

FIGURE 1.1
Significance, communicated meaning and linguistic meaning.

successfully takes place. Of course, if they had enough breath left, they could simply cry out ‘I’m choking’, and there would be no ambiguity. These cases show that a fully articulated sentence is not always necessary to communicate an intended meaning: the same meaning can be suggested in a variety of different ways, all of which rely on implicit conventions. The sentence expresses the intended meaning more precisely and unambiguously than the others: both the single cry and its three syllable variant are open to many interpretations, and are therefore much less reliable than the fully explicit sentence. But we can nevertheless remove the language from a communicative situation and retain much of the meaning. Situations are inherently meaningful. Meaning, we might say, is already there in the world: all we have to do is draw attention to it, and language is the most specific and unambiguous way of doing so. The different types of meaningfulness we have been discussing so far could be diagrammed as in Figure 1.1.

1.2 Talking about meaning in English and other languages

Semantics, then, is the study of meaning. But what actually *is* meaning? In Section 1.6 we will discuss some specific answers to this question. For the moment, we will make a start by looking at what place the notion of meaning has in our ordinary talk about language. The way we use the concept of meaning in ordinary language is important because it provides us with a *pretheoretical* starting point for theoretical semantic analysis, and gives us the initial vocabulary with which we can begin to identify and describe the phenomena which strike us. Informal talk about what pieces of language mean is a very common part of everyday life: we explain new words, give paraphrases of what people mean by a certain phrase or expression, sometimes translate words from one language to another in order to show their meaning. But even though we *use* the

notion of meaning naturally and unproblematically, it is quite another thing to develop an explicit, rigorous *explanation* of it. In just the same way, it is one thing to talk about the movements of celestial bodies like the moon and stars – we do so, informally, all the time – but a different one entirely to have a scientific understanding of them. And since meanings cannot be seen, there is the initial question of how to pin down exactly what we are and are not supposed to be investigating. It will help us to accomplish this task if we examine the everyday vocabulary used to talk about meaning in English and other languages. This vocabulary varies considerably cross-linguistically; examining it can show some of the important different aspects of linguistic meaning, and can allow us to see how different languages impose different starting distinctions on what we, in English, call ‘meaning’.

1.2.1 ‘Meaning’ in English

English uses the verb *to mean* to refer to a relationship involving at least one of three different types of thing: language, the world (including people, objects, and everything outside of ourselves) and our own minds or intentions. Here are five typical examples of *mean* in English which exemplify some of these relationships:

- (5) *When I said ‘Dublin has lots of attractions’ I meant Dublin, Ireland, not Dublin, Virginia.*
- (6) *In Sydney, ‘the bridge’ means the Harbour Bridge.*
- (7) *‘Stout’ means ‘short and fat’.*
- (8) *By turning off the music I didn’t mean that you should go.*
- (9) *Trees mean water.*

Sentence (5) distinguishes two possible places that the speaker could have been referring to by the name ‘Dublin’, and specifies that only one of them was intended. This, then, is a three-way relation between a piece of language, a mind and the world: the world is represented by the two places called Dublin, language by the sentence ‘Dublin has lots of attractions’, and mind by the speaker’s *intention* to refer to Dublin, Ireland. The second sentence is a relation between language and world, without any specific reference to people’s intentions. It says that the expression ‘the bridge’ refers to one particular structure – the Sydney Harbour Bridge – rather than any of the other bridges in Sydney. Even though it is obviously only through the action of speakers’ minds that *bridge* has this reference, there is no explicit mention of speakers’ minds in (6). In (7), there is no explicit reference to either people’s minds or to the world: the sentence reports an equivalence between two linguistic items, the word ‘stout’, according to (7), is simply equivalent in some way to the words ‘short and fat’. Sentence (8) refers to a mind–world relation: it is thus like sentence (5), except that there is no language: the speaker denies that the action of turning the music off was the result of any *intention* for the guests to leave.

Sentence (9) names a world–world relationship: the presence of one type of object in the world (trees) reveals the presence of another (water).

The fact that the same verb is used in English for these non-linguistic situations as well as the linguistic ones is noteworthy if we consider the discussion in 1.1. Thus, while sentences (5)–(7) refer to linguistic meaning, sentence (8) refers to communicated meaning, and sentence (9) refers to what we have called significance. In sentence (8) (spoken, say, at a party where it has got late and there are only a few guests left), the act of turning off the music could be interpreted as a sign of the end of the party: sentence (8) is a way of saying that the speaker did not intend this. And to say that ‘Trees mean water’ is to say that the presence of trees allows us to conclude that there must be water nearby (compare the examples of significance in the previous section). This is a conclusion we reach simply by virtue of what we know about trees and water, and without there being any communication as such.

