Four Patterns of Meaning in Religion

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USING language to discuss the uses of language can be a circular and self-defeating method of analysis. All serious treatments of linguistic behavior recognize the complexity of their subject matter. Yet they hope to discuss language in a straightforward and comparatively uncomplicated fashion. The languages of man are so infinitely varied, so intricately organized, so massively suggestive, so fluid with possibilities that the investigator of languages may become so impressed with such difficulties that he may pass them on to his readers with all of their native confusion. Since it is the function of the study of language to clarify rather than to confuse the issues, the investigator may do well to depend more upon the fact that he hopes and expects to be understood in his discussion than upon the difficulties and complexities which he has encountered in his investigations. We are assuming that the uses of language are understandable phenomena of human life even though complex, ambiguous, and sometimes puzzling. The purpose of this study is to summarize and draw together some important insights concerning the uses of language and to draw the conclusions which these insights support.

The most important issue which requires clarification concerns the nature and functions of "meaning" in language. The precise definition of this term has been a matter of great controversy in the history of linguistic and philosophic thought. This controversy subsided when investigators began to take seriously the notion that language and meaning should be studied in terms of their functioning in use. The definitions of meaning which have emerged from this type of investigation have consisted of descriptions of the various elements involved in instances of successful communication.[1] This method of investigation determines in part the choice of sources for the clarification of meaning. For this purpose those sources are most useful in which language and meaning have been investigated from a descriptive point of view. A great number of such sources are now available. This study is concerned only with the problems of meaning which arise in and because of the uses of language in the various forms of religious discourse.

The Definition of Language

It is necessary to develop an adequate definition of language which will indicate the general context for this analysis of meaning. A survey of the discussions of the definition of language indicates three primary forms of such definitions. (1) The most inclusive of these defines language as one kind of relatedness to the environment. By means of language one is related to other human beings and to objects, events and entities in his environment not merely by means of direct perceptual or motor responses but especially in terms of symbolic structures or sign functions. Under this interpretation practically any object or activity in the environment may function as a sign of something else. Language in this sense includes much more than the conventional symbols such as words and sentences. This is the approach to the definition of language taken by John Dewey, Justus Buchler and George H. Mead. (2) The second type of definition describes lan-

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[1] Cf. Charles K. Ogden and Ivor A. Richards, *The Meaning of Meaning*, London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner and Co., 1936, pp. 9f.

guage as a form for the conception of reality. These forms are dynamic and evolving, subject to laws of development and decay. Each new form of organization and structure has its own inherent possibilities and limitations. This evolution, as traced by Cassirer, seems to be primarily a movement from symbolic forms with an intensity of subjective feeling and in which reference to existential objects is vague and undifferential to ever more highly organized, rigidly controlled and unequivocal symbol systems which then permit extensive manipulation of the symbolic elements. The range from myth to pure matematics indicates the range of products of this evolution. The common languages of human communication, including those by means of which we communicate our religious ideas, have been influenced by and share to some degree in the characteristics of both ends of this development. This understanding of language has been developed by Ernst Cassirer and Susanne Langer. (3) The least inclusive of these interpretations is that which regards language as a tool, a particular set of signs which functions in certain ways for certain purposes. These signs may be construed broadly, but here the term "sign" has been taken more narrowly and language signs have been defined as verbal symbols producible and interpretable by the individuals using the language and maintaining a relatively stable signification among the members of the group and throughout the discourse. Language signs function primarily in the context of human social interaction. The concept of language presupposes a functioning society. Language may be reflexive, but this is based on prior cooperative and genuinely social interaction.[2] A definition of language which would cut across all three forms of emphasis is highly desirable. We may define language as that form of human social behavior by means of which individuals relate to one another and to their environment in terms of complex organizations of significant symbols which may be both produced and interpreted by the individual members of the social group, which are limited in the ways in which they may be combined, and which function with reference to ranges of attitudes, dispositions, and anticipations which are conventionally linked with the use of these symbols.

A Strategy for the Clarification of Meaning

In the light of this definition we may define the function of meaning very simply. To discover the meaning of any one or more verbal symbols one must discover the relationship, attitudes, dispositions or anticipations which are being promoted by the use of these symbols. As a practical matter, however, such discovery may not be so simple. What we need is a clear strategy for the clarification of meaning in instances of confusion, difficulty or error. With primary reference to two factors, (1) the various purposes or functions of discourse, and (2) the religious uses of language, this study is an attempt to provide such a strategy for clarification.

