

MEANING

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Primary Disciplinary Field(s): Linguistics, Semantics, Philosophy, Psychology

1. Core Definition

The concept of **Meaning** fundamentally refers to the significance, explanation, or interpretation assigned to a word, symbol, action, or experience within a particular context. It serves as the bridge between a signifier (the form, such as a word or gesture) and the signified (the idea or object it represents). Meaning is not merely a linguistic phenomenon; it encompasses cognitive processes, emotional associations, and social conventions that allow individuals to understand and interact with the world around them. When applied specifically to language, meaning is the point or significance conveyed by the lexicon used in a sentence, distinguishing the utterance from mere noise.

Meaning operates on multiple layers, requiring both subjective internal interpretation and objective external reference. The source content emphasizes that meaning can be either **cognitive or emotional**, illustrating its dual nature. The cognitive layer involves logical comprehension and factual understanding, while the emotional layer involves the subjective feelings, values, and associations triggered by the sign. For effective communication to occur, a shared understanding of the conventional meaning of signs is necessary, though interpretation often remains fluid and context-dependent, especially in non-literal language like metaphor or irony.

Crucially, linguistic meaning is often segmented into two primary components: denotation and connotation. **Denotative meanings** represent the explicit, clear, and literal definition of a word--the ideals clearly stated, often found in a dictionary. This type of meaning aims for objective, factual reference. Conversely, **connotative meanings** relate to the subjective, cultural, or emotional associations that extend beyond the literal definition--the ideals implied. For instance, while the denotation of "home" might be 'a dwelling place,' its connotation often includes feelings of warmth, security, and belonging. Understanding the interplay between these two forms is essential for analyzing the depth and intent behind communication.

2. Etymology and Historical Development

Philosophical inquiry into meaning dates back to classical antiquity, where thinkers debated the relationship between language and reality. Plato's dialogue *Cratylus* explores whether the connection between a name and the object it signifies is natural (Cratylus's view) or purely conventional (Hermogenes's view). This foundational debate established the dichotomy between intrinsic meaning derived from the nature of things and extrinsic meaning derived from social agreement. Aristotle subsequently refined logical theory, focusing on how propositions acquire

truth value based on their correspondence with external reality, thereby solidifying the referential function of meaning.

The study of meaning continued through the medieval Scholastic period, focusing heavily on logic and the semantics of universal concepts. However, the most significant shift occurred in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, commonly known as the **Linguistic Turn** in philosophy. Thinkers like Gottlob Frege distinguished between *Sinn* (sense, or the mode of presentation) and *Bedeutung* (reference, or the object designated), highlighting that two expressions can refer to the same object yet have different senses. This distinction formalized the complex cognitive structure that mediates between a linguistic expression and the world.

The modern foundations of linguistic meaning were cemented by Ferdinand de Saussure, who established the structuralist approach. Saussure argued that the linguistic sign is arbitrary and relational, consisting of the signifier (sound-image) and the signified (concept). Meaning, therefore, does not arise from intrinsic connection to reality but from **difference** within the language system itself. Simultaneously, Ludwig Wittgenstein's later philosophy revolutionized the concept by proposing that "meaning is use," emphasizing that the meaning of a word is determined by the conventional rules and practices governing its application within a specific social context or 'language game.' This move from referential semantics to pragmatic usage cemented meaning as a core topic across psychology, anthropology, and sociology.

3. Key Characteristics and Theories of Meaning

Theories attempting to explain how meaning functions generally fall into several categories, each emphasizing a different characteristic. The simplest is the **Referential Theory of Meaning**, which holds that the meaning of a word is the physical object or concept it refers to in the world. This approach works well for concrete nouns (e.g., "tree" refers to a biological entity) but struggles profoundly with abstract terms (e.g., "love," "justice") or non-existent entities (e.g., "unicorn"). The limitations of pure reference necessitated theories that accounted for cognitive structure and communicative intent.

The **Verificationist Theory**, championed by logical positivists, proposed that the meaning of a statement is its method of verification. If a statement could not be empirically verified, it was often deemed meaningless. While highly influential in the mid-20th century, this theory proved too restrictive, failing to account for ethical, aesthetic, or metaphysical meaning, which are crucial aspects of human communication and experience. Despite its eventual decline as a comprehensive theory, it underscored the importance of objective criteria for distinguishing meaningful from meaningless propositions in scientific discourse.

