

# **Chapter - III**

## *Meaning*

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### MEANING

Philosophy in this century is very much concerned with different aspects of language and among the different linguistic concepts, the concept of meaning is perhaps the most widely discussed and widely studied by philosophers. Not only philosophers but linguistics, grammarians, lexicographers are very much concerned with 'meaning' in their respective fields. Many basic concepts of linguistics such as phoneme - the minimum meaningful unit of sound, morpheme - the minimum meaningful grammatical element, etc. can be defined only in terms of meaning. Again, a grammarian who does want to reproduce an objectively determinate class requires to know what forms are significant or having a meaning. A lexicographer is concerned with synonym between forms in one language or forms in another language. Now lexicographers' reconstruction of the class of synonym pair although formal, it needs his prior notion of synonym or alike in meaning. Quine says:

"In the setting of their problems, the grammarian and the lexicographer draw equally on our heritage from the old notion of meaning".<sup>1</sup>

Besides the above areas, common people in their every day discourse frequently use the particular term 'meaning'. However, such widespread use of 'meaning' naturally deserves an adequate

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1. Quine, W.V.O., "Meaning in linguistics" in From A Logical Point of View, Harvard University Press, 1953, pp. 59-60

theoretical account of 'meaning' on the ground that such account would be very much helpful to linguists, grammarians, lexicographers etc. to perform their jobs in their respective fields.

Now, the point is that any satisfactory account of meaning would have to face a number of questions in connection with meaning. Among others, the following deserve special attention. They are :

- 1) Is there any entity called meaning? If so, what sort of entity it is?
- 2) What do we mean by 'meaning' of an expression?
- 3) What kind of relation holds between an expression and its meaning?

Regarding the above questions, some philosophers are of the opinion that the very answers of them lie in proper explanation of meaning. And hence, they feel the need to offer explanation of meaning. With this end in mind, they look at meaning from various points of view and consequently, arise different theories of meaning such as, the referential theory, the ideational theory, the use theory, the truth theory and so on. Now, in the following discussion I would like to focus on some such theories with a view to settle the question — 'Can there be any theory of meaning at all'?

Now, prior to the discussion on different theories of meaning, I think it necessary to point out the proper attribution of meaning. That is to say, it should be decided first whether a

word or a sentence would be the concern of meaning.

Since the term 'meaning' is used in course of talking about words as well as sentences, philosophers differ among themselves regarding the attribution of meaning. In this respect, they do follow two lines of thought. According to one line of thought being the units of language, words have meaning in the primary sense and hence, meaning should be attributed to words. In support of the above thought the following points have been put forward:

- i) It is argued that if words were not the proper attribution of meaning, classification of them as noun, verb etc. would not be possible at all.
- ii) An analytic truth has been defined as one that can be determined solely by analysis of the meaning of the words involving in a sentence expressing it. Thus, it has been pointed out that knowing the meaning of the word 'father' is all that is required to determine the truth of the statement 'Fathers are male'.
- iii) Word-meaning plays a very fundamental role in course of learning a language. While a child learns a language, Alston says,
 

"—it is obvious that the most economical way of ~~succeeding~~ is to give him the meaning of individual words, and to let him use his already acquired practical mastery of sentence structure to these words together with others in various sentences, rather than to tell him the

meaning of sentences one by one.<sup>1</sup>

iv) It has been argued that in any particular language, if words do not have meaning in primary sense, a new sentence would never be possible to understand.

On the contrary, according to another line of thought, it is not words rather sentences that should be treated as proper attribution of meaning. In support of sentence-meaning the main arguments are :

1) Since the purpose of a language is to communicate and since it is only through a sentence that a thought is completely expressed, proper attribution of meaning would be a sentence - not a word. It is said:

".... the utterance of a sentence is a self-contained speech act, an isolable piece of human behaviour in the sense that it is amenable to explanation as a whole. .... Words on the other hands are not in the same way meaningful by themselves. They can not be isolated and used alone to effect any change in the nexus of beliefs".<sup>2</sup>

2) It has been argued that it is only a sentence that can perform a linguistic act and such action can never be performed

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1. Alston, P, Philosophy of Language, Prentice Hall Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi, 1988, p. 33

2. Jane Heal, "Sentence Meaning And Word Meaning" in Philosophical Quarterly, April, 1979, p. 123

by a single word. Although sometimes it appears that a single word does perform a linguistic act, actually in such case the particular single word is used not as a word but as an abbreviated sentence. Thus, Alston says:

"To perform a complete linguistic action we must utter a sentence or some expression within that context is elliptical for a sentence".<sup>1</sup>

3) By uttering a sentence different sorts of linguistic acts such as describing, reporting, commanding etc. can be performed. Now, words, of which a sentence is composed of have certain contribution in performing such act and only in context of this contribution that words have meaning. Hence, it seems quite justified to attribute meaning to a sentence.

