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The Diversity of Meaning

L. Jonathan Cohen

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First published in 1962, *The Diversity of Meaning* was written to provide a more constructive criticism of the philosophy of ordinary language than the more destructive approach that it was commonly subjected to at the time of publication.

The book deals with a range of philosophical problems in a way that cuts underneath the more typical orthodoxies of the time. It is concerned primarily with the concept of meaning and asks not just how people ordinarily speak or think about meanings, but also what is gained or lost by their so doing. The author challenges the assumption that there is only one way of talking about meanings and instead argues that no single analysis of meaning can suit the semantics of lexicographers, language-teachers, translators, logicians, historians of ideas, psychologists and philosophers. By examining various common concepts of meaning and their relations to one another, the book sheds light on the issues most alive in philosophical controversy at the time of publication, giving it lasting relevance for those interested in the history of philosophical thought and theory.

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The Diversity of Meaning

By L. Jonathan Cohen

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Contents

V Meanings Conceived as what are Understood in an Act of Communication

VI Meaning and the *a Priori*

VII Meaning and the Law of Extensionality

VIII Meanings Conceived as Topics for Formal-logical Investigation

IX Meaning and Vagueness

X The Concept of Meaning in the Problem of Natural Necessity

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Preface

First Edition

Chapters I, II, III and V of this book formed the substance of my lectures at Oxford during Hilary and Trinity terms, 1958. §§26, 27 and 30 incorporate some material from articles I have already published in *The Journal of Symbolic Logic*, vols. xxii (1957), pp. 225 ff., and *Philosophical Studies*, vol. xii (1961), pp. 72 ff., and from another article, 'A Formalisation of Referentially Opaque Contexts,' which is shortly to be published in *The Journal of Symbolic Logic*. I am grateful to the editors and officers of these journals for permission to reprint.

I am also indebted to my College for a period of sabbatical leave in Michaelmas term, 1960, in which I was able to complete the book.

Prof. G. Ryle, Prof. W. Kneale, Mr J. O. Urmson and Mr P. L. Heath very kindly read the whole or part of the book in typescript, and I have profited a great deal from their helpful comments and criticisms. Over a long period I have also gained much from discussions of most of the issues raised in the book with other friends, colleagues or pupils, too numerous to mention here.

Second Edition

The publishers have kindly allowed me to make some alterations in the second edition. As remarked above the chapters about natural languages were in the main prepared before 1958, in which year the work of Prof. N. Chomsky began to be available, and Chapter II has now been very considerably enlarged by an attempt to assess relevant aspects of the work of Chomsky and his associates. I am very grateful to Mr John Marshall for several long discussions of these topics with him, though, of course, he should not necessarily be taken to agree with what I say about them. In addition to the enlargement of Chapter

II, there are minor additions and corrections throughout the book, and two short appendices have been added in further support of certain views advanced in the text.

31 March 1966 L.J.C.

I

An Eighteenth-century Innovation in the Concept of Meaning

§1. Can meanings change?

Philosophers have said much, especially during the past half-century, about the different kinds of meaning that different kinds of words have and about the different kinds of ways in which words are used. Their arguments have often relied on such distinctions as those between customary and indirect meaning, logical words and object words, informative and emotive idioms, dispositional and occurrent predicates, or performatory and non-performatory verb-uses. Yet they have said little about the variety of ways in which it is useful to think about ordinary word-meanings. They have distinguished between kinds of meaning rather than between concepts of meaning. Certainly they have differentiated meaning from reference, or literal meaning from verbal associations, or the meaning of words from the meaning of clouds or of life, or the meaning of a man's words, in the sense of what his utterance would normally convey, from the man's meaning, in the sense of what he intends his utterance to convey. But in their general theories about the meaning of words philosophers have tended to treat the concept of linguistic meaning as essentially homogeneous. Meanings, they have said, are subsistent entities, or the causes and effects of speech, as if there is some single, nuclear pattern of discourse about meaning that constitutes the only proper subject-matter for philosophers analysing the concept of linguistic meaning. No relational theory of meaning will do, they have said, or any adequate theory must be a contextual one, as if there is just one philosophical problem of meaning, not many.

The main destructive purpose of what follows is to show that this has been a mistake, and one of mark. The constructive purpose is to draw some, but by no means all, of the distinctions that need to be drawn in the field, to expose certain relations of dependence and independence between the various concepts of meaning that emerge, and

to show how confusion between those concepts can hamper important intellectual interests both inside and outside philosophy. Thus the book aims not so much to describe how people of various kinds do actually think about meanings, but to evaluate what is gained or lost by their so thinking, and to do this not speculatively or from the standpoint of some special interest but within the perspective of an inter-disciplinary survey in which some measure of regard is paid to the literature of the various disciplines concerned.

One question at least should have a simple answer if meaning is essentially a homogeneous concept. Yet the answer turns out to be far from simple, and to ask the question is to cut a path into the heart of the whole problem. Can meanings change? Have they periods of growth and periods of decay, like habits of dress or house-building? Or are they as fixed beyond recall as the ratio one natural number bears to another? Have they histories to be traced or just single, once-and-for-all accounts to be drawn up? Have they dates and durations, or is time irrelevant to them? Are we to think of them temporally or timelessly?

Perhaps the most tempting answer to this question is to echo some remarks of Frege's. 'The same words,' Frege writes, 'on account of the variability of language with time, take on another sense, express another thought.' Meanings do change, but just in the sense that words change their meanings. Words are continuous through change of meaning, but meanings themselves have no core of continuity relative to which they may undergo a peripheral change. Not even the utterance of the same words 'this tree is covered with green leaves' on different occasions presents us with an example of a thought or meaning that changes, since a different thought is expressed on each occasion. The words 'this tree is covered with green leaves' are insufficient to express any thought at all except in association with their circumstances of utterance. In Frege's view all thought, all meaning, whether it be the thought expressed by Pythagoras' theorem or the thought that the tree in his garden is, at the time he writes, covered with green leaves, is equally 'timeless, eternal, unchangeable'.[1] Thus justice seems to be done both to the lexicographer's interests and to the logician's. On the one hand it is recognized that dictionaries can chronicle the succession of meanings a word may have in the long history of a language. On the

[1] 'The Thought: a Logical Inquiry', tr. A. M. and M. Quinton, *Mind*, lxv (1956), pp. 309 f.

other hand formal logic is provided with a distinctively timeless subject-matter, where the truth-value of a thought and its consistency or inconsistency with other thoughts are equally invariant.