The **Pragmatic Theory of Meaning**, derived largely from the work of Wittgenstein and later speech act theorists like J.L. Austin and John Searle, focuses on the function and context of

utterances. Meaning is seen as the social and communicative effect achieved through the use of language. This approach shifts focus from static lexical definitions to the dynamic process of interaction, where the speaker's intent (illocutionary act) and the resulting effect on the listener (perlocutionary act) are paramount to defining the meaning conveyed. This highlights the fluidity and performative nature of meaning construction.

Finally, **Cognitive Theories of Meaning** emphasize the internal, psychological representation of concepts, aligning with the source content's mention of "cognitive or emotional significant explanation." Meaning is viewed as residing in the mental schemas, prototypes, and conceptual metaphors through which humans organize information. Semantics, from this viewpoint, is closely tied to the mechanisms of thought and perception, suggesting that differences in linguistic structure often reflect underlying differences in cognitive processing and world modeling.

4. Significance and Impact

The significance of meaning pervades nearly every intellectual discipline. In **Linguistics and Semantics**, the study of meaning is the core objective. Semantics focuses specifically on compositional meaning (how the meanings of individual words combine to form the meaning of sentences), while pragmatics analyzes how context shapes the final communicated meaning, addressing ambiguity and implicature. Without a robust understanding of how meaning is encoded, transmitted, and decoded, the fundamental processes of human language remain opaque.

In **Philosophy**, the analysis of meaning is central to addressing problems of truth, knowledge, and reality. Questions such as "What does it mean for a statement to be true?" or "How is objective reality represented through subjective language?" are entirely dependent on theories of meaning. The philosophy of language, therefore, provides the critical tools necessary for clarity and precision in metaphysical and epistemological debates, ensuring that philosophers are rigorously scrutinizing the logical structure beneath their assertions.

The impact of meaning is equally profound in **Psychology**. Beyond cognitive processing, the search for meaning is a primary driver of human behavior and mental health. Viktor Frankl's logotherapy, for instance, is centered on the belief that the primary motivating force in humans is the 'will to meaning.' Psychological well-being is often correlated with an individual's perceived sense of significance in life. Furthermore, understanding the connotative and emotional meaning attached to certain words or experiences is vital in therapeutic settings, as those associations often reveal underlying trauma or emotional conflicts.

5. Debates and Criticisms

One of the most vigorous debates surrounding meaning centers on the problem of **Indeterminacy**. W.V.O. Quine famously argued that translation is radically indeterminate; that is, there is no single,

unique way to assign meaning to another person's words based solely on empirical evidence. Multiple, equally valid systems of meaning could correspond to the same observed linguistic behavior, suggesting that the precise, internal meaning of an utterance might be ultimately inaccessible or nonexistent outside of its observable use. This challenge questioned the very possibility of achieving perfect, fixed meaning.

Another significant area of contention is the role of **Intentionality**. While Gricean pragmatics heavily emphasizes speaker meaning--the intention of the speaker to produce a certain effect on the listener--critics argue that relying too heavily on mental states (intentions) makes meaning too subjective and difficult to analyze objectively. This debate often pits theories focusing on stable, systemic linguistic properties (sentence meaning) against those focusing on dynamic, contextual communicative goals (utterance meaning).

Furthermore, the concept of meaning faces structural critiques regarding its scope and boundaries. Post-structuralist and deconstructionist thinkers, such as Jacques Derrida, challenge the idea that language can capture a stable, centered meaning (a 'transcendental signified'). Instead, they argue that meaning is perpetually deferred and unstable, arising only through the play of difference within texts and contexts. This perspective shifts the focus away from finding definitive meaning toward understanding the ways in which language systems constantly undermine and fragment themselves, highlighting the inherent ambiguity in all communication.

Further Reading

[Meaning \(Philosophy of Language\)](#)

[Semantics](#)

[Denotation and Connotation](#)

[Theories of Meaning \(Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy\)](#)