meaning.

Coherentism derives from a systems epistemology, which is an epistemology that organizes infor-

mation in a particular way but is also a standard for determining what we know. Actually, coherentism and systems epistemologies are quite consistent with the history of Western philosophy because they insist that knowledge is dependent on its placement in a larger framework of rationale-providing order. The well known covering law model of explanation, as well as geometry, are types of systems epistemologies. But our concern is certainly not with the systematization of formal knowledge (e.g. logic, geometry) but with empirical knowledge that results from the various contingencies in the communicative world. It is important to immediately face up to a few realities. There are no assurances that any efforts to systematize the process of achieving meaning will succeed. There is nothing a priori that can guarantee the quality of knowledge about our factual and symbolic world. A coherentist theory represents a system of regulative ideals toward which we strive. One of the strengths of a coherentist theory is that it allows for error and assumes that we can spiral upward toward improved understanding.

Coherentism helps account for meaning by addressing three related functions: these are intelligibility, order, and verification (see Rescher, 1979, pp. 29-33). Let's begin with an example of an everyday communicative exchange. A father walks into a room where his son is watching television and notices the son's coat on the floor.

Father: Is that your coat on the floor.

Son: Yea, I'll get it in a minute.

The first goal to be achieved is *intelligibility*. This is a matter of “accounting” for patterns and using available evidence to render the facts amenable to reason. In the above example we use patterns of historical use to determine the meanings of words, but bridle these potential meanings by our assumptions of intent. Intentionality becomes a theoretical entity that helps provide a justificatory relationship. Intentionality does not determine meaning but it assists with the process of drawing warrantable conclusions about what was communicated. The pragmatic conventions of the communicative situation (e.g. father-son relationship; prior interaction history; power; etc.) combined with the son's attributions about the father's intentions would allow the utterance to be understood as an indirect speech act and not a “genuine” question.

Organization is the second major component of coherentist theories of meaning. Meaning is reliant on organization in the same way as a traveler is reliant on a road map to make necessary connections and relate places. Meaning requires a place in a system. Derrida used the notion of a semiotic organizational network to argue for *differences* that destabilize meaning; but a coherentist theory of meaning draws on the intellectual traditions of Immanuel Kant and western philosophy by insisting on an epistemological rationale. That is, to

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"know" something such as the meaning of a word implies that what you know has a rationale. A network of language, it can be argued, stabilizes meaning rather than destabilizes it because it is the road map that communicators use to "find their place." A hearer or reader knows the meaning of something by relating it to linguistic and social patterns of use. So contrary to Derrida's differences within the semiotic system, a sign *is* meaningful because it has a specified and informed place within the organizational format of a bounded message system. Third, a coherentist theory addresses the matter of *verification* by arguing that if meaning is to be established by a place in a system, then the possibilities for error are reduced. Coherence theories utilize principles of completeness, order, consistency, and consonance as correctives to avoid "mistakes." It is possible to make errors in meaning but a stress on fit and consistency helps reduce the possibility of such errors. In the example of the father and son above it would have been an error to conclude that the father was "genuinely" inquiring about the ownership of the coat. The possibility of this error is reduced because such a meaning is not consistent with the system that forms a backdrop for the utterance.

Typically, meaning theorists have been held to principles of foundationalism. A foundationalist epistemology, as opposed to a coherentist epistemology, is that every claim requires *truths* as input. If a statement is true then the premises upon which it rest must be true. It

assumes a starter-set of immediate truths from which all others are derived. A foundationalist epistemology requires that it be possible to secure an axiomatic foothold for meaning. Representationalist and positivist theories of meaning are the most extreme form of foundationalist assumptions. They maintained that meaning must be self-evident, or that it must be possible to reason from a particular meaning back to a bedrock semantic capable of providing a foundational basis for the meaning. It should not be surprising that a foundational epistemological model is always lurking in the background of theories of meaning since its roots run deep in the traditions of western epistemology from Aristotle to present day science. For foundationalists the receiver of a message is little more than a machine-like decoder.

But a coherentist epistemology relieves us of a sacrosanct commitment to criterial truths. Since a coherentist epistemology is based on systematicity we can claim to "know" the meaning of something if it fits properly into a system. A foundationalist epistemology requires that the meaning of something be logically derived within a complex structure resting on basic facts. A coherentist program assumes that a conclusion about meaning is acceptable if the conclusion *fits* with other acceptable theses, facts, and principles. This is very consistent with scientific thinking which has always considered fit with theories to be equally as important as "facts". At the heart of coherentism is a system of statements that is the arbiter of

what is *acceptable*, not the determiner of what is *accepted*. Given that language has a certain fluidity the epistemology that captures it must match that fluidity. Coherentism accomplishes this by relying on a network of statements that are the standards for acceptability.

