

[Part VI: Timeless meaning defined in terms of meaning on an occasion]

Now perhaps it is time to drop the pretense that we have to deal only with “informative” cases. Let us start with some examples of imperatives or quasi-imperatives. I have a very avaricious man in my room, and I want him to go; so I throw a pound note out of the window. Is there here any utterance with a meaning_{nn}? No, because in behaving as I did, I did not intend his recognition of my purpose to be in any way effective in getting him to go. This is parallel to the photograph case. If on the other hand I had pointed to the door or given him a little push, then my behavior might well be held to constitute a meaningful_{nn} utterance, just because the recognition of my intention would be intended by me to be effective in speeding his departure. Another pair of cases would be (1) a policeman who stops a car by standing in its way and (2) a policeman who stops a car by waving.

[...]

Perhaps then we may make the following generalizations.

- (1) “*A* meant_{nn} something by *x* [on a particular occasion]” is (roughly) equivalent to “*A* intended the utterance of *x* to produce some effect in an audience by means of the recognition of this intention”; and we may add that to ask what *A* meant is to ask for a specification of the intended effect (though, of course, it may not always be possible to get a straight answer involving a “that” clause, for example, “a belief that...”).
- (2) “*x* meant_[nn] something [on a particular occasion]” is (roughly) equivalent to “Somebody meant_{nn} something by *x*.” Here again there will be cases

where this will not quite work. I feel inclined to say that (as regards traffic lights) the change to red meant_{nn} that the traffic was to stop; but it would be vary unnatural to say, “Somebody (e.g., the Corporation) meant_{nn} by the red-light change that the traffic was to stop.” Nevertheless, there seems to be *some* sort of reference to somebody’s intentions.

- (3) “ x means_{nn} (timeless) that so-and-so” might as a first shot be equated with some statement or disjunction of statements about what “people” (vague) intend (with qualifications about “recognition”) to effect by x . I shall have a word to say about this.

Will any kind of intended effect do, or may there be cases where an effect is intended (with the required qualifications) and yet we should not want to talk of meaning_{nn}? Suppose I discovered some person so constituted that, when I told him that whenever I grunted in a special way I wanted him to blush or to incur some physical malady, thereafter whenever he recognized the grunt (and with it my intention), he did blush or incur the malady. Should we then want to say that the grunt meant_{nn} something? I do not think so. This points to the fact that for x to have meaning_{nn}, the intended effect must be something which in some sense is within the control of the audience, or that in some sense of “reason” the recognition of the intention behind x is for the audience a reason and not merely a cause.

[...]

Now some question may be raised about my use, fairly free, of such words as “intention” and “recognition.” I must disclaim any intention of peopling all our talking life with armies of complicated psychological occurrences. I do not hope to solve any philosophical puzzle about intending, but I do want briefly to argue that no special difficulties are raised by my use of the word “intention” in connection with meaning. First, there will be cases where an utterance is accompanied or preceded by a conscious “plan,” or explicit formulation of intention (e.g., I declare how I am going to use x , or ask myself how to “get something across”). The presence of such an explicit “plan” obviously counts fairly heavily in favour of the utterer’s intention (meaning) being as “planned”; though it is not, I think, conclusive; for example, a speaker who has declared an intention to use a familiar expression in an unfamiliar way may slip into the familiar use. Similarly in nonlinguistic cases: if we are asking about an agent’s intention, a previous expression counts heavily; nevertheless, a man might plan to throw a letter in the dustbin and yet take it to the post;

when lifting his hand he might “come to” and say *either* “I didn’t intend to do this at all” *or* “I suppose I must have been intending to put it in.”

Explicitly formulated linguistic (or quasi-linguistic) intentions are no doubt comparatively rare. In their absence we would seem to rely on very much the same kinds of criteria as we do in the case of nonlinguistic intentions where there is a general usage. An utterer is held to intend to convey what is normally conveyed (or normally intended to be conveyed), and we require a good reason for accepting that a particular use diverges from the general usage (e.g., he never knew or had forgotten the general usage). Similarly in nonlinguistic cases: we are presumed to intend the normal consequences of our actions.

[...]

All this is very obvious; but surely to show that the criteria for judging linguistic intentions are very like the criteria for judging nonlinguistic intentions is to show that linguistic intentions are very like nonlinguistic intentions.

Notes

¹ *Ethics and Language* (New Haven, 1944), ch. iii.

² *Ibid.*, p. 57.