4) In a language many words have more than one meaning. For example, in the following two sentences —

a) Work hard to reach the goal.

b) He scored a goal.

the particular word 'goal' has not been used in single sense and the difference of meaning of the word 'goal' can only be understood in reference to respective sentence where it does occur. Hence, it is said :

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1. Alston, P, Philosophy of Language, Prentice Hall Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi, 1988, p. 33

"----- to say a word or a phrase has a meaning is to say that there are sentences in which it occurs which 'have meanings' and to know the meaning which the word or phrase has, is to know the meanings of sentences in which it occurs".<sup>1</sup>

However, from the above account no solution regarding the problem of attribution of meaning has been achieved. In fact, the arguments that have been put forward by each line of thought appears to be correct only upto a certain point. Hence, it has been noted that, while discussing meaning, philosophers sometimes refer to words and sometimes to sentences.

## SECTION - II

This section includes some of the theories of meaning like the referential theory, the ideational theory, the verification theory, the behavioral theory and use theory of meaning. Discussion on these theories would show how different philosophers attempt to define meaning from various points of view and thereby face the above three basic questions concerning meaning.

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1. Austin, J. L., Philosophical Papers, Oxford University Press, 1979, p. 56

Referential theory of meaning.

The basic assumption that the task of a language is to describe reality leads some philosophers to hold that expressions get their meaning by pointing towards objects in the external world. Hence, taking meaning as a kind of entity objectively specifiable, the upholders of the referential theory hold that an expression would be meaningful only if it stands for something other than itself. These philosophers think that the difference between meaningful linguistic expression and meaningless linguistic expression lies in the fact that while meaningful linguistic expression does stand for something, meaningless one does not. Thus, according to the referential theory, the meaning of a linguistic expression is its referent and meaning is the relation between the expression and its referent.

Now, a number of answer-bagging questions may arise in connection with the referential theory of meaning. They are :

i) If meaning is taken as an entity --- what sort of entity would it be?

ii) What is exactly meant by the phrase 'stand for'?

A little reflection on the above two questions would show us that none of them have been satisfactorily answered by the proponents of the theory.

In connection with question (1) it can be pointed out that it is not only the case that there does not exist something called 'meaning', but such question cannot be treated as a question at all. That it is a spurious question to ask 'what sort of entity is meaning?' can be shown by the following arguments :

a) The proponents of this theory wrongly assume that just because we employ the noun 'meaning' there must be something to which the noun refers. According to Cooper, when it is said that 'It has been done for the sake of John', it is not meant that 'the sake' is some entity which belongs to John and for which something has been done. It simply means that something was done to help John. In the same way, when we speak about 'the meaning of a word', it is incorrect to suppose that there exists some entity called 'meaning' which belongs to the concerned word.<sup>1</sup>

b) If meaning were an objectively specifiable entity, all the questions we want to ask about meaning cannot be asked without employing the noun 'meaning'. In practice, we can do so. Hence, instead of asking 'Is procrastination a word with meaning?' we can ask 'Is procrastination meaningful?', instead of asking 'Do procrastination and putting things off have the same meaning?' we can ask 'Are procrastination and putting things off synonymous?'

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1. Cooper, D.E., Philosophy and the Nature of Language  
Longman, London, 1975, p. 13

and so on. According to Cooper, this ability to paraphrase questions about meaning into questions which do not contain the noun 'meaning' clearly suggests that 'meaning' in no way be regarded as a sort of entity.<sup>1</sup>

The phrase 'stand for something other than itself' as used in question (ii) cannot be explained in any way. It is quite unnatural to think that corresponding to each linguistic expression there exists something in the external world. Would it be reasonable to say that linguistic expressions like 'pen is mightier than sword' or 'honesty is the best policy' stand for something in the external world?

Admitting that in some cases linguistic expression do refer to something in the external world, it does not follow that meaning should be identified with referent. In fact, if meaning were truly identified with referent the two expressions 'Scott' and 'the author of Waverly' would have the same meaning. These two expressions though refer to the same individual do not have the same meaning. Again, there are some expressions which although refer to many individuals do have the same meaning. As pointed out by Alston that the expressions which are often called 'indexical terms', systematically change their references with

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1. Ibid, p. 14

changes in condition of their utterance; e.g. 'I' always refers to the person who utters it and hence it does not refer to the same individual irrespective of circumstances. This variation of the referent individual does in no way change the meaning of 'I' which is simply 'the speaker'.<sup>1</sup>

Moreover, this theory fails to explain meaning of the descriptive phrases corresponding to which there are no referents at all. Thus, according to Gilbert Ryle, although the phrase 'the third man to stand on the top of mount Everest' did not refer to anybody, at a particular time yet it is undoubtedly a significant phrase.<sup>2</sup>

Besides the above limitations, the particular theory of meaning suffers from circularity also. The theory overlooks the fact that in order to know the referent of an linguistic expression it is necessary to know the meaning of such expression first. Hence, arises circularity.