Linguistic Contexts

The insights which are useful for such a strategy may be summarized briefly in three relationships. First, the use of language always occurs in or presupposes a specific but extensive context of personal, social and environmental factors. Whenever one uses language for purposes of communication at least the following contexts are involved. (a) The particular language system or set of symbols of which the discourse forms a part is the first context for the clarification of meaning. The common languages of human communication such as English or German are not rigid "systems" as are some

[2] Cf. Charles Morris, *Signs, Language and Behavior,* New York: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1946, pp. 32-59.

systems of mathematics or logic. They permit considerable latitude, deviation, individuality. But they are not unlimited in the freedom they permit. The words one uses were formed and used for the most part in a language which one does not invent or greatly modify. One is simply required to "learn the language" in order to share in communication. (b) The language system involves and develops in a context of non-linguistic events. The interactions of human beings with one another and with the objects of the environment tend to become organized into patterns or habits. Language habits are among those developed under the determination of social custom and sanction. These individual habits and social customs provide for the inter-personal character of language signs. Habits also provide for a sufficient generality of contexts so that verbal symbols can and do maintain a relative stability of significance in the course of social use. (c) The third context in which language functions is comprised of the constellation of interrelated lesser contexts, that is, of the habit systems and organization of symbols functioning together in the funded experience and anticipation that the individual contributes to any occasion of discourse. It is this funded or accumulated experience to which the isolated bits of the linguistic code are related in order to be decoded as meanings. This context is transcended by still more inclusive contexts which are especially relevant for the problem of verification, namely, (d) the recoverable content of human experience unreflective as well as reflective, and (e) the total sequence of events of which human experience is only a part. To determine the meaning of a given instance of discourse, one relates it to the progressively larger contexts from which it has emerged. From this point of view, meaning may be defined as membership in a common context of symbolic organization, individual habit, social custom, funded experience and natural history. The problem of verification is a problem which arises in attempting to determine how extensive a given context of meaning is. If the context is only that of a language system and social custom and does not include the contexts of directed human experience and natural history, a symbol may be said to have "theoretical" or "social" but not "objective" reference. Only that kind of discourse which at some point has "objective" as well as "social" significance can reflect back to increase the successful control of behavior. It is this which Dewey describes as the fundamental import of verification, namely, the increase in the ability to relate to the environment in terms of control and of adjustment in the effort to make life qualitatively richer.

Linguistic Functions and Modes

The second point in this strategy of clarification is a development from the insights of Charles Morris concerning the basic functions of language and the primary modes of signification. Morris notes four kinds of organism-environment interactions in which sign-behavior functions. These are: (1) the process of taking account of the environment, (2) the process of responding selectively or preferentially with regard to some elements in the environment, (3) the process of responding actively and effectively so as to gratify the organism's needs, (4) the process of organizing responses into some pattern.[3] These constitute the four primary functions of language and may be called respectively the informational, the valuational, the motivational, and the organizational functions of language.

Corresponding to these primary functions of language Morris notes five kinds of dispositions to respond to signs: (1) in terms of space-time locations or proper names (identifiors), (2) in terms of certain specific character-

[3] Morris, *Signs, Language and Behavior,* pp. 95ff.

istics (designators), (3) in terms of preferential status (appraisors), (4) in terms of the requiredness of certain responses (prescriptors), (5) in terms of modifications of responses to other signs (formators). These modes of signification are directly related to the primary functions of language so that, strictly speaking, informational language would use identifiors and designators, valuational language would use appraisors, motivational language prescriptors, and organizational language formators. The fact that actual language use is seldom so consistent does not disturb the fundamental assertion that the function of language — informational, valuational, motivational, or organizational—tends to control not only the mode of signification and to a certain extent even the syntax of sentences, but also the habitual patterns of reference and association which are involved in the uses of language. One of the fundamental thrusts of this strategy for clarification is to point out the determining effect of the functions for which language may be used.

