Referential Meaning: The Static Aspects

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To clarify the relationship between a word and the thing to which it is assumed to refer, Ogden and Richards¹ constructed the following diagram:

This diagram has been useful in helping to make clear that the relationship between a word and the thing to which it is assumed to refer is neither God-given nor inherent in nature. Rather, it is a relationship that exists only because the members of the speech community concerned have habitually used the word to refer to that thing. Thus, the word “court” carries the meaning that it does only because it is habitually so used. That convention and ultimately general usage provide the connecting link is expressed by making the base of the triangle, which connects symbol with thing (“referent”), a broken line. The solid connection between the two is thus made only through thought (“reference”), which forms the apex of the triangle. The diagram also suggests that the relationship of symbol to user or hearer is, in at least some respects, a causal one.

Despite its value for these purposes, the diagram appears to have serious inadequacies. First, it suggests that the relationship between symbol and thing (“referent”) is as significant as the relationship between symbol and concept of the thing (“reference”). If a symbol is viewed as ultimately designating a thing, meaning would be thwarted whenever nothing corresponding to the particular concept actually existed, unless there was a shift at that point to the assumption that in such a case the symbol designated, instead, the concept of the thing. Would it not make simpler and more consistent sense simply to say that in all

cases the symbol refers to the thought, even though it may seem unnatural when the object corresponding to the thought is physically observable? Certainly, the meaning of the sentence, "You will find a consumer protection act in the 1969 Session Laws" is the same whether or not such an act is included in that volume.

Second, the left side of the triangle must, as a consequence, do double duty—once for the non-causal relationship between symbol and thought just discussed, and again for the causal. Unfortunately, the two cannot be differentiated in such a diagram.

Third, the diagram suggests that the relationship between thought and symbol, represented by the left side of the triangle, is similar to that between thought and referent, represented by the right. Whereas the relationship between thought and symbol is in one of its aspects a causal one whose direction depends on whether the thought is that of the sender or that of the receiver, the relationship between thought and thing is sometimes causal and sometimes not, and, where it is, it is a one-way relationship in which the thing provokes the thought (through the process of perception) whereas the thought does not provoke the thing.

Fourth, in using the right side of a symmetrical triangle to represent the relationship between thought and thing, Ogden and Richards seem to treat as coordinate with the relationship(s) between symbol and thought a relationship that falls within the area of epistemology. This relationship lies outside the field of meaning in the referential sense, and beyond the reach of the metalanguage, which is the language used to talk about language.

Fifth, the diagram takes no account of the relationships among symbols. To place these elements in more useful perspective within the general theory of meaning, sometimes called "semiotic," the following diagram is offered as an amplification of and possible improvement on that of Ogden and Richards:

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**STATIC MEANING DIAGRAM**

**TOTAL MESSAGE**

**SYMBOL A**

**SYMBOL B**

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**TOTAL THOUGHT** (DESIGNATA)

**CONCEPT A**

**CONCEPT B**

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**THING A**

**THING B**

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**THE "REAL WORLD"** (DENOTATA)

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In the terminology of the revised diagram, "concept" (designatum) replaces "thought or reference" and "thing" (denotatum) replaces "referent."

Aspect 1 is the relationship between symbols. Under the general classification developed by C.S. Pierce and his recent disciple, Charles W. Morris, this is the "syntactical" dimension of semiotic. For example, the statement that "juge" is French for "judge" lies in the domain of syntax. Soe does the problem of the squinting modifier and other forms of syntactic ambiguity. It is largely the area in which mathematics and deductive logic operate. It is described in the metalanguage.

Aspect 2 is the subjective, two-way causal relationship between a symbol and its corresponding concept, the tendency of minds to use or respond to particular symbols in particular ways. The tendency of minds to use a symbol in a particular way is based on habit. The tendency of minds to respond to a symbol in a particular way is based on a special kind of habit—the conditioned reflex. This is the "pragmatical" dimension of semiotic. It is largely the area in which "general semantics" operates. It is the area in which the abuse of stipulative definition called "Humpty-Dumptyism" operates. It is described in the metalanguage.

Aspect 3 is the objective, non-causal relationship, resulting from habitual use in Aspect 2, that exists between a symbol and the concept that it refers to. This is the "semantical" dimension of semiotic, represented by the dictionary ("Bill of Attainder means . . ."). It is described in the metalanguage. It is here that the diagram differs most significantly from that of Ogden and Richards.

Aspect 4 is the imputed relationship between a symbol and the existing physical object or activity (denotation), if any, corresponding to the concept that the symbol refers to in Aspect 3. This is a variant of the semantical dimension (Aspect 3). Because the existence or non-existence of the object or activity concerned is generally irrelevant to problems of meaning, the relationship adds nothing to Aspect 3. Indeed, it has no significance for semiotic and is beyond its reach.

Aspect 5 is the one-way causal relationship between an existing object or activity ("denotation") and its corresponding concept. For example, a building may generate in the viewer the idea of the state capitol; but the converse is not true. The relationship is described in the languages of psychology and philosophy (epistemology). It is beyond the reach of semiotic.

Aspect 6 is the relationship between two concepts. For example, the concept of default is closely linked with that of foreclosure. The mental relationship is described in the language of psychology. It is beyond the reach of semiotic.

Aspect 7 is the relationship between two existing objects or activities (denotata). For example, the House of Representatives and Senate must pass the identical bill if it is to become law. The relationship is described in the object language. It is beyond the reach of semiotic.

Where concept A and concept B (designata of specific denotata) are members of the same class (which is inherently conceptual), Aspect 8 is the range of characteristics that define the class. These comprise the subjective "connotation" or "intension" of the symbol designating the class. They are ordinarily represented by a connotative definition ("'child' means a person who has not attained his 21st birthday"). They are described in the metalanguage.

Where thing A and thing B (denotata) are members of the same class, Aspect 9 is the range of characteristics that define the class. They are the objective description of connotation or intension in the subjective sense.
Aspect 10 consists of the particular concepts (designata) that comprise the total thought expressed by the communication. They are described in the language of psychology.

Aspect 11 consists of the particular objects or activities (denotata), if any, that correspond to the particular concepts that comprise Aspect 10. They are described in the object language. They have no significance for semiotic and are beyond its reach.

Whatever its possible merits, this diagram must not be viewed as portraying all the elements that control or affect meaning. It is as much like a full-blown theory of meaning as a photograph of a garaged racing car is like the Indianapolis “500” race. It represents, in static form, basic elements that taken alone would constitute some of the tools of a very primitive language. The language of current use, on the other hand, is not confined to words that name concepts that correspond to objects. Moreover, because the conveyance of meaning depends largely on the dynamics of particular use, we must add the factors of context and its integrating force of purpose. But, despite these omissions, the diagram may help to illumine several elements basic to the total concept of referential meaning in communication.