

# Meaning

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## [Part I: Natural meaning distinguished from non-natural meaning]

Consider the following sentences:

“Those spots mean (meant) measles.”

“Those spots didn’t mean anything to me, but to the doctor they meant measles.”

“The recent budget means that we shall have a hard year.”

[...] I cannot say, “Those spots meant measles, but he hadn’t got measles,” and I cannot say, “The recent budget means that we shall have a hard year, but we shan’t have.” That is to say, in cases like the above, *x meant that p* and *x means that p* entail *p*.

[...]

Now contrast the above sentences with the following:

“Those three rings on the bell (of the bus) mean that the ‘bus is full.’”

“That remark, ‘Smith couldn’t get on without his trouble and strife,’ meant that Smith found his wife indispensable.”

[...] I can use the first of these and go on to say, “But it isn’t in fact full – the conductor has made a mistake”; and I can use the second and go on, “But in fact Smith deserted her seven years ago.” That is to say, here *x means that p* and *x meant that p* do not entail *p*.

[...]

When the expressions “means,” “means something,” “means that” are used in the kind of way in which they are used in the first set of sentences, I shall speak of the sense, or senses, in which they are used, as the *natural* sense, or senses, of the expressions in question. When the expressions are used in the kind of way in which they are used in the second set of sentences, I shall speak of the sense, or senses, in which they are used, as the *nonnatural* sense, or senses, of the expressions in question. I shall use the abbreviation “means<sub>nn</sub>” to distinguish the nonnatural sense or senses.

I propose, for convenience, also to include [...] under the head of nonnatural senses of “mean” any senses of “mean” found in sentences of the patterns “*A* means (meant) something by *x*” or “*A* means (meant) by *x* that ...” [...]

I do not want to maintain that *all* our uses of “mean” fall easily, obviously, and tidily into one of the two groups I have distinguished; but I think that in most cases we should be at least fairly strongly inclined to assimilate a use of “mean” to one group rather than to the other. The question which now arises is this: “What more can be said about the distinction between the cases where we should say that the word is applied in a natural sense and the cases where we should say that the word is applied in a nonnatural sense?” Asking this question will not of course prohibit us from trying to give an explanation of “meaning<sub>nn</sub>” in terms of one or another natural sense of “mean”.

[...]

I want first to consider briefly, and reject, what I might term a causal type of answer to the question, “What is meaning<sub>nn</sub>?” We might try to say, for instance, more or less with C.L. Stevenson,<sup>1</sup> that for *x* to mean<sub>nn</sub> something, *x* must have (roughly) a tendency to produce in an audience some attitude (cognitive or otherwise) and a tendency, in the case of a speaker, to *be* produced *by* that attitude, these tendencies being dependent on “an elaborate process of conditioning attending the use of the sign in communication.”<sup>2</sup> This clearly will not do.

[...] Let us consider a case where an utterance, if it qualifies at all as meaning<sub>nn</sub> something, will be of a descriptive or informative kind and the relevant attitude, therefore, will be a cognitive one, for example, a belief. (I use “utterance” as a neutral word to apply to any candidate for meaning<sub>nn</sub>; it has a convenient act-object ambiguity.) It is no doubt the case that many people have a tendency to put on a tail coat when they think they are about to go to a dance, and it is no doubt also the case that many people, on seeing someone put

on a tail coat, would conclude that the person in question was about to go to dance. Does this satisfy us that putting on a tail coat means<sub>nn</sub> that one is about to go to a dance (or indeed means<sub>nn</sub> anything at all)? Obviously not. It is no help to refer to the qualifying phrase “dependent on an elaborate process of conditioning ...” For if all this means is that the response to the sight of a tail coat being put on is in some way learned or acquired, it will not exclude the present case from being one of meaning<sub>nn</sub>. But if we have to take seriously the second part of the qualifying phrase “attending the use of the sign in communication”), then the account of meaning<sub>nn</sub> is obviously circular. We might just as well say, “*X* has meaning<sub>nn</sub> if it is used in communication,” which, though true, is not helpful.

[...]

A further deficiency in a causal theory of the type just expounded seems to be that, even if we accept it as it stands, we are furnished with an analysis only of statements about the *standard* meaning, or the meaning in general, of “sign.” No provision is made for dealing with statements about what a particular speaker or writer means by a sign on a particular occasion (which may well diverge from the standard meaning of the sign); nor is it obvious how the theory could be adapted to make such provision. One might even go further in criticism and maintain that the causal theory ignores the fact that the meaning (in general) of a sign needs to be explained in terms of what users of the sign do (or should) mean by it on particular occasions; and so the latter notion, which is unexplained by the causal theory, is in fact the fundamental one. I am sympathetic to this more radical criticism, though I am aware that the point is controversial.