Language and Emotion

Our strategy for clarification demands an understanding of the role of attitudes and emotions in language. The works of C. L. Stevenson[4] and Ernst Cassirer[5] have been especially illuminating philosophical treatments of this problem. In some instances of language use the effects of attitude and emotion are deliberately suppressed, negated or avoided. This is usually the case when the function of discourse is primarily to take account of the environment. This is the area which Stevenson calls "belief." Disputes concerning such informational beliefs may be resolved in terms of further verification. It is in the area that Stevenson calls "attitude" where valuations are made and activities are motivated that emotional effects and the dominance of selectivity must be taken into account. The function which Morris defined as the process of responding selectivity or preferentially with regard to some elements of the environment is defined by Stevenson as the operation of attitude, interest or judgment. Such attitudes or judgments have their own hierarchies of greater and lesser importance, but they are not strictly informational. It is not always possible to resolve completely a disagreement in attitude in terms of verifiable information. In a sense the motivational pattern is designed to carry forward to a natural conclusion the appraisive judgments of the valuational pattern. Stevenson has described the structure of this movement from attitude to action. Cassirer, on the other hand, has described the evolution of the symbolic forms which embody such attitudes and motivate such actions. He describes three stages of symbolic development: mythic consciousness, language proper (verbal conception) and theoretical discourse. The first of these is characterized by subjectivity, intensity, heightened emotionality, motivational power, incitive possibility, imagery, extensive symbolic association and suggestiveness. In contrast, theoretical discourse is described as teleological, inherently discursive, compounded, logically connected, manipulable, comparatively free from emotion, and referential rather than suggestive. Language proper reflects ties with both of the other symbolic forms. At the point of "noticing" or selecting for attention and discourse it shares in the characteristics of mythic consciousness. At the point of functioning in the control and direction of behavior it takes on the characteristics of theoretical discourse. This "language proper" may be compared with the valuational pattern of language which we have previously mentioned. The incitive

[4] See especially his *Ethics and Language,* New Haven: Yale University Press, 1944.

[5] Ernst Cassirer, *Language and Myth,* Harper and Brothers: New York, 1946, in *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms,* Vol. 1, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953.

and intensely emotional characteristics of the mythic consciousness may be identified with motivational language, and the discursive and descriptive methods of theoretical discourse may be identified with the informational pattern. In terms of this strategy for the clarification of meaning, therefore, the special values of each pattern should be recognized, especially the verifiability of the informational pattern, and the selectivity and judgment of the valuational pattern, and the incitive and decisive power of the motivational pattern. To each of these the organizational pattern adds the values of order, comprehensiveness and coherence.

The conclusion which emerges from the juxtaposition of these several studies is that one may understand the content and structure of discourse more clearly by understanding the various ways in which the elements of language function together in the general patterns of language use. This is, of course, a highly selective and generalized study, but it does clearly suggest that there are specific ways in which we may increase the clarity of religious discourse. Wittgenstein has suggested that languages are like games, definable only in terms of interrelated families of usage and functioning with many different kinds of rules any set of which is compelling only to one who is playing the particular game governed by that set of rules. This analysis takes his suggestion seriously. It does not attempt to provide a description of the basic rules for all language games; it describes only a few common patterns. It does not attempt to deal with all the issues which may occur in any language game; it does attempt to summarize some of the more basic and fundamental rules and elements which occur in the general patterns of linguistic usage in religious discourse.

Description of the Four Patterns of Meaning

The four patterns of meaning are: (1) the informational, (2) the valuational, (3) the motivational, and (4) the organizational. The function of the informational pattern is to take account of the environment so as **to secure, test and communicate reliable information.** In its most consistent form it would use the identificative-designative modes of signification to locate the objects of the environment and to describe their characteristics. It adheres to the linguistic standards of the community of scholars, excludes irrelevant considerations and avoids attitudinal biases and emotional associations as far as possible. The consistent use of the informational pattern always involves a specification of the "connectedness" of things beyond the linguistic system itself. This specification of non-linguistic states of affairs makes possible and necessary the verification of the linguistic relations which refer to them. Verification seeks to establish a high **reliability** for the statements of informational discourse.

