

CHAPTER-VI
MEANINGFULNESS, CULTURE
AND INTENTION

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Human language has a creative aspect. The creation of new sentences and therefore the creation of new meanings of the sentences is a property of all languages. This creative aspect of human language makes the fundamental distinction between human language and animal language or more properly between animal communication system and human communication system. Human being possesses a distinctive ability to express new thoughts and ideas and also has a distinctive ability to understand entirely different and unique expressions within the "instituted language." I use the term "instituted language" following Chomsky in his book Language and Mind. "Instituted language" is defined by Chomsky as "a language that is a cultural product subject to laws and principles partially unique to it and partially reflections of general properties of mind".¹ If language is subject to different laws and principles unique to specific culture then there can not be any such concept like meaningfulness and meaninglessness independent of any specific language. What is meaningful to one language may be meaningless to any other and vice versa.

1 Noam Chomsky, Language and Mind, Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968, p.6.

Let us discuss this important issue. The content of every culture is expressible in its language. Language difference is an important symbol of cultural difference. Linguistic materials, both form and content, are used to symbolize the actual meaning, the experience of the specific culture or society. Even language may be called as heuristic. The forms of language may predetermine our modes of observation and interpretation. The real difference between languages is not merely a difference of sounds or signs but the difference of "World-perspective" or World view, that is expressed by the sounds and signs of a language. But it does not follow that there is a simple overt correspondence between language and culture. The correspondence lies moreover on a very deep level. The establishment of this correspondence requires a long observational process because linguistic changes are not as rapid as the cultural changes.

Languages differ widely in respect of their vocabularies and the vocabulary is a very acute index of the culture of the people. Every language contains terms that crystallise in themselves the thought of a people, a culture, a civilization. If one's mother language is English he has the same word, the word 'snow' for falling snow, snow in the hill, packed snow or what ever may be. But to an Eskimo

this general or all inclusive word 'snow' is almost unthinkable or meaningless. He uses different words for different kinds of snow which are sensuously different from each other. A language called Aztec is even more poorer in this respect, using the same word 'sten' for cold, ice and snow. Sometimes the vocabulary differences and therefore the meaning differences exists between different languages because of some cultural and economic need. Thus the Arabs have a large vocabulary of terms referring to camels as the Eskimos have a large vocabulary of terms referring to snow because they have an economic necessity to camels and snow respectively. Vocabulary of a language reflects the physical as well as the social environment of a society. Some societies have two different words for 'aunt'. One word denotes the mother's sister and the other denotes the father's sister. Naturally in such cultures there would be different behaviours expected in relating to these two 'aunts'.

There is little doubt about the fact that language consists of a large body of grammatical rules. Every language, may be it Japanese, Chinese, English or most 'primitive' language like Hopi, has its particular grammatical structure. Languages have grammars which act as a guide to the norms of conventional and social correctness. Languages differ not only in how they construct their sentences but also in how

they cut down nature into different types and categories and put them in sentences. Thus Whorf says :

... it is not possible to define 'event, thing, object, relationship' and so on from nature but that to define them always involves a circuitous return to the grammatical categories of the definer's language.¹

There are wide variety of concepts and the principles of their classification among languages which are illustrated in different linguistic forms. For instance, in the Indo-European languages noun classification made generally on the basis of gender but for many other languages this principle do not function at all, although other methods are there for attaining the same end. It is very surprising that not only the things in the world has been categorised differently in different languages, the very important metaphysical concept like 'time' also varies sometimes with the languages. The major linguistic differences occur in the temporal forms of verbs. English system of tenses divides time into three distinct sections, past, present and future. In contrast Hopi verbs have no tenses. Whorf says :

... the Hopi language is seen to contain no words, grammatical forms, constructions or expressions that refer directly to what we call

1 Benjamin Lee Whorf, Language, Thought and Reality edited by John B. Carroll, The M.I.T. Press, Cambridge 1971, p.215.

"time", or to past, present, or future...
At the same time, the Hopi language is capable of accounting for and describing correctly, in a pragmatic or operational sense, all observable phenomena of the universe... The Hopi metaphysics imposes upon the universe two grand cosmic forms, which as a first approximation in terminology we may call Manifested or Manifesting (or unmanifest) or, again objective or subjective.¹

Thus what we call future is for the Hopi in the realm of the manifesting and what is past is for the Hopi in the realm of the manifested. Now the question arises : Is this merely a terminological difference or conceals the fundamental conceptual differences between the two languages ? These are not merely a terminological difference because the words Hopi employ for temporal information belong to a different group from that the words like 'future' belong. Our concept of time is a public, measurable and objective process and time for us is a never ending process. But in Hopi language time is a purely mental concept. The Hopi words for temporal information are used for talking about the mind, about hoping, what can be hoped for. The grammatical structure of Hopi language does not permit the objectification of time. If one tries to do so in Hopi language then meaningless expression

1 Benjamin Lee Whorf, Language, Thought and Reality
edited by John B. Carroll, The M.I.T. Press,
Cambridge 1971, pp.57-59.

would result because the logic of the specific language contribute the understanding of the meaning of the expression.

