

Meaning and Time: History and the Fregean Third Realm

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Wenn man das Element der Intention aus der Sprache entfernt, so bricht damit ihre ganze Funktion zusammen.

Wittgenstein, *Philosophische Bemerkungen* 20, 1929/30

1. What does time have to do with meaning? Words have meanings, and the meanings of words change from place to place, culture to culture, generation to generation and through the centuries. A good dictionary, especially an etymological one, tells us how complex and subtle such changes are and how rich the resulting spectra of meanings can be. But it is not only words that have meanings. Symbols and signs, a frown, a smile, and all kinds of representations and representational systems have their meanings and are meaningful. They, too, develop and change over time. They have their stories and their histories. I want to call this aspect the “temporally global aspect” of meaning. It is a macro aspect that extends over longer periods of time. Besides (and as we shall see not just “besides”) this global aspect, there is also a “local”, micro aspect regarding the role of time for the constitution of meaning: When we think of something *right now*, when we grasp an idea, express ourselves and communicate something to others, then meaning comes into play in a momentary and dynamic way. On this micro level, meaning is not just grasped but also created and recreated, and modified. This happens in a single moment of time, in the blink of an eye, and in a single person’s mind. This is the “temporally local aspect” of meaning – localized in a moment of time and in a single individual who intends, desires, imagines, thinks and expresses and thereby means something. “What did you mean when you said such and such?” also has the sense of: “What did you mean, intend, to say?” There is momentary intention underlying meaning.

We thus have two temporal aspects of meaning, a global and a local one, a historically extended and a phenomenological-psychologically concentrated one, one that might make us think of externalist views of meaning and one that appears closer to internalism. In this essay I will try to indicate how these two aspects are interwoven and interdependent. This, so it seems to me, is where problems of description and explanation in theories of meaning arise.

The following question is central to what follows: How essential are these two temporal aspects of meaning? That is, how important is time to what we think meaning is? On the one hand, it is obvious that languages and acts of meaning have temporal structures, simply because languages always develop and acts always happen *in time*. But on the other hand, time itself is so fundamental, primitive and universal, that it seems to play exactly the same role in the historical development of any language, be it English, German, or Chinese, and also to be the same in any act of thought, be it thinking of a tree, a house, or of friendship. Hence, how can *time itself* possibly contribute to the specific *structure* of a language, such that it develops, for instance, into German and not Chinese? And how can it contribute to the specific *content* of a thought, making it the thought of a tree and not of a house? Although there are essential *temporal aspects* to meaning, it seems that *time itself* does not matter.

We are all born into societies that have languages, traditions, cultures and all kinds of rich and complex representational systems that each of us, in his or her individual way, will learn, use, and modify. As members of society, we engage in communication. Each time we use a word, we do so in particular circumstances and with particular intentions that go beyond the literal meaning of the words and thus modulate the general meaning for those who use it right there and then. We are sensitive to such changing circumstances, and we are ready to adapt ourselves to them. This leads to modifications, traces and patterns that will be picked up by others in turn. We are always integral parts of the evolutionary processes of customs, cultures and languages, and, in these evolutionary processes, the local, momentary and individual aspects are intertwined with the global, extended and social ones. Each time you act and react, each time you think of something or plan what your next move should be, you are making use of your past experiences, your networks of associations and connections, those Husserlian *Verweisungszusammenhänge* and various kinds of background knowledge, all of which you more or less share with others: past, present, and possibly future.

We hardly ever think in neat syllogisms of pure logic. We usually go by associations, patterns, skills, and the familiar, well-trodden paths of thought. This is like going through grassland or hiking through the mountains. Sometimes there are paths, and sometimes there are none. There are usually open spaces and obstacles. There are mountains and there are valleys, and some ways appear easier and more promising than others. There are usually good reasons why certain paths develop the way they do: why they were chosen in the first place, why people follow them, and why they became well-trodden paths. There are good reasons for saying that water is H₂O, even if we might have another theory of chemistry in the future. But how “objective” are such reasons? What are the grounds and reasons for our concepts of, say, friendship, *Freundschaft*, *amitié*, *péng you*? How “objective” are their meanings and associations and implications? How objective are the values you associate with that fountain pen your mother gave to you some twenty years ago? Meanings are not just objects “out there”. They involve *significance* and *relevance*, not only *Bedeutung* but also *Bedeutsamkeit*, relevance with respect to other objects, other people, and often also, more or less essentially and more or less obviously, certain purposes and certain values. There is a wide range from the objective, via the quasi-objective and inter-subjective (the human and cultural), to the merely subjective (the personal and individual). The boundaries are often hard to draw, and if they are drawn, they are abstract and forced.

Water might be H₂O for a chemist, the means to survival for someone in the desert, or something that reminds you of something else from your past. Each of us can imagine such cases. But for reasons that are different for different people, some cases are easier to imagine or to communicate than others. Some cases require knowledge of theories. Others presuppose personal experiences. Some involve the experiencing subject more than others. Chemistry is more objective. It is something we can discover and that we imagine exists independently of us. But survival and memory are different. They involve the

experiencing subject, individuals who have memories, who survive and to whom survival matters. Nevertheless, involving subjects does not necessarily make things merely subjective, incommunicable or arbitrary. It just requires that the experiencing subject is involved. It still allows for inter-subjective features that are based on *common* cultural factors. Although the concepts of survival, friendship and love are not like H₂O, because they are *about* human beings and presuppose certain experiences, they are not incommunicable or arbitrary. They have general and inter-subjective features. Of course there is then *your* concept and idea of love, as well. But that is a further step.