Yet here as elsewhere (compare §24 below) Frege has too concentrated a vision for him to be a reliable guide in the general problem of meaning. Anyone who answered the question 'Can meanings change?' along such lines, even if he held that to treat meanings as timeless is not necessarily to treat them, like Frege, as subsistent entities, would be erring or oversimplifying in at least four crucial respects. There is both less change and more change than Frege allows for. In a still important use of 'meaning' and of 'word' it is true to say that no word of any utterance ever changes its meaning. In a use of 'meaning' that was important till the eighteenth century, and sometimes still occurs, it is true to say that no word in any language ever changes its meaning. In the use of 'meaning' that is of principal importance to modern lexicographers the meaning of an English sentence is no more timeless than the purpose for which an Englishman marries. In a use of 'meaning', 'thought', or 'concept' that is important to modern historians meanings, thoughts or concepts themselves can have a core of continuity through change. To establish these four theses against the Fregean position is a first step in exposing just how multiform is the concept of meaning.

§2. Meanings as unchangeable properties

A speech has a date and duration, not so its meaning. When a speech is over nothing can change what it meant. What has been said cannot be unsaid, though later remarks may contradict it. Even the ambiguities in this evening's speech must remain such for ever, though tomorrow's press conference may clarify the speaker's intentions. Though the speech may be differently translated in different countries or at different periods, no one could judge the correctness of each new translation unless he assumed the meaning of the original speech to remain the same. Though expositions of what has been said can change, they can always be criticized, and the question whether a given exposition is loose or close, fair or biased, accurate or inaccurate, would not arise unless the meaning itself were invariant under exposition. People often make up their minds that some statement in a speech is false, some

inference invalid, some promise unworthy or some exhortation ignoble. But they would never be justified in doing this if the speech's meaning could change, and it is often of no slight importance to come to a final decision on such matters. A people might be forced by its government to transform its language. But if the government claimed to be legislating retrospectively so as to change the meaning of last year's election addresses its opponents would be entitled to object that it was enforcing an incorrect exposition of those speeches rather than changing their meaning.

If the meaning of a speech is as undatable and unlocatable, as timeless and unchanging, as the ratio of one natural number to another, so too are the meanings of its thousand-odd words or its hundred-odd sentences. 'Word', 'sentence', 'clause', etc., turn out to have two uses that differ from one another not only in their criteria for what is to be reckoned as a countable unit, but also in their relation to time and change. Not only is the first sentence of this book thirty-four words long, though only twenty-six English words occur in it. In addition, its meaning is in principle unchangeable, unlike that of the English sentence it instantiates. The thirty-four words that compose it have a history in space and time, in so far as their initial writing down and subsequent printing or publication are datable events. But they cannot have now one meaning, now another, like the English words they instantiate.

It would be a mistake to suppose that the difference between these two uses of 'word', 'sentence', 'clause', etc., is covered by C. S. Peirce's terminology of 'types' and 'tokens'. Peirce's aim[1] was to distinguish between the sense of 'word' in which one might say of a particular man that he has a vocabulary of five thousand words or of English that it has more words than Latin, and the sense in which one might say of a particular piece of paper that five words have been written on it, or of a particular room on a particular afternoon that only five words were spoken in it. The words of a language are certainly types in Peirce's sense. But the words of a speech are not what he called tokens. If a speech is written down or its tape-recording played over, the number of tokens produced is doubled, while the number of words remains precisely the same. Conversely, if two men proclaim the same slogan 'Disarmament' by shouldering together a single banner on which this slogan is inscribed, there is only one token (until they are

[1] *Coll. Papers*, ed. C. Hartshorne and P. Weiss (1931), 4.537.

photographed) but two one-word proclamations. The words of a book, speech, letter, conversation or statute should not be confused with the tokens composing its original utterance or with the tokens composing one of its copies or recitals, any more than with the English or French words occurring in it.

Suppose therefore we call the first of these three things *utterance-words*, and the last *language-words*, leaving the sense of quotation-marks to be determined by their context. Any two tokens are the same utterance-word or utterance-sentence if they are, are intended to be, and would normally be taken as being copies, recordings, recitals, etc., of the same token, or if one is such a copy of the other. Then what has been established is that utterance-words have meanings that are timeless and unchanging in the very strong sense of being unalterable properties of the utterance-words to which they belong.

Can language-words have meanings that are timeless and unchanging in anything like the same sense? Until about two centuries ago almost no one would have ascribed them meanings in any very different sense. The uses of words changed then as they do now. But whatever their interest in language people almost always talked about meanings in much the same timeless kind of way as they still talk about the ratio of two to four. Metaphor was recognized, but only as a figure of speech, not as a process by which eventually the non-metaphorical use of a word may be extended. If a usage was metaphorical on one occasion, it must also be so on any other occasion. The meaning of a word was thought of as far too integral a property of that word, far too intimately linked with the word itself, whether by nature or by convention, for the word ever to lose one meaning or acquire another. Even when this notion of an intimate linkage between word and meaning did not support a superstitious belief in the magical power of words, it normally blocked the way to the historical study of semantic change. Similarly the significance of a sentence's grammatical construction was assumed to be as timeless and unchanging as a statement's logical form, with which it was often in part confused. Occasionally an author might stipulate a special sense for his own purposes or argue what the true meaning of a word was. But the basic meanings of every word and construction in the language, whether properly acknowledged or not, were assumed to be invariable.

It was not that all features of a language were assumed eternally the

same. The origin of language was a notorious problem as early as the date of Plato's *Cratylus*. Ancient writers also often distinguished between forms or inflections that had once been popular and those that were now so. Sometimes, like Phrynichus, they made the proviso that the classical forms were more correct.[1] Sometimes, like Horace, they accepted current usage as arbiter.[2] Bacon went so far as to remark that the pronunciation of words is continually changing.[3] All scholars recognized that new words, along with their meanings, might come into use, or old ones, along with theirs, drop out.[4] But words were rarely, if ever, thought of as having one meaning at an earlier period and another at a later. A seventeenth-century nominalist like Hobbes was in no way ahead of Plato here. Adam, says Hobbes, and others added new words to the language given by God, and after the destruction of Babel 'the diversity of tongues that now is' proceeded by degrees from the survivors and their descendants, 'and in tract of time grew everywhere more copious'.[5] Though he noticed the gradual addition of new words, he ignored the gradual extension of old ones, separately or in combination, to new uses. Yet it is in the latter as well as, if not more than, in the former that the power and richness of a language is evident.