The above-mentioned limitations clearly point to the fact that the referential theory can in no way be regarded as an adequate theory of meaning. The particular theory fails to realise

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1. Alston, P, Philosophy of Language, Prentice Hall Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi, 1988, p. 13

2. Ryle, Gilbert, "The Theory of Meaning", British Philosophy in the Mid-Century, ed. by Mace, C.A., George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1966, p. 244.

that although in course of learning a language meaning of expressions are mostly dependent on availability of some concrete situation, it does not follow from this that 'meaning' can be identified with referent.

### Ideational theory of meaning

Tendency to explain meaning of a linguistic expression in terms of something other than linguistic expression leads some philosophers to adopt the view that to be meaningful a linguistic expression must refer to thing in the mind i.e. to an idea. Thus, according to the proponents of the ideational theory of meaning each linguistic expression has meaning through its regular association with a certain idea.

The underlying thinking of the ideational theory is that language which has been conventionally created to perform the job of communication is essentially an instrument of thought. Now, a thought consists of a succession of ideas and ideas are directly accessible only to their possessors. Hence, in order to make others cognizant of one's thoughts one must employ publicly observable sounds and marks i.e. linguistic expressions as representatives of the ideas.

The main theme of this particular theory was clearly stated by Locke in the seventeenth century in the following writings:

"Words are sensible signs necessary for communication.

Man, though he have great variety of thoughts, and such from which others as well as himself might receive profit and delight, yet they are all within his own breast, invisible, and hidden from others, nor can of themselves be made appear. The comfort and advantage of society not being to be had without communication of thoughts, it was necessary that man should find out some external sensible signs, whereby those invisible ideas which his thoughts are made up of might be made known to others. For this purpose nothing was so fit, either for plenty or quickness, as those articulate sounds which, with so much ease and variety, he found himself able to make. The use, then, of words is to be sensible marks of ideas, and the ideas they stand for are their proper and immediate signification".<sup>1</sup>

Hence, according to ideational theory, for every meaningful linguistic expression there is an idea which is regularly associated with that expression.

Now, the above version of ideational theory puts before us a number of important questions. They are :

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1. John Locke, "Of words" in Theory of Meaning, Ed. by Lehrer, A., Prentice Hall, U.S.A., 1970, p. 65

- a) Is it really possible to explain the notion of meaning in terms of an idea?
- b) If possible, does the theory work in respect of all linguistic expressions?
- c) Where should we look for an idea to settle the question regarding meaning?

In connection with question (a) some philosophers think that although in a sense 'idea' is derivative from notions like meaning or understanding, it does not follow from this that meaning can be defined in terms of 'idea'. According to Alston, the term 'idea' in the expressions like 'I get the idea', 'I have no idea with what you are saying', etc. have been used in derivative sense of the speaker's knowing or understanding the meaning. Hence, 'idea' as used above, can provide no basis for an explication of meaning.<sup>1</sup>

So far as question (b) is concerned, it can be said that it is something difficult on the part of this particular theory to point out the obvious connection between all linguistic expressions and their ideas. In fact, problem arises regarding expressions like 'if', 'and', 'or' and so on. Practically, it is hard to believe that corresponding to these expressions there are

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1. Alston, P, Philosophy of Language, Prentice Hall Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi, 1988, p. 24

some ideas. Not only that the theory fails to work even for expressions that are supposed to have obvious connection with ideas. According to Alston this theory fails to work even for words like 'dog', 'book' etc which are supposed to have obvious connection with mental images. Thus, although the use of a word 'dog' is accompanied by mental image, it does not follow that in each case the mental imagery would be the same. This difference in mental imagery would in no way be reflected in any difference in meaning.<sup>1</sup>

In connection with question (c), it can be said that since idea is not something objective rather something private speaking of regular association of linguistic expression with idea would be nothing but imaginery. In fact, we do not look for ideas in the minds of speakers and listeners in order to settle questions about what a word means in the language or about the sense in which a speaker used a term on a given occasion.

Despite the above difficulties, the ideational theory of meaning suffers from circularity also. In order to recognize what the idea is, it is necessary to understand the meaning of the concerned expression.