The ways we experience and remember things in moments of time – in recollection, reproduction, expectation and projection – have effects on what ‘water’ (the stuff, the word, the concept, each in its way) means, or what it can possibly mean, and on the role it might play in our lives. The temporally local structures of perception, awareness, creation and recreation of meanings do matter in the creation of networks of meanings that we have and rely on. The momentary structures of intentionality that we find within each living individual are interwoven with the temporally global structures we find in the history and evolution of meaning that we are born into and that we keep modifying. The individual inherits and instantiates, supports, carries, and thereby modifies the global aspects of meaning.

2. Frege distinguished between *thoughts* and our *grasping of thoughts*. Thoughts for him belong to the “third realm”, an ideal Platonic realm where thoughts exist by themselves, independently of us, and to which we have access only through language. Language, so Frege thought, is our sole “bridge” from the sensible to the “supersensible”. Language has the task of approximating and “assimilating” (*anähneln*) itself to thought (Frege 1923, 167; see also Graeser, 2000, 38). How the “grasping” should be understood was less important to Frege and a question that could be left to psychology. But can we leave it at that? If time and the subject are essential to meaning, if there is an evolution of meaning and if the local, momentary aspects we pointed out above are part of the “grasping” of thought and leave their traces in the global networks and aspects of the meanings of words, then does all this not introduce relevant and “meaningful” structures into the third realm, so that it would well make sense to study the grasping and its logical significance? The Fregean realm of thought is certainly structured, and that part which is accessible to us bears structures that result from the (also temporal) structures of our grasping. Our psychology is not only of local and momentary relevance but also leaves traces in our history and evolution, which all matters to meaning. We can say this also in another way and on another level, the level of study and research: There are not only the natural sciences, such as physics or chemistry, which study things that exist independently of us and do not, so we take it, involve us in any way. There are also the humanities. They are about human beings, but they are not without their own standards. Besides the *Naturwissenschaften*, we have *Geisteswissenschaften*. Meanings and thoughts are not limited to the world of the natural sciences. And as soon as we look at their histories even the natural sciences show traces of human beings and our interests and ways of grasping.

Even if we accept Frege’s picture of an independent realm of thoughts, our language will cut out, or approximate, only certain parts of this realm, and the

development and history of our language will show what those parts will be, which thoughts will be grasped and which will not, what the connections between those thoughts and what the structures of those networks of thoughts will look like. *Our history is part of this realm*. We create facts. We fall in love, we fight wars, and we do science. And in all this, if time has an impact on what language we arrive at and how communication works, if the local and global temporal aspects of meaning are not external but intrinsic to meaning, then those aspects will affect those thoughts and their relations to each other. Even for Frege, who was more interested in the sciences than in poetry, “meaning” (*Bedeutung*) is not just an isolated object but involves relevance and meaningfulness. It seems to me the aspects of significance, relevance, and meaningfulness, *Bedeutsamkeit*, should be part of a theory of meaning in general. Meaning is part of our lives and not like a book that you can pick up and lay down at will. This becomes apparent when we look at those facts and thoughts that are about, and reflect, our own lives. They should belong to the Fregean third realm, too. Analytic philosophy has often not paid enough attention to this.

The Fregean “grasping” (*Fassen*) of thoughts and the Platonic “remembering” (*anamnesis*) of ideas are mental acts and processes. These acts have temporal structures of consciousness and attention, which have an impact on the structures and *Verweisungszusammenhänge* of the thoughts that are grasped and remembered. It thus should be worth our while, as philosophers, to take a closer look at such mental acts. Husserl gave detailed analyses of those acts, of inner time consciousness, synthesis, “retention” and “protention”. For him meaning was based on acts and not something in a third realm. Even if in the beginning he, too, idealized, focusing on abstract and idealized *species* of acts, and can in this respect be seen as a Platonist, his approach to meaning has the advantage of including the mental. Mental acts are instantiations of idealized acts, which in turn are the basis of meaning. Instead of “grasping”, we have “instantiation”. (See Simons 1995, 113.) Husserl later introduced his theory of the *noemata*, which are even closer to real, individual mental acts (*noesis*), because they depend on them. They are even less objects of a third realm. With this view and the transcendental turn and the emphasis on *epoché*, Husserl became less and less of a Platonist about meaning. Meaning is the result of something really happening, an unfolding of pre-linguistic experiences. It seems to me that this approach is more promising than Frege’s if we want to cast some light on the temporal aspects of meaning. At least it brings into focus the temporally *local* aspects of meaning.

But besides the local individual mental acts and their temporal structures of time consciousness and synthesis (*noesis*), there are also *global* temporal structures. We have to take into account that we are born into societies where meanings and whole networks of meanings already exist and are already alive through other participants and their interactions. These networks of meaning are partly the result of evolutionary processes that we always inherit, learn, incorporate, grow into, support and carry on with. In the process of doing so we also gradually modify them. The local and the global are always intertwined and interwoven, and there is no way around the dialectical features of these temporal part-whole relationships.

I think it should now be obvious that time does play a role in meaning. But it is difficult to give examples regarding the human perspective in general, because we cannot easily adopt a point of view that is radically different

from the one we have. A German can say things about the way the Chinese think, because he can try to adopt their point of view by learning their language and living in their society. This is a case in which the culture and language are accessible. But we cannot so easily step out from what is common and fundamental to *all* human beings, since there is no ready place for us. We would, for instance, have to adopt the point of view of a Martian. But this might even be impossible. Martians might be too different from us. It is as Wittgenstein said: *Wenn ein Löwe sprechen könnte, wir könnten ihn nicht verstehen.* (If a lion could talk, we would not be able to understand him. *Philosophische Untersuchungen*, Part II, xi).

Literature

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