From Timothy Bright's *Characterie* of 1588 onwards many thinkers even proposed the construction of new written languages and their use for certain purposes in place of either Latin or the local vernacular. But they took for granted that such languages when in general use would retain all the grammatical and lexicographical features originally given them by their inventors. Only on this assumption could it make sense for Descartes, Dalgarno, Wilkins, Leibniz and others to propose a language that would combine the essentials of an international auxiliary with those of a systematically precise scientific terminology.[6] New

[1] *Ecloge*, preface.

[2] *De Arte Poetica*, ll. 47–72.

[3] *De Augmentis Scientiarum*, VI, i (*Philosophical Works*, ed. J. M. Robertson, 1905, pp. 525 f.).

[4] Cf. J. Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, II, xxii, 7.

[5] *Leviathan*, I, iv (Everyman edition, 1914, pp. 12 f.).

[6] Descartes, letter to Mersenne of 20th November 1629, *Œuvres*, ed. C. Adam and P. Tannery (1897), vol. i, pp. 76 ff.; J. Wilkins, *Essay towards a Real Character and a Philosophical Language* (1668); G. Dalgarno, *Ars Signorum* (1661); Leibniz, *Opuscules et Fragments Inédits*, ed. L. Couturat (1903), pp. 27 f. Cf. J. R. Firth,

words might need to be added to such a language as human knowledge grew. But there could not be divergent directions of semantic change, one prompted by the needs of everyday life and the other by those of theoretical knowledge, because there would not be any semantic change at all. Just as at that period an acceptable scientific theory was not thought open to revision or recall, so too the meanings of words in a satisfactory new language were not thought open to change.

The kind of event that would nowadays be called a change of meaning did not by any means go unnoticed. It was known under another name. It was called a deviation from, or a reversion to, the true meaning. When a Renaissance humanist, like Lorenzo Valla,[1] preferred the Latin of Cicero and Quintilian to that of Boethius and the Schoolmen, and tried to show in detail what such a preference implied, he did not conceive of his task as a reversal of the change by which the classical language had been transformed into the medieval one. For him Latin itself had not changed at all, but only the correctness with which it was written or spoken. As he conceived it, his task was not to reform Latin but to revive it. Later, when a standardized vernacular was taking the place of Latin as a literary medium, seventeenth-century French grammarians, like Vaugelas, normally treated provincial and plebeian usages as corruptions of the 'pure French' spoken by most people at court. The sovereign usage determining the laws of French was 'la façon de parler de la plus saine partie de la Cour, conformément à la façon d'écrire de la plus saine partie des Auteurs du temps'. Vaugelas admitted that over a generation a minute change in 'good' or 'pure' French might occur. But he conceived of linguistic change primarily as the appearance of new words or combinations of words and the disappearance of old ones, not as a combination of this with a process of transformation in the meanings of continuously existing words.[2] On such a view there could be no history of a given word's meaning, but only a chronicle of the word's popularity. Vaugelas's contemporaries disagreed with him on many points of grammatical or lexicographical

Papers in Linguistics (1957), pp. 103 ff.; L. J. Cohen, 'On the Project of a Universal Character', *Mind*, lxiii (1954), pp. 49 ff.; R. W. V. Elliot, 'Isaac Newton's "Of an Universall Language"', *Mod. Lang. Review*, lii (1957), pp. 1 ff.

[1] Cf. *de Linguae Latinae Elegantia* I, xiii; I, xvi; and *passim*, esp. the preface (ed. of 1577, pp. 52, 58, etc.).

[2] *Remarques sur la Langue Françoise*, ed. of 1738, vol. I, pp. 18 ff., 68 ff., and *passim*.

detail. Two critics, la Mothe le Vayer and Scipion Dupleix, also objected in general that Vaugelas's rules were too strict and tended to impoverish the language. Dupleix refused to accept the speech of court ladies as a standard, and la Mothe le Vayer held it a fault in Vaugelas that he took court speech at all as a criterion of good usage. But none of Vaugelas's contemporaries seem to have had anything more than he to say about change of meaning.[1]

The prevailing attitude is neatly summed up in Hobbes's political philosophy. In what he called 'the state of nature' controversies might arise about the meanings of words like 'right' and 'wrong', or 'pound' and 'quart', and it was for the sovereign, set up by the social contract, to settle such a dispute. When the sovereign does so, Hobbes does not think of him as changing the sense of a word, but as determining its proper sense.[2] A normative approach to the study of meaning excluded a historical one. Similarly from the time of Panini in ancient India the task of a grammarian had remained the same. It was still to give rules, not to describe, narrate or explain. Even if his analysis of a language was as subtle and comprehensive as Panini's, it was constructed in terms of a system of permanent or quasi-permanent rules[3] which blocked all interest in the temporal dimension of language-study.

Apparent exceptions to these generalizations are hard to find and, when found, seem not to be downright counter-examples, though it would perhaps be rash to claim that no such counter-examples exist at all. Thucydides remarked how in the bitterness of civil strife the Corcyreans and others changed the meanings of certain Greek words as they thought fit. Reckless daring came to be described as loyal courage and prudent delay as disguised cowardice.[4] But if Thucydides had thought alterations of meaning from period to period, or culture to culture, a commonplace he would not have chosen this way of highlighting the enormities of Greek civil strife. For his point to be a telling one he must have relied on his readers' sharing the assumption that changes of meaning were utterly abnormal. In any case the changes he

[1] Cf. *Commentaires sur les Remarques de Vaugelas*, ed. J. Streicher (1936) pp. 971, 977, 987, 990, etc.; and F. Brunot, *Histoire de la Langue Française* (1909) vol. III, pp. 24 ff.

[2] *Elements of Law*, ed. F. Tönnies (1928), II, 10, 8.

[3] Cf. O. Böhtlingk's ed. (1887), pp. 20, 337, etc.