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1. Alston, P, Philosophy of Language, Prentice Hall Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi, 1988, p. 25

### The Behavioral Theory of Meaning

The consideration that meaning is a function of publicly observable aspects of the language situation, has led a group of thinkers to develop a theory of meaning in terms of connection between utterances and responses i.e. between utterances and publicly observable features of the communication situation.

The underlying principle of the behavioristic theory is that each meaningful expression has a close connection with behavior and difference between a meaningful expression and a meaningless expression lies in the fact that while the former affects the behavior in a way, the later does not. Being intimately connected with publicly observable features this kind of approach to meaning on the one hand does deny the existence of thoughts, images or anything inner and private, and on the other hand, has attracted psychologists and psychologically oriented philosophers to develop a sophisticated theory of meaning.

Now, the behavioristic account of meaning has two versions : crude and sophisticated. Theme of the crude version has been clearly stated in the definition of meaning offered by Leonard Bloomfield. According to him the meaning of a linguistic expression is

"..... the situation in which the speaker utters it and the responses which it calls forth in the hearer".<sup>1</sup>

Now, regarding the crude version a question may arise in the following form : Is it possible to identify meaning of a linguistic expression with regularly evoking a certain response? That having a certain meaning cannot be simply identified with regularly evoking a certain overt response can be shown by the fact that a single linguistic expression may produce very different responses on different occasions of its utterance and sometimes its utterance may evoke no response at all. And from this it does not follow that the particular expression becomes meaningless on those occasions.

The above deficiency in the crude version lead philosophers like Morris to accept a sophisticated account of meaning by introducing the concept of a disposition to respond. According to this concept associated with each word having a distinct meaning, there is some distinctive goal-directed response-sequence towards which it disposes us. Now, on the basis of the concept of a disposition to respond, Morris creates a theory of meaning according to which the meaning of a linguistic expression has two components — one denotatum or what the expression refers to and the other is the

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1. Bloomfield, Leonard, Language, Allen & Unwin, 1967, p. 139

significatum or essential properties to serve a denotum. Thus, Morris thinks that for something to be food, and serve as the goal we are disposed to achieve by the expression 'food' - it must be edible. Hence, edibility is part of the significatum of the expression 'food'.

Now, the question is : Would it be correct to say that corresponding to each linguistic expression there is some sort of goal-directed behavior? In other words, can meaning of each expression be truly explained in terms of goal-directed behavior?

The point to be noted that although in some cases dealing with expressions like 'food', 'drink' is somehow connected with goal-directed behaviour, it does not mean that corresponding to each linguistic expression there would be some distinctive type of behavior. According to D.E. Cooper:

"--- if we turn to words like 'if', 'at', 'or', 'each', 'for', 'so', etc, it does not sound faintly plausible to suppose that every word in the language has its connection with some distinctive type of goal-directed behaviour. ----- It follows from all this that we shall be unable to explain the meaningfulness of more than a few words in terms of characteristic response-sequences associated with them".<sup>1</sup>

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1. Cooper, D.E., Philosophy and the Nature of Language, Longman, London, 1975, pp. 30-31

Now the point is that problem persists even in ideal cases where expressions are supposed to be connected with such behaviour. P. Alston in Philosophy of Language seems to subscribe to this view. According to him it is generally assumed that the utterance like 'Your son is ill' will produce a disposition to go to where one believes one's son to be if one has a great concern for one's son. Now the fact is that whether the above utterance will produce a disposition to go or not would be dependent on many other factors ..... such as the hearer may not believe the information or he may not be physically fit to go or he may be previously acquired the information and so on. Now, this important aspect has been sadly overlooked by the proponents of the theory. As a result, the particular theory has been labelled as a theory suffering from oversimplification.

Moreover, an attempt to explain meaning in terms of behaviour suffers from circularity also. The particular term 'behaviour' has more than one meaning. It may mean body movements like movements of muscles and so on or it may be used to mean human actions like praying etc. And it is in the second sense that the term 'behaviour' has been used in the present context. Now, any explanation of meaning in terms of action would be possible only if one can identify what the action is independent of already knowing the meaning of the words associated with it. However, it is not possible at any rate. Cooper says :

"... once we include actions under the heading of 'behaviour', it is difficult to see that we are always in a position to identify what the behaviour is without already knowing the meanings of the words we are supposed to explain by reference to this behaviour".<sup>1</sup>

### The Verification Theory of Meaning

A theory of meaning standing very close to the criterion of meaningfulness is the verification theory. According to this theory, the meaning of a sentence is simply describing the ways in which it would be verified. According to Moritz Schlick,

"The meaning of a proposition is the method of its verification".<sup>2</sup>

Now, a little reflection on the criterion of meaningfulness as formulated by the logical positivists, I think, would be helpful to understand this particular theory of meaning.