ESTABLISHING MEANING

The discipline and practice of communication is pretty senseless if we cannot claim to apprehend and understand the meaning of a message. My final point tonight is that validating conclusions about meaning is possible and I will offer up ten features of communication that account for meaning. Each of these can be a plank in a coherentist structure.

1. Context variation is usually considered a source of instability for meaning. Communication scholars are quick to embrace clichés and ideologies about the uniquenesses of people and situations. These ideologies easily find their way into our basic texts (e.g. "Words have no meaning, people do"), and we even organize our discipline into contexts—for example, interpersonal, groups, and so on. But Habermas has explained how there are stable qualities of all contexts: a speaker-hearer relationship; presupposed knowledge by participants; and a reflexive relationship between the individual's language and his or her beliefs.

I argue, on the contrary, that rather than destabilizing meaning contexts make meaning possible;

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contexts occasion meaning. Contexts bring meaning into existence. Contexts provide the information that makes meaning possible. They warrant the language; they determine how norms of usage are being observed; contexts signal genres and the appropriate conventions of meaning.

2. Intentionality is a very important component of the meaning process. If my parrot squawks, "The car is in the driveway" one could understand what the individual words mean but deny that the parrot communicated anything. The sound pattern of the parrot might resemble language in some state, but not in the communicative state because the squawk is devoid of intentions and the public norms of discourse required for interpretation. The separability of intentionality and language might be debatable but not so intentionality and communication. Let's try to imagine intentionless communication.

Suppose you have a big box in your den and it is full of little wooden squares with letters of the alphabet on it. You come home one day and the cat has knocked over the box and the squares have spilled onto the floor spelling out:

*Two nations are in your womb,
And two peoples will be
separated from inside you;*

You don't know what this means. You recognize the words, syntax, and perhaps even its biblical flavor but you still do not know what has been *communicated*. You will find it all very puzzling. Now assume

you pick up the remaining letters and return them to the box while still staring at the two sentences. Just then your cat walks up to the box, looks you in the eye, extends his paw and again knocks over the box spilling the letters onto the floor and the following words are formed underneath the above words:

*And one people will be stronger
than the other people,
And the greater will serve the
younger.*

Now the question of communication comes into focus. You will take a close look at your cat and feel obligated to explain what has happened. You might accept that the first two lines were the result of incredible chance, but now you are not so sure. Now you are wondering what has been communicated. It is only intentions that separates the first two lines from the last two. It is only intentionality that determines whether communication and meaning have occurred or not. If you decide that the first two lines were pure accident then there has certainly been no communication, and you have no idea about meaning. The fact that your cat created the second two lines is beside the point. If you attribute intentionality to the message of some source of communication then meaning has occurred.

3. Meaning is irreducibly dura-
tional. A word, or clause, or message is located in time and logically connected to what came before. This is not necessarily clock time but human time where meaning is assigned to events in a sequence.

Meaning is reliant on mental models that define patterns of events. Newspaper stories, speeches, television shows, comic strips, museums, essays, and conversations all have diachronic conventions that produce coherence.

4. Meaning is emblematic. A particular word is a vehicle or a mark that is embedded in a more generic concept. Another way to say this is that messages are and have tokens that are part of broader types. This is how messages achieve particularity without being solipsistic or so particular they are uncommunicative. Suppose I say, "Pete bought a station wagon and is now a member of the middle class." The token—"station wagon"—is part of a more inclusive type—"middle class." The token could have been a "lawn mower" or any number of other things and still served as the appropriate emblem of the middle class. These are of course culturally learned.

5. Meaning is produced by cracking the hermeneutic circle. A brief word of explanation. Hermeneutic implies that a message is trying to express meaning and a recipient is trying to educe it. This makes for a tension with no special solution for determining the meaning of a message. It leads to the well known hermeneutic circle where the meaning of a text is dependent on its parts, but the meaning of the parts are also dependent on the whole. The circle is cracked by our capacity for interpretation. All participants in a communicative event are hermeneutically alert. As soon as we engage in communication we em-

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ploy a form of cognitive processing called interpretation (a process, I might add, that has been essentially ignored by cognitivists). We attribute intentions, apply background knowledge, invoke Gricean principles, etc. all in our efforts to negotiate meaning.