[4] *History of the Peloponnesian War*, III, lxxxii, 4.

remarked on consisted in the adaptation of familiar words to the needs and passions of the moment. They were not long-term changes in the Greek language that a good dictionary would nowadays record. John Locke recognized, in a sense, that the meanings of words may sometimes be altered. But for him the phrase 'altering of a signification' does not refer to a change in English or some other language. It refers just to some special use of a word that a particular individual may decide to make, and Locke advises this to be done warily, sparingly, and only after due stipulation, since 'men think it a boldness'. Locke admits the possibility that such a special usage may one day pass into common parlance, but shows no awareness that new usages which have not been deliberately coined as technical terms are constantly developing within most languages.[1] Occasionally Vaugelas speaks about the disappearance of a word in one of its senses. But even this is not quite the same as recognizing that it may change its sense.[2]

A second thesis against the Fregean position is thus reasonably well established. The meanings of language-words, at least until the eighteenth century, were normally regarded as unchangeable properties of them. One must take account of this if one wishes to appraise Aristotle's theory of definition, Spinoza's analysis of scientific knowledge, or any other piece of classical philosophy that hinges partly on a theory of meaning, without doing a great injustice to its author. But the same charity should not extend to modern theories of meaning or to philosophies that rely on them.

§3. Meanings as changeable properties

The late eighteenth century was the first period to treat words' meanings as raw material for historians as well as for normative grammarians and language-planners. To prepare the way for the new point of view some bold spirit had to cry down the pretensions of normative grammar and lexicography. No one did this with better irony than J. G. Hamann when in 1760 he remarked of the French Academy – the principal function of which, according to Article 24 of its statutes, was to determine the 'rules' of the French language – that 'in as large a city as Paris are foregathered *annually* without expense, *forty* learned men

[1] *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, III, vi, 51.

[2] E.g. *Remarques*, ed. of 1738, I, p. 62.

who know infallibly what is pure and decent in their mother-tongue and what is necessary for the monopoly of this second-hand trade'. Hamann insisted that 'the purity of a language diminishes its riches, a too strict correctness diminishes its strength and manhood', and that 'a mind which thinks at its own expense will always interfere with the language'.[1] The way was now clear for J. G. Herder's explicit acceptance of meaning-change as a normal phenomenon in human history. In 1770 he wrote that on occasions, in the development of a language, 'one word was lost to a person, another retained, another was diverted from the main point by a secondary view; sometimes, with the revolution of ages, the sense of the original idea became changed'.[2] If one compares this with Hobbes's account of the origin of language it is most noticeable that what Herder has added is the conception of meaning-change.

Like many intellectual innovations the new way of thinking about meanings did not at its outset always appear in an unalloyed form.

Samuel Johnson, in the preface to his *Dictionary* published in 1755, had recognized that 'in every word of extensive use it was requisite to mark the progress of its meaning and show by what gradations of intermediate sense it has passed from its primitive to its remote and accidental signification'. He noted also that 'as by the cultivation of various sciences a language is amplified, it will be more furnished with words deflected from their original sense. . . . The tropes of poetry will make hourly encroachments, and the metaphorical will become the current sense.' But he retained enough of the old normative approach to language to prevent him from paying equal respect to all changes of meaning. The writers of the century prior to the Restoration were those whose works he took as 'the wells of English undefiled, as the pure sources of genuine diction'. Where earlier or later usage differed from this classical model it was almost always to be disregarded as an imperfection.

Lord Monboddo, in a volume first published in 1776, noted that what he called radical words often changed their meanings. 'There is nothing, either in nature or in the grammatical art, that determines the proper signification of a radical word. It is fixed by use alone; and, as that is variable in all living languages, it frequently happens that words change their signification.' But he thought derivative, inflected and

[1] *Schriften*, ed. F. Roth (1821), vol. II, pp. 151 f. and 130 f.

[2] *Über den Ursprung der Sprache*, Eng. tr. of 1827, p. 100; cf. also pp. 59 ff.

compounded words 'have what may be truly called a proper and natural signification, being such as is ascertained by grammatical rules. . . . When such words lose this signification, and denote something else, it is an abuse and corruption of language.'[1] For radical words Monboddo was a modern, descriptive lexicographer, for others an old-fashioned, normative one, though even here he conceded that we had to submit to any abuse that was firmly established by custom.

Many thinkers, like Condorcet in 1793,[2] did not clearly distinguish the fact of semantic change from the value they attributed to it. But their faith in human progress was not merely a reversal of the Renaissance humanists' tendency to see in contemporary Latin usage a decline from the perfections of antiquity. They did not aim to replace the old doctrine that all present differences from classical usage were a falling away by a new doctrine that all past differences from present usage were a falling short. They held instead that it was language itself which changed, rather than the degree of human fidelity to its rules. They sought histories of linguistic development, not chronicles of elegance and solecism. And wherever 'enlightened' contempt, like Condorcet's, for the primitive and medieval gave way under the advocacy of Herder and his followers to an attempt to understand each period, people or culture in its own circumstances, interest in the value of linguistic change soon disappeared into a scholarly preoccupation with the pattern of its detail, and in particular into the immense labours of those who then began to study the history of the Indo-European, Finno-Ugrian and other language families. When Sir William Jones suggested in 1786 that Latin, Greek, Persian and the Germanic languages were all probably derived from a common parent, he sowed a seed in ground that had already been fertilized by Herder's historical-mindedness. It is true that philologists did not begin to study meaning-change systematically until more than half a century after they had reached a comparable stage in morphological enquiry.[3] But at any rate the new conception of a word's meaning as something that may be in a continual

[1] *Of the Origin and Progress of Language*, II, iv, 3.

[2] *Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind*, tr. J. Barraclough (1955), pp. 22, 37, 166.

[3] Cf. Sir W. Jones, 'Third Anniversary Discourse of the Asiatic Society' in *Works* (1799), vol. I, p. 26; and S. Ullmann, *The Principles of Semantics* (1951), p. 1.

state of transformation soon spread to philosophers whose main interests were not in the field of language. In 1810 the moral philosopher Dugald Stewart was discussing historical changes in the meaning of words with an obvious recognition of their importance,[1] and a little later J. S. Mill was doing the same and at somewhat greater length in his *System of Logic*.[2]

All that remained was for Saussure and others to emphasize that an exclusive interest in linguistic history is too one-sided a reaction against the old muddling-up of normative and descriptive linguistics. Descriptive studies are also needed to abstract and record the pivotal stages in a continuum of change. Synchronistic and diachronistic enquiries – studies of a single period and studies through several periods, respectively – can and should complement each other.[3] Differences in a word's meaning from place to place are as interesting as those from period to period. But this is not to reintroduce a timeless mode of discourse about meanings in a language. Though dialect surveys and other synchronistic studies do not narrate changes, they nevertheless resemble statements about habits of dress or house-building more than they resemble statements about the ratios between natural numbers. They describe no timeless features of a language, but only what was true of it between certain dates.