The empiricists of the nineteenth century willing to give philosophy a scientific orientation, think that philosophy in the past means nothing but useless controversy over metaphysics and

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1. Cooper, D.E., Philosophy and the Nature of Language, Longman, London, 1975, p. 32

2. Moritz Schlick, "Meaning and Verification" in Theory of Meaning, ed. by Lehrer, A., Prentice Hall, Inc., Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, p. 100.

normative problems which are in principle insoluble and hence, statements concerning such problems are considered by them as meaningless statements only. In order to establish their view i.e. in order to show that the so called metaphysical statements are meaningless, the empiricists felt the need to formulate a criterion of meaningfulness.

The basic principle of such criterion lies in some kind of connection with sensory experience. In fact, sense experience plays a significant role in the so called traditional theories of meaning in the acquisition of meaning by a given expression. Thus, according to the ideational theory a word can have meaning only if there is an association between the word and an idea derived from sense experience. In case of the behavioral theory, the requirement is the stimulus-response bonds and such bonds can be acquired through repeated experience of the coincidence of such stimuli and such responses. In the referential theory, an expression acquires the capacity to refer to a certain thing through being paired with that thing in experience. It is the empiricist criterion that holds that a given sound pattern is related to world not by virtue of its intrinsic characteristics but by experience. Experience is the source of meaning whatsoever.

Any way, considering ostensive definition as the primary way of understanding Moritz Schlick locates method of verification or reference to 'experience' as a very fundamental method to

understand meaning. He writes:

"It is clear that in order to understand a verbal definition we must know the signification of the explaining words beforehand, and that the only explanation which can work without any previous knowledge is the ostensive definition. We conclude that there is no way of understanding any meaning without ultimate references to ostensive definitions, and this means, in an obvious sense, reference to 'experience' or 'possibility of verification'.<sup>1</sup>

Now, the problem is that following the verification theory only a small number of indicative sentences would be entitled as meaningful. Sentences of questions, requests, commands etc. would not come in the purview of meaningful sentences as they are not empirically verified. Moreover, according to this theory, analytic statements, moral judgements, aesthetic appraisals would cease to be meaningful being incapable of empirically tested.

The above difficulties faced by the theory of verification lead the proponents of the theory to rethink over the term 'verification' and hence, it is maintained that in order to consider a sentence as meaningful what is necessary is that neither the sentence

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1. Moritz Schlick, "Meaning and Verification" in Theory of Meaning, ed. by Lehrer, A., Prentice Hall, Inc., Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, p. 101.

is already verified nor 'verifiable' here and now rather, it has the possibility of verification.

Now, introduction of 'possibility of verification' does undoubtedly modify the theory to some extent. It is recognised now that there are perfectly meaningful sentences that have not yet been tested and even meaningful sentences that we are not in a position to test. According to Alston, "in requiring verifiability, the positivist is simply requiring that it be possible to specify what an empirical test would consist in; he is not requiring that the test have been carried out".<sup>1</sup>

However, the point is that the replacement of the phrase 'verification' by the phrase 'possibility of verification' does not put the theory in any advantageous position for the following reasons:

(i) The great difficulty arises regarding what is meant by 'empirical observation'. And the proponents of the theory differ among themselves on this issue. They differ as to what it is physical objects, properties or sense impressions that we do observe through the senses.

(ii) It has been argued that the notion of verifiability as used by the logical positivists is not a clear notion at all. Cooper says,

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1. Alston, P., Philosophy of Language, Prentice Hall Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi, 1988, p. 70

"If I say, 'All unsuspected bodies fall', I am talking of a possibly infinite number of occurrences. So, however many times I may have observed unsuspected things falling, it is always possible that the next unsuspected thing will not fall. Again, however many times I may fail to observe a unicorn, I shall never conclusively falsify the sentence 'Unicorns do exist' by future observation. These two sentences are plainly meaningful, despite the fact that the one is not conclusively verifiable, and the other is not conclusively falsifiable".<sup>1</sup>

(iii) The proponents of the theory make a gross mistake while thinking that a single sentence isolated from all else can be confirmed or disconfirmed. They fail to realise that it is only in conjunction with other sentences that a single one can come up for verification. As Quine says:

"..... our, statements about the world face the tribunal of sense experience not individually but only as a corporate body".<sup>2</sup>

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1. Cooper, D.E., Philosophy and the Nature of Language, Longman, London, 1975, p. 49.