Some philosophers like Grice mentions of course that it is impossible to give an adequate account of the concept of meaning without reference to speaker's audience directed intentions of a certain kind. According to Grice the particular meaning of an expression is no doubt largely a matter of rule and convention of that language and may have cultural fervour. We have to follow the rules and conventions of classifying objects into different categories, grammatical rules for constructing an expression and so on but the rules and conventions can be only understood by reference to the concept of communication intention, that is he tries to establish that meaningfulness is primarily a matter of intention. This view if correct, has important bearing on the significance of the distinction between meaningfulness and meaninglessness. Role of intention may lead to obliterate the distinction or at least blunt the sharpness of this distinction between meaningfulness and meaninglessness. Moreover, if meaningfulness is primarily a matter of intention then the concept of meaningfulness would no way be a relative concept - relative with a specific culture or language. It would be a universal concept, for the men of any culture want to communicate

something or intends to communicate something by using the language. Now let us consider whether meaningfulness is primarily a matter of intention or not. According to the communication intention theory of linguistic meaning (non-natural meaning) the primary use of language is to make communication and what we want to communicate cannot be grasped in complete isolation from what is intended to be communicated. It is true that one of the most important function of using language is communication. And in communication intention plays a vital role. But since intention is a mental process we cannot know others intention directly. I can know my intention directly but to know the others intention or others to know my intentions we must have a objective means, a communicating process. Formal semanticist gives stress to this process -- the process of making explicit the complex intention, while the communication - intentionist gives stress only to what is to be communicated, not how it is to be communicated. Both the formal semanticists and the communication - intentionists take the one sided diet. Grice's account fails to bring home the truth that saying something or communicating is a process which involves rules, conventions and other paraphernalia. What we say is closely related with what we mean. Wittgenstein says "... a significant sentence is one which one can not merely say, but also think."¹ He also

1 Ludwig Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations, translated by G.E.M. Anscombe, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1976, Section 511.

says that language involves an elaborate system of rules - rules of meaning, grammatical and syntactical rules and these rules must be objective. If meaningfulness is only a matter of intention then what is the significance of producing certain rules for producing certain sound pattern or marks for communication? If meaning is primarily a matter of intention and not closely related with the outward process of making this intention explicit then meaning would be a matter of subjective affair. And then having a meaning would be comparable to having a pain, or some other mental state.

Moreover there is nothing like intention in itself. Intention and the process of expressing this intention are inseparable. This is true even for the speaker himself, where he is soliloquizing. Intention is a kind of thought process. And as thinking is essentially linguistic in nature (it does not mean that thinking requires a fully developed language like us) there may be no intention without language. Gricians, I think, would agree with this. What they disagree, if I am not wrong, is the fact that linguistic structure of intention and the linguistic structure of what we say may not always be the same. According to them, when somebody utters the sentence "The forest is full of ferocious animal" to someone, the real intention of the utter of the

sentence might not be simply to describe the present state of the forest but to warn the hearer not to go to forest and the actual meaning of the sentence lies in the intention of the speaker in uttering of the sentence. In this type of cases where we say one thing and mean another thing, I think, two other factors may involve, either his intention of not making explicit the intention of uttering the sentence or his presupposition that the content of the utterance would make his intention clear. Instead of uttering the sentence "The forest is full of ferocious animal, so you will not go to the forest" we can just say "The forest is full of ferocious animal" in a communicative situation and think the rest will be supplied by the situation or the context. So context is also a determining factor of meaning. We can not neglect this factor. Now what will be the meaning of the sentence in the case (1), where a higher order intention i.e. the intention of not making explicit the intention of uttering the sentence, is involved? Is the meaning of this sentence is determined by the syntactical and semantical rules of the language or by the intention which he does not want to communicate? Communication - intention theorists are silent about this.

To give an account of meaning neither the structural features of language nor the speaker's intention or

psychological states can ultimately be ignored. The concept of communication requires something which will be communicated and at the same time media of communication which is to ascertain acceptable or as stable or objective. Otherwise communication would not be possible. We have to give the same importance both to what we want to communicate and the media we use for this purpose. No priority would be given to one over the other. They are complementary and are not contrasting. Gricean theory contends that communication relies on the speaker's expectation that the hearer can recognize his intention through his utterance. But says nothing about the structure of language though he is concerned with linguistic meaning and relegate the question of linguistic structure to secondary status. If the real meaning of a sentence is primarily a matter of intention - intention of the speaker and if what I am saying is not the same as what I am intending then it is impossible for my hearer to grasp the real meaning of the sentence that I am uttering. If intention is the most dominant factor in meaning then meaningfulness would be an affair of the speaker and meaninglessness would be an affair of ^{the} hearer because the speaker intends to say something but the hearer does not understand it. Sincere speaker really wants to say something, he always says something meaningful. No one deliberately say something meaningless - even if it is possible for a speaker to produce

a meaningless expression (arbitrary collection of words, for example) deliberately. And if a speaker produces a meaningless expression intentionally then that expression serves certain purpose - the purpose of giving an example of meaningless expression and so on. That expression can not be vacuous.

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