In the past two generations, also under Saussure's powerful advocacy,[4] the programme of treating speech rather than literature as the primary material for linguistic study, and phonemes rather than letters as its primary units, has doubly reinforced the nineteenth-century tendency to exclude normative discussion from academic linguistics. First, since the norms of good style, though not irrelevant to speech, have most often been invoked in the criticism of literature, it is easier to separate the science of language from the criticism of style if linguists are supposed to study the spoken word rather than the written one. Secondly, even outside literature written utterances tend to be more standardized in language than do spoken ones: we thus take advantage of their relative permanence and achieve communication over much

[1] *Philosophical Essays* (1810), pp. 222 ff.

[2] IV, iv, 6; and IV, v.

[3] *Cours de Linguistique Générale*, ed. C. Bally and A. Sechehaye (1916), pp. 119 f., etc.

[4] Ibid., pp. 47 ff.

wider stretches of space and time. Those who concentrate their interest on speech are therefore less likely to be preoccupied with the problem of norms and more open-minded in discerning variation. No doubt the reaction here too, as in the case of the historical movement, has been somewhat excessive. But when linguists return, as some of them are now doing,[1] to the study of written language they are interested in facts not rules, in how people do write, not in how they ought to write.

The meaning of a language-word, therefore, to a modern lexicographer or grammarian is a changeable property. That is why he can discuss, as Herder's predecessors could not, how a decline in the relative importance of pastoral wealth extended the meaning of the Latin word 'pecunia', or how the use of the rosary gradually changed that of the English word 'bede' or 'bead'.[2] Whereas the causal liaisons of semantic change were beyond the conceptual reach of those who treated meanings as unchangeable properties, they are now a familiar topic of research – because it is generally accepted that a word may remain the same while changing its meaning. If a word itself changes, its continuity through change is now normally thought to consist in similarities of form alone rather than in those conjoined with identity of meaning. When a linguist explains the meaning of the modern French word 'épices' as having evolved out of the medieval druggists' use of 'species' to refer to the four kinds of ingredients in which they traded (saffron, cloves, cinnamon, and nutmeg),[3] he is explaining a later meaning of a word in terms of an earlier meaning of the same word, even though the form of the word has changed, and his explanation presupposes that morphological similarities are sufficient to establish verbal continuity. If verbal continuity required semantic identity as well, every explanation of this kind would either break down altogether or be weakened into a tautology.

Finally, if a linguist thus conceives a word to vary its meaning, rather than a meaning to vary its word, he is not thereby committed to thinking of each meaning in itself as something eternal and out of time, in the Fregean manner. He is like a historian of dress who thinks of men

[1] E.g. A. McIntosh, 'The Analysis of Written Middle English', *Trans. Philological Soc.* (1956), pp. 26 ff.

[2] M. Bréal, *Semantics*, tr. H. Cust (1900), p. 116, and L. Bloomfield, *Language* (1935), p. 440.

[3] M. Bréal, op. cit., p. 109.

as varying their clothes, rather than clothes their men, and does not therefore have to suppose that clothes or fashions are timeless. Whatever is needed for other kinds of concern with the meanings of language-words, whatever the timelessness of utterance-words' meanings, the lexicographer's concept of meaning can safely be a temporal one. For him the meanings a word has at different times are as much historical phenomena as the various forms it takes. The thoughts it expresses are items in the flux of history, not eternities in a timeless realm of formal logic.

§4. Meanings as changing continuants

But though a grammarian or lexicographer does not need to think of a meaning as something timeless, and would not naturally do so, the main pattern of his work, considered in isolation from other disciplines, would nevertheless remain undamaged if he in fact thought of them in the Fregean manner. Dialect surveys, historical researches and other empirical enquiries would merely need to be interpreted as showing which words expressed which timeless thoughts at what times and places. The element of timelessness would be unnecessary and incongruous, not radically detrimental. But this is not true for the modern historian of ideas. He has much to lose if he cannot take meanings to have dates, durations and changing forms.

To see this one must first distinguish between what it is convenient to call the verbal and the conceptual planes of discourse about meaning. Though an apparatus of technical terms here is perhaps ugly, and certainly not indispensable, it will serve to bring into relief a serious error in the Fregean position.

On the verbal plane statements about specific meanings cannot be translated throughout into another language or paraphrased in their own: quoted words and sentences must be left in their original form. When someone tells me 'The German word "Katze" means a cat' and I pass on this information to a Frenchman in his own language, my translation would turn a true statement into a false one if I put 'chat' for 'Katze' as well as for 'cat'. Though a non-specific statement like 'The meanings of all common English words are to be found in *The Pocket Oxford Dictionary*' can be translated as a whole, such a statement is normally to be reckoned at the verbal level if a specific discussion of the meanings referred to cannot be so translated.

On the conceptual plane almost all statements about meanings, specific and non-specific alike, can at least in principle be translated as a whole from one language to another. Discussions about the meaning of 'western civilization' in modern political parlance, or about the meaning of 'mass' in seventeenth-century physics, can be rendered throughout into any language sufficiently rich to contain methods of expressing the concepts concerned. The quotation-marks around these words do not bar us from translating them. Certain other statements also belong to the conceptual plane even though a straightforward application of the translatability criterion would place them on the verbal one. When a word-use has been more or less confined to the speakers of one particular language a historian of ideas can conveniently refer to it by some such locution as 'the meaning of "religio" in ancient Latin culture'. The quoted word cannot here be translated. But if it can, at least in principle, be paraphrased by other words in the same language without being considered to alter the sense of the statement – if the word-meaning concerned is as much that of the word's synonyms, if any, as of the word itself – the statement belongs to the conceptual plane.