The function of the valuational pattern is that of selecting certain features of the environment for specific concern in order **to develop, maintain and communicate certain human preferences or judgments.** In its most consistent form it uses the appraisive mode of signification to accord status to the preferred object, idea, event, or process. It may utilize the full range of linguistic conventions of the society without attempting to suppress or negate emotional associations. Syntactical clues are less reliable than in the informational pattern, but the most consistent use of the pattern would normally involve some form of conditional, hypothetical or potential grammatical structure. The valuational pattern functions in the application of a judgment and must be verified in terms of (a) the **appropriateness** of the judgment, and (b) the reliability of the implicit informative statements.

The function of the motivational pattern is to indicate the requiredness of certain responses so as **to initiate, guide**

and direct human behavior. In its most consistent form this pattern uses a persuasive or prescriptive mode of signification which may be indicated by imperative sentence structures. Again, no syntactical clues are completely reliable. The imperative may be either permissive or obligative or even disguised or latent. Motivative language may be used to permit, persuade, prescribe, evoke, incite or compel the desired behavior. It must be tested in terms of the **effectiveness** with which the needed response is secured, the appropriateness of the underlying judgments and attitudes, and the reliability of the implicit or explicit information.

The function of the organizational pattern is to systematize responses into some structure of relationship **by means of organizing, classifying and relating the statements of informational, valuational and/or motivational discourse.** This pattern must involve at least two modes of signification, i.e., the mode of the statements which are to be organized, and the formative mode of the pattern itself. The function of the formative mode is to modify the response to other kinds of statements. The other statements will have their own characteristic patterns so that no syntactical description of the organizational pattern is possible beyond noting that it will always involve special terms indicating classification and logical relationships. This also implies that verification involves both the testing of the organized system itself in terms of its **comprehensiveness, coherence** and **fruitfulness,** and the testing of the individual statements of the system in terms of their own possibilities for verification.

Application of the Meaning Patterns to Religious Language

Utilizing part of Professor Bernhardt's analysis of religion into function, reinterpretations and techniques, we may apply the understanding of these four linguistic patterns to various kinds of religious discourse. The problems connected with religious reinterpretations may be divided into two areas. There is first the problem of the **interpretation** of the Existential Medium which must be developed and made available for religious thinking. There is secondly the specifically religious problem of **reworking this interpretation** in the light of religious needs. The task of the interpreter is the task of securing, testing and communicating reliable information concerning the nature of the total environment or at least of its more pervasive phases. The linguistic method which is demanded for this task is the informational pattern. In Dr. Bernhardt's analysis the organization of this information in preparation for religious reworking is the task of the philosopher of religion or metaphysician. This interpreter appears to have three primary sources of data: the physical sciences for cosmological information; historical studies for interpretations of human experiences in their various sequences and consequences; and the social studies for information concerning the nature, needs and possibilities of man.

The second phase of the reinterpretative process is a theological reworking of the interpretation of the Existential Medium in the light of religious needs. The conception of the nature of religious needs form an underlying criterion for theological judgment. The theologian has the task of bringing together the relevant information and the religious appetite in order to provide satisfying religious nourishment. The pattern of language which is required for this task is the valuational. This pattern is required because the theological problem is basically a question of judgment about facts rather than simply a description of facts. The use of the word "God" in theological discourse adds no new descriptions of reality but it expresses a profound judgment concerning its character. The valuation pattern is required further be-

cause there is purposive direction in the intellectual reformulation which is determined not by the nature of the information as such, but by the religious needs which this information is to fulfill. The capacity to state and clarify such judgments in the light of given purposes is the fundamental characteristic of the valuational pattern. Theological judgment involves both the assumptions on which any interpretation must be based and also the specific information in terms of which a particular interpretation must be developed. The work of the theologian in this phase of intellectual reformulation is subject to testing on two primary counts. It must be determined that the judgments are appropriate in the light of religious needs. It must also be determined that the information which is brought to bear to meet these needs is reliable. Following this interpretation of theological thinking three important sources of error and confusion may be noted.

First, it would be possible to confuse an appropriate judgment concerning that which would fulfill a religious need with reliable information concerning the nature of the environment—in other words, to substitute the test of appropriateness for the test of reliability. Dr. Bernhardt has analyzed the epistemological consequences of this type of confusion in his critique of "The Logic of Recent Theism," (**The Iliff Review**, Spring, 1947).