2. Quine, W.V.O., "Two Dogmas of Empiricism" in From a Logical Point of View, Harvard University Press, 1953, p. 41

(iv) It has been pointed out that many important factors such as attitude etc. involving in the notion of verifiability have been overlooked by the theory. According to Cooper,

"----- whether or not a sentence is verifiable is partly a function of the attitudes people take towards it. They can decide not to make it verifiable or falsifiable. But the meaningfulness of the sentence is not similarly a function of their attitude towards it".<sup>1</sup>

(v) This theory of meaning confuses the two questions such as 'whether a sentence is meaningful' and 'whether the statement it expresses can be known to be true or false'.

(vi) It has been argued that the process of verification is inapplicable also to the judgements of perception. According to Bertrand Russell,

"The process of verification is never sufficiently examined by those who make it fundamental. In its simplest form, it occurs when I first expect an event and then perceive it. But if an event occurs without my having first expected it, I am just as capable of perceiving it and forming a judgement of perception about it; yet in this case there is no

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1. Cooper, D.E., Philosophy and the Nature of Language, Longman, London, 1975, p. 52

process of verification. Verification confirms the more doubtful by means of the less doubtful, and is therefore essentially inapplicable to the least doubtful, viz. judgements of perception".<sup>1</sup>

However, from the above account it is clear that this particular theory of meaning fails to serve the purpose for which it has been proposed. In fact, while formulating the theory what the positivists have really been concerned with is the criterion of meaningfulness. Practically, there has been little attempt to offer a proper account of meaning.

#### Truth Theory of Meaning

A theory of meaning closely connected with the verification theory is the truth theory of meaning. The main defect of the verification theory lies in the fact that reference to experience or empirical observation reduces meaning of an expression to something private. With a view to eliminate the above defect some philosophers have tried to explain meaning in terms of truth-conditions. Thus, according to truth-theory, meaning of a sentence is its truth-conditions. And this truth-condition does depend on its corresponding to facts. Now, the theory takes the following form :

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1. Russell, Bertrand, An Inquiry into Meaning and Truth, Penguin Books, 1973, p. 291

'S means that P = df S is true if and only if P'.

It is supposed that the definition works by giving necessary and sufficient conditions for the truth of every sentence, and to give truth-conditions is a way of giving the meaning of a sentence. Thus, truth-conditions of a sentence 'snow is white' is : 'snow is white' is true if and only if snow is white.

Now, the point is that, this particular theory like many other theories of meaning such as the referential theory and so on, is based on the assumption that meaning of an expression should be identified with its use in a particular context and consequently, like those theories it is also open to certain objections. They are :

1) The main objection against this theory of meaning lies in the fact that it fails to draw a line of distinction between meaning of a sentence and its use to make a true or false assertion. According to Strawson, the meaning of a sentence can in no way be identified with the assertion it is used to make on a particular occasion. Strawson writes:

"--- to talk about the meaning of an expression or sentence is not to talk about its use on a particular occasion, but about the rules, habits, conventions governing its correct use on all occasions, to refer or to assert. So the question of whether a sentence or expression is significant or not has nothing whatever

to do with the question of whether the sentence, uttered on a particular occasion, is, on that occasion, being used to make a true or false assertion or not, or of whether the expression, on that occasion, being used to refer to, or mention, anything at all".<sup>1</sup>

2) That meaning of a sentence does not differ corresponding to making right or wrong assertion can be shown by the fact that the same sentence 'I am six feet high' can be used to make statements with different truth-values.

3) The theory involves circularity also. According to it, in order to explain meaning of a sentence we are to know truth conditions. Now, the fact is that to know truth conditions of a sentence it is necessary to know the meaning of the sentence first.

4) Following this theory, evaluative sentences, aesthetic appraisals, sentences of commands, questions etc. would have no meaning so far as they have ~~no~~ truth value.

5) By applying the concept of truth-conditions, explanation of the synonymy of sentences becomes difficult. For, in that case, any two sentences which are true in every possible

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1. Strawson, P.F., "On Referring" in The Theory of Meaning

ed. by Parkinson, G.H.R., 'Oxford University Press, 1978, p. 69.

world would have the same truth-conditions and hence the same meaning.

6) It has been argued that meaning of a sentence cannot be explained in terms of truth-conditions, since truth-conditions of a sentence does connote nothing. Ayer writes,

"---- to say that a proposition is true is just to assert it, and to say that it is false is just to assert its contradictory. And this indicates that the terms 'true' and 'false' connote nothing, but function in the sentence simply as marks of assertion and denial".<sup>1</sup>

Besides the above limitations, philosophers trying to identify meaning with truth-conditions differ among themselves regarding the way by which truth-conditions are determined. Thus, according to Davidson:

"----- the syntactic and semantic rules together determine the meanings of all the sentences of a language and do this by means, precisely, of determining their truth-conditions".<sup>2</sup>

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1. Ayer, A. J., Language, Truth and Logic, Penguin Books, 1978, p. 118

2. Strawson, P. F., "Meaning and Truth", in The Philosophy of Language, ed. by Martinich, A. P., Oxford University Press, 1985, p. 104.