This distinction applies to discourse about the meanings of speeches, books, conversations, statutes, etc., as well as to that about meanings in languages, and thus, in the light of the distinction drawn in §2 between a language-word and an utterance-word, two further senses of words like 'word', 'phrase', 'sentence', etc., are generated. Corresponding to the notion of a language-word or language-sentence, as when a lexicographer is concerned with the meaning of the German word 'Katze', we also have the notion of a *culture-word* or *culture-sentence*, as when a historian of ideas is concerned with the meaning of the word 'mass' in seventeenth-century physics. Quoted culture-words are translatable: quoted language-words, tied to their own forms, are not. Corresponding to the notion of an utterance-word or utterance-sentence, as when a translator of Newton's *Principia* is concerned to render the meaning of each sentence in turn from Latin into English, we also have the notion of a *saying-word* or *saying-sentence*, as when an editor of Newton's great work is concerned to elucidate the implications of his opening sentence. Quoted saying-sentences are translatable: quoted utterance-sentences, tied to their own forms, are not. The number of saying-words, saying-sentences, etc., in a speech or book

is indeterminate, unlike the number of utterance-words, utterance-sentences, etc. A three-word phrase in French may have a one-word translation in English, and a five-sentence remark in English may have a one-sentence translation in Japanese. The language we are using generally determines whether we talk here, on the conceptual plane, about a word or about a phrase, a sentence or a passage. In short, two tokens are the same saying-word or saying-sentence if either they are the same utterance-word or utterance-sentence, respectively, or if they are, are intended to be, and would normally be taken as being translations or paraphrases of the same token, or if one is such a translation or paraphrase of the other.

The meanings of saying-sentences are to be reckoned as timeless as those of utterance-sentences, for reasons already given: their truth-values and logical implications are absolutely unchanging. But the meanings of culture-words turn out to be temporal and changeable in a stronger sense than those of language-words. To see this one must first observe that for most purposes there is no important difference between historians' statements about concepts or ideas and statements about the meanings of words that belong to the conceptual rather than the verbal plane. Some interesting psychological research has been done on the ways in which many people often think in terms of mental images rather than of words,[1] and here it would obviously be dangerous to substitute statements about the meanings of words for statements about concepts. Even historians of ideas sometimes want to trace the concept of time through such non-linguistic expressions of it as the painting of an old man with a scythe, or to discover the manifestation of Romantic ideas in the vogue of the English garden which spread so rapidly in France and Germany after 1730.[2] But in most cases one can interchange conceptual statements about word-meanings with the corresponding statements about concepts, since it is by means of language that people give the most articulate and intelligible expression to the concepts with which they think. To analyse the concept of time is to analyse, on the conceptual plane, the meaning of the word 'time'.

[1] Cf. *Handbook of Experimental Psychology*, ed. S. S. Stevens (1951), pp. 732 f., and R. S. Woodworth and H. Schlosberg, *Experimental Psychology* (1954), pp. 815 f.

[2] E. Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology* (1939), pp. 69 ff., and A. O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being* (1936), p. 15.

The history of the idea of time, strictly conceived, is the history of the meaning of the culture-word 'time'.

It was no doubt because of this interchangeability that the period in which changes of language-words' meanings were first accepted as commonplace was also the period in which the history of ideas first became a subject of serious enquiry. In 1764 the Swiss historian Isaac Iselin was discussing the 'better development' of certain concepts, like those of order, justice and morality; and, even before Herder, Jacob Wegelin, who migrated from Switzerland to Berlin in 1765, advocated studying the ways in which the nature and development of ideas affect the course of human history.[1] The late eighteenth century was a period of innovation on both planes of discourse about meaning.

Not that before then every feature of people's thoughts had been assumed eternally the same. Diodorus, Ockham, Buridan and other logicians commonly supposed that what was true at one time might be false at another. For them, unlike Frege, there was a proposition 'This tree is covered with green leaves' that changed its truth-value with the time of year at which it was uttered. But they did not take it to change its meaning.[2]

Scholars had also long taken for granted that not every community and every age operated with precisely the same stock of concepts or word-uses. Differences of religion or culture within a milieu of commercial or military intercommunication sufficed to make this evident to most observant writers of the ancient and early modern world. Lucretius complained that the poverty of his native language made it difficult for him to discuss certain matters that had long been familiar topics of Greek philosophical writing,[3] and Locke remarked how difficulties of translation from one language to another indicate that certain complex ideas exist in some countries and not in others.[4] The belief that important ideas had disappeared from circulation and were now being rediscovered was itself a causal factor in the ferment of the Renaissance.[5]

[1] Cf. I. Iselin, *Geschichte der Menschheit*, 1768 ed., vol. II, p. 31, and H. Bock, 'Jacob Wegelin als Geschichtstheoretiker', *Leipziger Studien*, ix, 4 (1902).

[2] Cf. B. Mates, 'Diodorean Implication', *Philosophical Review*, lviii (1949), pp. 234 ff., and E. A. Moody, *Truth and Consequence in Medieval Logic* (1953), pp. 53 ff.

[3] *De Rerum Natura*, I, 136–9.

[4] *Essay*, III, v, 8.

[5] H. Weisinger, 'The Renaissance Theory of the Reaction against the Middle Ages as a Cause of the Renaissance', *Speculum*, xx (1945), pp. 461 ff., esp. p. 463.

It was not unnatural to suggest, like James Harris in 1751, that nations like individuals have their peculiar ideas and the wisest nations have the most and best ideas.[1] For Locke it was not even paradoxical to talk about someone's having altogether new notions which require the coining of new words or phrases to express them.[2] But in all, or almost all, such cases prior to the closing decades of the eighteenth century the incidence of a concept's employment was what was thought to change, and not also a concept itself, just as on the verbal plane grammarians like Vaugelas noted the presence or absence of a word in the usage of different generations but not also the transformation of a word's meaning over the whole period.

Unless one is careful to notice this one might easily overlook the principle of method that marks off a genuine historian of ideas from a mere chronicler of their popularity. Only when historians concern themselves with changes in the role or content of a concept as well as in its incidence can they guard against a tendency to distort their account of the human past in certain characteristic ways. To say that Newton invented the modern concept of mass would be grossly unfair to Galileo, Huyghens and others. But, if a historian may speak of changes in an idea's content, he can say that Newton achieved a crucial new development in the concept of mass by defining it in terms of density and volume rather than in terms of weight.[3]

The danger to be surmounted here – a blind eye to the possibility of change in the topic of one's narrative – occurs also in other fields, such as biography or the history of political institutions. Tacitus was notoriously unfair to Tiberius in conceiving of his character as something so substantial and unchanging that the emergence of vices in later life had to be taken as evidence of hypocrisy in earlier years.[4] Similarly many sixteenth-century Englishmen, struggling against the executive power of Tudor monarchs, were guilty of wishful thinking in their search for historical precedents. They supposed that Parliament had always existed as an institution with precisely the same customarily

[1] *Hermes, or a Philosophical Enquiry concerning Universal Grammar*, 1794 ed., pp. 407 f.