Secondly, it would be possible to formulate theological judgments on the basis of a mistaken interpretation of the nature of religious needs, to apply information to the consequences but not to the source of religious judgments. Epistemologically this works out to what Dr. Bernhardt has described as "The Presupposition of Absolute Demand," (**The Iliff Review**, Spring, 1950).

Thirdly, it would be possible to make inappropriate judgments as to the application of the term "God" (or other theological terms) even though the informational interpretations were considered reliable. This type of disagreement is implied in the question concerning "The Religious Availability of Whitehead's God" and in the various debates between Professor Bernhardt and Professor Henry Nelson Wieman. This type of disagreement is one of the most difficult to resolve, because the attempt to resolve it involves the clarification of a lengthy series of interpretations and assumptions and mutual agreement concerning each of them to settle the issues. It is probable that the available information is too limited to make universal agreement possible. At any rate the understanding of the nature of valuational language ought to clarify the understanding of the nature of the theological enterprise.

The area of religious techniques involves overt religious activities designed to be consistent with the theological interpretation of the available religious resources and to satisfy religious needs. The motivational pattern of language is that way of using language which initiates, guides and directs action in the light of valuational judgments and relevant information.

In religion this form of language very naturally is used in connection with the area of techniques because it is appropriate to the problems of evoking and directing religious behavior. Since this pattern is implicitly dependent upon both appropriate appraisals and reliable designations, the only justifiable use of incitation is in the context of a responsible theology and a reliable interpretation of the nature of the world. Without these basic defenses religious motivation would be bereft of justification. If informational language is primarily a tool of the philosopher, scientist, historian and social scientist, and valuational language the tool of the theologian, then incitive language may be regarded as a basic resource for the religious technician or practicing minister. An important strategy of justification is needed here. In so far as

the philosopher, theologian and minister (whether these are embodied in one man or in a group) operate as a team and integrate their efforts, the products may be justifiable at all levels. In so far as these efforts are disintegrated and isolated from the mutual support and critical findings on other levels the problem of justifying a particular form of religious behavior may be insoluable short of sheer dogmatic assertion. The need for an integrated linguistic approach which recognizes both the differences among these patterns and their interdependence, coupled with a recognition of the massiveness of available information, the significance of appropriate judgments and the practical problems of religious living should suggest a solid basis for emphasizing a "team" approach toward these areas of religious concern. It also suggests a primary religious function of the organizational pattern, namely, the systematizing, classification and relating of informative, valuative and motivating statements to show their nature, interrelatedness and mutual dependence and justification. At the level of informative analysis, the systematic organization of designative statements may be the function of the scientist, historian, social scientist, which in turn may be integrated into further systematic organization by the philosopher. At the motivational level there may be limited organizations of religious prescriptions. This suggestion calls for a more extensive use of the systematic pattern than is yet evident to give more order, coherence, and interdisciplinary justification to religious thought and action. The verification of the organizational pattern concerns (1) the direct verification of the sentences which are organized, and (2) tests of the adequacy of the organization. The sentences, of course, are judged in terms of reliability, appropriateness and effectiveness. The adequacy of the organization may be tested in terms of comprehensiveness, coherence and fruitfulness. The fundamental error to be avoided in the organizational pattern is that of confusing the fact that a statement may fit neatly into a system of thought with the question of its reliability. Coherence is a measure of the adequacy of systemic relatedness; it is not a substitute for tests of reliability. A second possible danger connected with the religious uses of the organizational pattern is that the desire for a comprehensive and consistent "system" may obliterate the recognition of the partial, piecemeal character of one's reliable information. The quest for system very easily becomes a quest for massive certainty which turns the speculative possibilities of one chapter into the basic assumptions of the next.

Conclusions and Implications

What follows from this type of analysis of the patterns of religious language? No attempt has been made to analyze any particular theological or philosophical positions but some of the implications of this analysis may be suggested in relation to familiar theological positions. A primary suggestion for further study in this area would be the application of this type of analysis to significant theological statements.