Again, Strawson thinks that the notion of truth-conditions cannot be determined only by the syntactical and semantical rules of language. According to him, the notion of truth-conditions cannot be explained as independent of reference to the function of communication-intention. According to Strawson,

"--- it is a truth implicitly acknowledged by communication theorists themselves that in almost all the things we should count as sentences there is a substantial central core of meaning which is explicable either in terms of truth-conditions or in terms of some related notion quite simply derivable from that of a truth-condition, for example the notion, as we might call it, of a compliance-condition in the case of an imperative sentence or a fulfilment-condition in the case of an optative".<sup>1</sup>

Hence, as a theory of meaning, this particular theory does help little to get proper explanation of meaning.

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1. Strawson, P.F., "Meaning and Truth", in The Philosophy of Language, ed. by Martinich, A.P., Oxford University Press, 1985, p. 105.

### THE USE THEORY OF MEANING

According to the use theory, meaning of a word is its use in a language. Unlike the traditional theories, the use theory does look at the meaning of a word from entirely different angle. The underlying principle of this theory of meaning is that since language is nothing but an instrument, words have meaning only if they can be used to perform some functions of language. Language cannot be divorced from other behaviours of man and hence, meaning of words cannot be divorced from their use in language.

Among the three aspects of language such as syntax, semantics and pragmatics, the use theory of meaning focuses its attention on pragmatic aspect. Hence, the proponents of this theory think that meaning of a linguistic expression is to be explained in terms of the use of that expression, that is to say, in terms of the way it is employed by the users of the language. According to Gilbert Ryle,

"--- to know what an expression means is to know how it may or may not be employed ---"<sup>1</sup>

The proponents of the use theory think that while trying to explain meaning in terms of truth-conditions, the truth theory

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1. Ryle, Gilbert, "The Theory of Meaning", in British Philosophy in the Mid-century, ed. by Mace, C.A., George Allen And Unwin Ltd, London, 1966, p. 255.

ignores diverse linguistic functions such as commanding, requesting, questioning and so on. A theory that isolates only one of the diverse functions of language and make the meaning of an expression depending on only that function, naturally deprives us of a general understanding of the various ways in which meaning of words enable us to use language. This limitation leads philosophers to seek a theory with broader objectives. They are of opinion that a theory of meaning should be a part of a theory of language explaining how language can fulfil its various linguistic functions. Hence, according to the use theory, any use of a sentence, whether to assert, question, command depends on the meaning of the words uttered.

That this particular theory does enjoy a special status and hence more accepted than the so-called traditional theories can be shown by the following arguments:

I) The proponents of the theory realise the fact that it is a simple mistake to try to locate meaning of an expression in some realm of being or other.

II) The theory rightly points out, since the meaning of a word is not a function of the physical properties of the word, and since a given pattern of sounds can have different meanings in different language-communities, or in the same language-community at different times, the meaning of a word must somehow be a function

of the activity of language users, of what they do in their employments of the word.<sup>1</sup> In fact, behavioral theorists, while trying to construe meaning solely in terms of the hearer's response are sadly indifferent to the fact that although the hearer may or may not respond to what is being said, it will always be true that the speaker is doing something failing of which, there can be no linguistic transaction. On the assumption that the meaning of a linguistic expression is somehow a function of what the speakers do with the expression, the proponents of the use theory hold that meaning of an expression is nothing but its use in the language.

III) Since the use theory does focus on diverse use of language, it stands free from any charge of over simplification. This is because the word 'language' involving in this theory is used in a wide sense. A language in this sense is not to be regarded as just collection of so many words, but must be seen in the whole context of human behaviour.

IV) The proponents of the theory are quite right in maintaining that by telling someone what a linguistic expression means we thereby put him in a position to be able to use it. Thus Alston says,

"Specifications of meaning are commonly provided when we want to teach someone how to use the expression

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1. Alston, P., "Meaning and Use", in The Theory of Meaning, ed. by Parkinson, G.H.R., Oxford University Press, 1978, p. 145

whose meaning we are specifying. Teaching someone how to use an expression is the native soil from which talk about meaning has grown".<sup>1</sup>

Despite the above advantages, this theory of meaning faces some difficulties while trying to explain meaning solely in terms of use.

The basic problem that stands on the way to explain the meaning of an expression lies in the fact that the particular term 'use' may be handled in many different ways. As example, the following sentences can be cited containing the term 'use'.