[2] *Essay*, III, vi, 51.

[3] Cf. E. A. Burtt, *Metaphysical Foundations of Modern Science* (1932), pp. 238 ff.

[4] *Annals*, ed. H. Furneaux (1884), i, p. 135.

granted rights and privileges as they now alleged it to have.[1] But the point is particularly important if a historian's subject-matter is not just a single concept but a whole movement of ideas, like the fifteenth-century Renaissance or the rise of modern science in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. It was not merely ignorance that for so long distorted accounts of these movements, but also a certain conceptual blindness. A chronicler of the popularity of ideas cannot explain such movements in any other way than by supposing either that certain foreigners, perhaps refugees from the sack of Constantinople, have introduced new ideas, or that certain forgotten principles, like the mathematicism of Plato's *Timaeus*, have now been rediscovered, or that certain altogether new notions, like that of experimental enquiry, have now been born. As a result he overemphasizes discontinuities and may miss important factors in the stream of events. He may be tempted to exaggerate out of all proportion the innovating influence of the Byzantine refugees.[2] He may too easily ignore what was contributed to the mathematization of science by medieval influences like Roger Bacon's stress on the need for a strictly mathematical treatment of optics, or what was contributed to the empiricism of science by the practical co-operation of improvement-minded artisans and the long experimental tradition of the Padua medical school.[3]

That is why Ernst Cassirer and many other historians of ideas have held that 'whenever . . . we make any comparison between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance it is never enough to single out particular ideas or concepts. What we want to know is not the particular idea as such, but the importance it possesses, and the strength with which it is acting in the whole structure.' Changes in the content of a concept necessarily involve changes in its relations to other concepts, so that no single concept's history can be studied in isolation. 'The historian of ideas is not asking primarily what the *substance* is of particular ideas. He is asking what their function is.'[4] 'What is new about the Renaissance is

[1] Cf. J. E. Neale, *Elisabeth I and her Parliaments 1559–1581* (1953), pp. 17 ff., 100, 188 ff., etc.

[2] Cf. R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (1946), p. 80.

[3] E. Cassirer, 'Some remarks on the question of the originality of the Renaissance', *J. Hist. Ideas*, iv (1943), p. 51; E. Zilsel, 'The Genesis of the Concept of Scientific Progress', *J. Hist. Id.*, vi (1945), pp. 325 ff.; J. H. Randall, 'The Development of Scientific Method in the School of Padua', *J. Hist. Id.*, i (1940), pp. 177 ff.

[4] E. Cassirer, op. cit., p. 55.

not so much the ideas themselves, but the ways in which they were recombined into new intellectual constructions.'[1] For example, 'the concept of the human individual was no innovation of the Renaissance', but 'that the portrayal of a particular man *as* a particular man – with all his peculiarities, accidents and idiosyncrasies – could have theoretical interest, was recognized by no philosophy before the Renaissance': previously the portrayal of men gave rise to types or 'characters' – like the *Characters* of Theophrastus.[2] Or what was importantly new about Galileo's mode of scientific thought was neither his recourse to experiments, nor his preoccupation with quantitative variations rather than qualitative differences, nor his rejection of Aristotelian mechanics, nor his interest in acceleration, nor yet his systematic use of ideally simplified concepts, in which Euclid at least had anticipated him, but rather the way in which he combined all five to produce the prototype of a modern scientific theory.

A modern historian of ideas must therefore be something more than a mere chronicler of their popularity. In studying their 'nature, genesis, development, diffusion, interplay and effects'[3] he must treat them as continuants with changeable contents. He must narrate 'the general development of the concept . . . of genius', describe the post-medieval 're-evaluation' of 'the concept of friendship', or trace a recurrent instability in the European idea of God to an original incoherence in Plato's theology.[4] Nor are any concepts exempt from this kind of treatment. At first sight the uses of certain kinds of words, such as personal pronouns and logical connectives, might seem to show insufficient change over several millennia to deserve treatment as a topic of conceptual study by historians. But that would be to ignore the changing conception of autobiography,[5] the varying importance attached by logicians at different periods to truth-functional conditionals, or the

[1] H. Weisinger, 'Ideas of History during the Renaissance', *J. Hist. Id.*, vi (1945), p. 435.

[2] E. Cassirer, op. cit., p. 54.

[3] A. O. Lovejoy, 'Reflections on the History of Ideas', *J. Hist. Id.*, i (1940), p. 8.

[4] H. Dieckman, 'Diderot's Conception of Genius', *J. Hist. Id.*, ii (1941), pp. 151 ff.; B. N. Nelson, *The Idea of Usury* (1949), pp. 141 ff.; A. O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being, passim.*

[5] Cf. G. Misch, *History of Autobiography in Antiquity* (1950), pp. 3 ff.

way in which ideas of 'I' and 'if' change even within a single generation of children as they grow to maturity.[1]

When meanings are thus taken as the topic of diachronistic narrative, or of the synchronistic surveys that complement such narrative, it is meanings that vary their language-words rather than language-words their meanings. The development of a concept may be followed through different words in the same language, like 'Christendom' and 'western civilization'.[2] Or it may be followed through different languages that coexist or succeed one another within the same culture. In a work on primitivism and related ideas in antiquity A. O. Lovejoy and G. Boas list sixty-six 'meanings of "nature" ' and their list is not intended as a substitute for a dictionary article. 'The development of meanings of *physis*, *natura* and the derivatives of the latter in modern European languages, is treated as a single semasiological process, of which the greater part belongs to the history of the Greek word.'[3] All that is essential for discourse about culture-words is that one should be able to get cross-bearings on them, as it were. There must be one way of identifying the meaning talked about and another way of talking about it – one bearing to locate the concept and another to ascribe it a certain content at a certain time or place. Because we have such cross-bearings on the concept of friendship, for instance, we can see it as a development from the ancient and medieval idea, preserving the factors of association, mutual benevolence and independence of kinship, while replacing those of exclusiveness and aristocratic solidarity by a warmly felt companionship of interests.[4]

Hence a culture-word, like the 'nature' studied by Lovejoy and Boas, is individuated by meaning, not by form. It need have no morphological unity or continuity from one place or period to another, and its meaning is discussed on the conceptual plane, whereas a language-word is identified by its form and its meaning is normally discussed on the verbal plane. Frege made it seem at least plausible to suppose that all thoughts or meanings were timeless because he failed to notice the sense of 'meaning' which is vital for the history of ideas. He took all

[1] Cf. J. Piaget, *The Language and Thought of the Child*, tr. M. Gabain (1932).