One immediate conclusion is that we have here a convenient strategy for the clarification of the meaning of religious discourse in terms of contexts of use, purposes and appropriate methods. A second such conclusion was the suggestion concerning interdisciplinary cooperation as the most effective method for the resolution of some theological perplexities. And a third direct conclusion is the suggestion of a rigorous analysis of the underlying assumptions, the implicit judgments and the informational support for theological and motivational discourse in order to promote clarity and effectiveness in the religious enterprise. The integrated theology, like the man of integrity, is consistent in drawing together the available information, the sound judgments and the ap-

propriate behaviors of an ongoing life. In so far as either man or theology disassociates information from judgment or judgment from action there is a loss in integrity. In addition to these primary conclusions there are certain implications which have arisen throughout the study. We may suggest some of these briefly.

When it was suggested that there is a danger in confusing tests of appropriateness in judgment with tests of reliability for information, or, again, when it was suggested that coherence is a test of organizational adequacy but not of informative reliability, certain familiar theological methods came to mind. In so far as this analysis has been accurate concerning the ways language actually functions serious questions would have to be raised whenever the claim is made that ideas may be justified by their attractiveness or by their consistency in a system of thought without further positive verification. The nature of language indicates no shortcuts to the discovery of truth.

When it was suggested that errors might arise from a mistaken interpretation of religious needs, familiar theological controversies were implied. In so far as religious needs might be defined without adequate information to support the judgment this strategy for clarification might provide a method for the resolution of the difficulty. In so far as differences in the definition of religious needs arise from different ontological or epistemological asumptions, this form of analysis would at least reveal the source of the differences and the implications involved in the alternative assumptions. To convince a man that his basic presuppositions are in need of revision is beyond the capacities of this or of any other device of which I am aware. This can be done only when he feels himself contradicted by his own judgments. However, with a recognition of the basic differences between sheer information and good judgment he may strive to express his presuppositions and his judgments with clarity and significance.

A third implication emerged from the nature and need for verification in language use. It has been shown that symbols can operate in the context of a language system and social customs without having any checkable reference beyond these contexts. One can discover how a culture uses a term and how it is defined in relation to other terms even though there may be no denotative content for it; the behavior sequences which it signifies cannot be completed. In such cases there is no relevant method for determining the existence or non-existence of the objective referent. In some cases this is a matter of little moment. A good deal of our social discourse has the primary function of merely avoiding silence, or of acknowledging one another's presence, or symbolically expressing certain feelings. In these cases the existence or non-existence of objective referents of the symbols of discourse is immaterial or secondary. However, when the function of discourse is crucial, such as actually taking account of the environment under specific conditions, or judging some object to be important for human life, or motivating a course of effective action, the existence or non-existence of the objects of discourse does matter. A theological system which claims that certain special words are useful and valid because they have appeared and have been utilized in a particular religious tradition must also be prepared to test whether or not the context of reference is or is not more than social. Without such a test the object of discourse is not known to exist. Few theologies could stand complete skepticism concerning the existence of God, but this analysis of the language in which we talk about God suggests that any theology will need more evidence than the appearance of the name if they are to avoid the skeptic's argument.

A final implication in the area of theology concerns the possible applica-

tion of this analysis to theologies which give special emphasis to the religious value of discourse which expresses intensity of personal association, acquaintance, emotional and mystical involvement, the undifferentiated character of that to which a person relates in the religious life. To a certain extent this analysis has attempted to explain and justify such an approach. We have described the operation and the motivational power of mythic consciousness in religious discourse. But this description clearly differentiates between the satisfying intensities and evokative power of the motivational pattern and the problems of verification in terms of judgments and information. Religious discourse by its very nature must ultimately become motivationally effective, it must effectively express and evoke man's relationship to God with all of its consequences, but this analysis suggests that we must not confuse motivational efficiency or sheer intensity with validity. The problems of verification are basically presuppositional and informational. These problems may be wrestled with in the study rather than in the pulpit, but they are inevitably involved in and underlie every claim made in the name of religion.

A closing suggestion is simply that linguistic analysis is no savior. It is simply a tool for critical, careful and effective thinking. It finds its place among a number of other such tools. To the degree that our lives are influenced and directed by words we hear, read, speak or write and the attitudes, dispositions and deeds which flow from them, to that degree clarity in language is important. In so far as this and other studies provide constructive strategies for arriving at and communicating clear and justifiable ideas and activities and promote increased recognition of the possibilities of interdisciplinary cooperation they do provide important methods for the resolution of religious difficulties.