- a) Always use capital letter in the beginning of a sentence.
- b) What is the use of a tractor in ploughing land?
- c) Ram prefers to use dunlop tyres in his car.
- d) Mita uses 'sorry' frequently.

In each of the above cases, the particular term 'use' has been used in a way peculiar to its own. In (a), 'use' has been used in the sense of reference to a particular rule. In (b), 'use' is referred to a certain purpose. In (c), the particular term refers to a personal choice and in (d), it refers to a particular way of talking.

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1. Alston, P., "Meaning and Use", in The Theory of Meaning, ed. by Parkinson, G.H.R., Oxford University Press, 1978, p. 145

Secondly, an attempt to explain meaning in terms of 'use' makes it difficult to explain the process of language learning. Since an expression in a language can be used in a variety of ways, it becomes humanly impossible to learn all the possible uses of it.

Thirdly, pragmatic stand-point of this particular theory quite ignores compositional mechanism of a language and thereby fails to explain meaning of expression involving in creative aspect.

Moreover, in variety of cases occurring of the term 'use' has no direct bearing on meaning. Some such cases are the following:

- i) Expressions like proper names undoubtedly have a use but may not have always a meaning.
- ii) As a hearer one may use 'yea' frequently, although such use has no direct connection with meaning.
- iii) Sometimes meaningless expressions may have a use.

Cooper says,

"If I want to convince you that I am insane, it might be a good idea to answer your questions with gibberish. This use of gibberish does not make it meaningful, except in that sense of 'meaning' where meaning equals purpose".<sup>1</sup>

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1. Cooper, D.E., Philosophy and the Nature of Language, Longman, London, 1975, p. 39

iv) It has been argued that if meaning of a linguistic expression would be identical with its use, the two questions — 'What is the meaning of X?' and 'What is the use of X?' would be the same question. In fact, questions like 'What is the meaning of a spade?' can in no way be replaced by the question 'What is the use of a spade?'

In reply to the above difficulties arising from the term 'use', the proponents of the use theory may point out that philosophers while arguing in the above way, fail to realise significance of the phrase 'in a language'. According to the proponents of the use theory the phrase 'in a language' involving in the expression 'the meaning of a word is its use in a language' is a significant phrase. Hence, if we ignore the significance and concentrate our attention only on the expression 'the meaning of a word is its use' it would be undoubtedly a gross mistake. It would suggest that a word has a meaning in isolation, while in reality, many factors other than meaning are necessary for word to accomplish its purpose. One such factor is the grammar of language. In fact, the phrase 'in a language' as used in this theory does refer to the grammar of ordinary language. The grammar limits the conventional ways according to which we can use words. When somebody utters a series of words, his success or failure in asserting something will depend on the order in which he utters the word.

Hence, the expression 'meaning of a word is its use in a language' would turn into 'the meaning of a word is its use according to rules of grammar'.

Now, the point is that reference to 'rules of grammar' does not put the theory in any advantageous position for the following reasons:

i) In ordinary language, number of rules are neither limited nor fixed. Speaking of limited fixed rules would not be consistent with the essential feature of ordinary language. It is only in case of artificial language that the number of rules can be fixed. Natural language with its creativity, spontaneity cannot strictly adhere to rules of grammar.

ii) If knowledge of the rules of grammar were necessary condition for using language, it would not be possible for illiterate people quite ignorant of the so-called rules, to use language.

iii) In creative aspect, natural language has the property of being dynamic change, in the sense of addition and alteration. Hence, in such aspect it is not possible for natural language to follow strictly the rules of grammar. From this it does not follow that in creative aspect words involving in ordinary language cease to be meaningful. On the contrary, it is noticed that words used in such aspect attain some mysterious power and become more and more meaningful.

iv) While determining the meaning of a word, this particular theory ignores the role played by the context of utterance. The theory fails to realise that contextual information can compensate for many linguistic anomalies. In fact, if the context of utterance can provide enough information for understanding the ungrammatical utterance, the ordering of words need not be perfectly grammatical for the words to accomplish their purposes. When the cow-boy, for example, shouted by uttering the word 'tiger', the very use of the word undoubtedly served the purpose although the ordering of word was not perfectly according to grammatical rule.

The above account clearly points out that this theory does handle meaning as a highly abstract theoretical entity and hence fails to give a proper account of meaning. According to Paul Ziff, the use of a word depends upon many factors and some of them have no concern with meaning. Hence, it would be wrong to say that 'the meaning of a word is its use in a language',<sup>1</sup>

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1. Cooper, D.E., Philosophy and the Nature of Language, Longman, London, 1975, p. 39.