[2] F. Le Van Baumer, 'The Conception of Christendom in Renaissance England', *J. Hist. Id.*, vi (1945), pp. 131 ff.

[3] *Primitivism and Related Ideas in Antiquity* (1935), pp. 447 ff.

[4] B. N. Nelson, *The Idea of Usury*, pp. 149 ff.

discourse about meanings to be concerned with the meanings of language-words, and none with those of culture-words. He would no doubt have agreed in principle with G. E. Moore's dictum that 'to define a concept is the same thing as to give an analysis of it',[1] which makes it impossible for a historian to give different analyses of a concept in respect of different periods. In his own legitimate concern for the timeless domain of formal logic, and his desire to defend it against confusion with the temporal domain of psychology, he overlooked the equally legitimate need of historians to treat thoughts and meanings – the meanings of culture-words – as temporal continuants with changeable states or contents.

It is no use objecting that Frege was right here to ignore culture-words because language-words are more basic. In what respect are they more basic? Perhaps the use of 'word' in the former sense was developed earlier in human history and is still acquired earlier by each individual in his own lifetime. But temporal priorities of this kind are an unreliable guide to intellectual importance. Perhaps the notion of a culture-word is reducible by definition, since it might be defined as a family of inter-translatable language-words. But a language-word might equally well be defined as a uniform example of a culture-word.[2] Perhaps the concept of a culture-word is an even more abstract one than the concept of a language-word. But the level of abstraction at which a science operates is at least one criterion of fundamentality, rather than the reverse. Moreover, from any point of view from which the meaning of a culture-word is a temporal continuant, one must in consistency regard the meanings of the language-words that pertain to it as temporal phenomena. So far as Frege was wrong in omitting to take account of culture-words, he was also wrong in thinking the meanings of language-words to be out of time.

The opposite error to Frege's has also been made. Friedrich Engels explicitly held all thought and meaning to be temporal, and none timeless. Though it was concerned with topics like contradiction, validity and truth, which seem to have no concern with time, the dialectical

[1] 'A Reply to my Critics', *The Philosophy of G. E. Moore*, ed. P. A. Schilpp (1942), p. 665.

[2] Though either of these definitions might conceivably be offered as alternatives to the account of culture-words offered on page 15, neither, of course, would set up quite the same concept of a culture-word.

logic that he envisaged was nevertheless to have the temporal quality of historical discourse.[1] It is hardly surprising that dialectical logic, thus conceived, has made little or no progress since Engels's day, as compared with formal logic's most notable century of advance. Nor is it surprising that recent attempts by Russian logicians to reconcile Engels's theory with some measure of respect for formal logic have encountered great difficulties and led to as yet unresolved controversy within the Soviet Union.[2] If thought is not caught up in the flux of history what room is there for dialectical logic? But if all thought is caught up in the flux of history, how can there be laws determining unchangeable features of valid thinking? And if no such laws exist what room is there for formal logic? These difficulties are part of the philosophical price paid for converting Hegel's dialectic of spirit into a Marxist dialectic of matter. Hegel could distinguish the eternal logical relations within the Absolute Idea from their historical manifestations in the development of human thought. For Marx and Engels there was only the historical play of material forces and the equally historical manifestation of these in human minds.

The philosophy of meaning has to steer a course between these two extremes of oversimplification, between Engels's obsession with time and Frege's with timelessness, and to achieve that feat of navigation without steering into the fogs engendered by a dialectic of spirit or a doctrine of subsistent entities. It will be one object of the following chapters so to avoid jettisoning the vital interests either of temporal or of timeless semantics.

[1] *Dialectics of Nature*, tr. C. Dutt (1940), pp. 153 f., 161, 206, 224, 237 ff. Cf. also 'Ludwig Feuerbach and the Outcome of Classical German Philosophy' in *Karl Marx, Selected Works*, ed. C. P. Dutt (1942), vol. I, pp. 424 ff. and 451 ff.

[2] Cf. A. Philipov, *Logic and Dialectic in the Soviet Union* (1952), pp. 45 ff. and 78 f., and O. Wetter, *Dialectical Materialism*, tr. P. L. Heath (1958), pp. 523 ff.

II

Meanings Conceived as what Words have in a Language or Culture

§5. *De facto* and *de jure* theories of meaning

The notorious obscurity of the word 'meaning', and of its equally slippery synonyms, like 'sense' and 'significance', have in the past two generations provoked almost every active philosophical thinker to seek some resolution of the concept into clearer and sharper outlines. Though it would be excessively tedious and unprofitable to examine each such thesis in detail, it is useful to sketch out, with their main variations, two cardinal types of theory to one or other of which most views in current favour will readily be granted to belong. Roughly, one type, to be called *de facto*, holds that most statements about meanings are, or should be construed as, statements about occurrences, states, situations or habits of certain sorts and their observable or introspectible relations to one another. The other type, to be called *de jure*, holds instead that most statements about meanings are or should be construed as statements about rules of certain kinds and the extent to which they have been broken or obeyed. For *de facto* theories a language is a pattern of events, for *de jure* ones a system of rules. The former suppose correct accounts of a word's meaning to state something that happens whether it ought to or not: the latter, something that may or ought to happen whether it does so or not.

Perhaps the commonest form of *de facto* theory is that in which the meaning of a word or sentence is equated with events that are somehow causally related to its utterance. The dominant object of philosophers holding such a theory has generally been to assimilate statements about meaning to those in certain of the natural sciences, and so to remove any temptation to suppose that they must be concerned with something very special and mysterious, like Descartes's mental ideas or Meinong's subsistent entities. The meaning of a word for its hearer is held to be a causal property of a vocal sound, acquired fundamentally through the