6. Many communicative exchanges are highly routinized. Learning to identify and perform in conventional communication routines is an important part of oral developmental communication, and literacy in the written mode. In all sorts of oral exchanges (e.g. service exchanges) and written exemplars (e.g. narrative structures) there are orthodox forms that serve as prescriptions for how to proceed with meaning. There is usually a triggering event that signals how the meanings will unfold. Breaks and deviations from these orthodox forms make for individuality and creativity that challenge communicators into fresh interpretive activity. There is, then, an endless supply of linguistic innovation that challenge routine scripts but rely on them for interpretation.

7. Language is referential. We do use language to "refer" to the external world and universally teach children to use language in this way. This does not mean we must fall into a referential theory of meaning, rather, just that reference is a language practice. This is a standard pragmatic act with numerous conventional rules.

8. Genres are one of the most useful meaning devices. A genre is a distinctive category of discourse that comes complete with coded

rules of use that constrain meaning. All sorts of genres from high literary forms to more homely discourse such as letters of recommendation, business letters, and public proceedings have powerful rules and expectations about meaning and how language is to be used. Genres are situated in communities where naming practices have relevance. They carry with them strong contextual influences, exemplars that dictate allowable language and rhetorical strategies, and a common understanding of the "action" to be performed by the genre. Shared communicative purposes among events is the principal criterion of genres. And novel, creative, and innovative departures from genres are still dependent on original generic forms for meaning.

9. Meaning is conventional. It is ordinary, everyday, mostly concerned with cultural legitimacy. This is what Aristotle, grammarians, and communication scholars spend their time on. Burke's pentad is a prevailing expectation that looks for the normal and conventional arrangements of elements of communication. Rhetorical theorists of all stripes are concerned ontologically with the symbolic world and its arrangements. All of these methods are preoccupied with the circumstances of meaning.

10. Finally, meaning amasses and accumulates. It is true that meaning becomes deeper and sharper if one is part of a culture or tradition that has accumulated interpretive frames that you learn to use and have been endowed with privileged status. Participation in a

family history, or chronological knowledge of the jurisprudence system improves the possibility of meaning. This is not the result of simple historical-causal relations or even the likelihood of "better" meaning in the scientific sense. Rather, it is the belief that things happening in time are connected. That part of validating meaning, not verifying it, results from the accrual of local symbols and behaviors. Again, things are connected into a coherent whole that have a continuity provided by shared history

I will conclude tonight by reminding you that my arguments are buckshot in a war of words about the status of language, reality, and communication. I continue to try and occupy the positions of rigor and pragmatism; that is, I sympathize with the army who seeks to quell what Nietzsche called "the longest lie," the notion that outside us there lies something like God, or science, or truth that will step in and save us. But I reject the young turks and intellectual terrorists who simply "deconstruct." They are secularists with a vengeance. There is a dividing road that leads not to science or truth but to improvement and sophistication. A road where meanings are captured not because they sympathize with reality, but because they point the way to shelter. *This lecture, especially points one and two, draws from ideas first presented in my article "Fixing Communicative Meaning: A Coherentist Theory" published in Communication Research, 22, 1995, 515-544. Please see that article for additional details and elaboration.*

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B. AUBREY FISHER

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Professor Fisher was a prominent scholar in interpersonal communication and communication theory. His published work includes three books and more than 35 articles and book chapters. He was considered one of the most notable and influential communication scholars of his time. He held numerous offices in professional organizations, including President of the Western Speech Communication Association, President of the International Communication Association and Editor of the *Western Speech Communication Journal*.

The B. Aubrey Fisher Memorial Lecture was established by the Department of Communication in 1986 to recognize Professor Fisher's outstanding achievements and to provide a forum for presenting original research and theory in communication.

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Professor Ellis completed his Ph.D. at the University of Utah in 1976. His doctoral dissertation won the Speech Communication Golden Anniversary Dissertation Award as one of the three best dissertations in that year. He was on the faculties of Purdue University and Michigan State University before assuming his current position at the University of Hartford in 1983.

Dr. Ellis is author or editor of numerous books, articles, monographs and book chapters. His specialties are in communication theory and language discourse processes. He has served on many editorial boards and recently completed his editorship of *Communication Theory*. He is a life member of both the International Communication Association and the Speech Communication Association, as well as a member of the American Association of Applied Linguistics. Don Ellis has held fellowships at Yale and New York University, and was elected to membership in the Connecticut Humanities Council in 1996.

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