In ordinary English, then, we use the same verb to refer both to the meanings expressed by language and to those which are communicated non-linguistically, as well as to those which emerge, without any communication, as a result of the inherent significance of the world and human behaviour. In a number of these situations, the idea of the intention of the communicator seems to be an important part of what is being talked about through the use of the verb *mean*. But meaning is not the only way in which situations like those in (5)–(6) can be described in English: a number of other possible modes of description are also available. To see this, let’s narrow the discussion down to one particular example of language – a piece which many people would think of as, simply, a mistake. Consider the following situation: Judy and Alastair are having a dinner party, and Alastair has gone out to buy a few extra plates and cups for the guests. Coming home, he says:

(10) *I’ve got some more cutlery for the party.*

For most speakers of English, this would count as a mistake, since ‘cutlery’ refers not to cups and plates, but to knives, forks and spoons. But the fact that this is a mistake in no way diminishes the need for a principled, linguistic account of it: like other branches of linguistics, semantics describes language as it is actually used and the use of a mistake as our example here will allow the relevant issues to emerge particularly clearly.

How then can we describe what is happening in (10)? In context, we can imagine three replies which Judy might make, each of which considers Alastair’s ‘mistake’ from a different point of view:

- (11) a. Judy: *Cutlery?! We’ve got lots of cutlery! You mean you got more crockery!*
Alastair: *Oh yeah, crockery.*
- b. Judy: *Cutlery?! Why did you say cutlery instead of crockery?*
Alastair: *Oh yeah, crockery.*
- c. Judy: *Cutlery?! You did not! You got more crockery!*
Alastair: *Oh yeah, crockery.*

In (11a) Judy uses the category of meaning to describe Alastair's language, and says that Alastair did not actually *mean* 'cutlery': what he meant was 'crockery'. In (11b) she talks about what Alastair 'says'. Here, she could be described as talking not about language meaning, but language *use*: she notes that Alastair has used the term *cutlery* when the term *crockery* would be expected. In (11c), Judy simply denies what Alastair has said. In so doing, she can be described as applying the categories of truth and falsity to Alastair's utterance: according to her, it is simply not true that Alastair bought cutlery, a fact which Alastair then admits.

Ordinary English, then, makes available at least three different ways of talking about language: meaning, use and truth. Each of these three categories of ordinary language description highlights a particular aspect of the occurrence. Description in terms of truth places the emphasis on the objective facts of the situation by concentrating on the relation between language and reality: does the language used correspond to the actual state of affairs? Description in terms of use makes no explicit reference to the facts, but limits itself to a consideration of equivalences between the piece of language in question and an assumed norm: Alastair said *cutlery* when, in the same circumstances, most people would have said *crockery*. Lastly, description in terms of meaning places the emphasis on the speaker's intentions: for Judy to say that Alastair meant *crockery* is, in this context, the equivalent of saying that he *intended* to say *crockery*, and to note a discrepancy between this assumed intention and the actual words used.

As we will see in Section 1.6, each of these ordinary language modes of description has its own developed, theoretical analogue.

1.2.2 'Meaning' in Warlpiri

In English, then, the one verb 'mean' is used to describe reference, linguistic meaning, intention, and general significance. Given the frequency with which, in English, we use this verb to talk about the relations between language, intention and the world, it may be surprising to discover that there are languages which do not make use of any similar notion in order to talk about situations like those in (5)–(6) above. One such language is Warlpiri, a Pama-Nyungan language spoken in central Australia. In a sense, Warlpiri has no equivalent for the verb *mean*, and the links between reference, linguistic equivalence, intention, and general significance are quite differently constituted.

In Warlpiri, the most common way of asking about the 'meaning' of a word does not involve any verb. For example, to ask about the meaning of the word *karnta* ('woman'), one would simply say (12):

- (12) *Nyiya karnta-ju?*
 what *karnta*-TOPIC
 'What is a *karnta*?'/ 'What does "karnta" mean?'

This could be translated as either 'what does *karnta* mean?' or as 'what is a *karnta*?'. And when the meaning of a word is explained or defined, once

again no separate verb meaning ‘mean’ is involved. In the following example, for instance, the speaker is explaining the meaning of the word *ngalyarra*:

- (13) *Ngalyarra ngula-ju yanjilypiri panu.*
Ngalyarra that-TOPIC stars many
 ‘*Ngalyarra* – that is many stars’/‘*Ngalyarra* means “many stars”.’
 (WlpD: *ngalyarra*)

The absence of the specific verb ‘mean’ is characteristic of a wider set of contexts in Warlpiri; there is also very often no separate verb that would be the equivalent of ‘is’ in English, as the following examples show:

- (14) *Ngamirliri, ngula-ji kirrirdipardu.*
 curlew that-TOPIC tall
 ‘The curlew is tall.’ (WlpD: *ngamirliri*)
- (15) *Jajirdi kuyu wita.*
 native cat animal small
 ‘The native cat is a small animal.’ (WlpD: *jajirdi*)

The result of this is that Warlpiri makes less of a distinction than English between what a word means, and what its *referent* actually is. To say what a word means is simply to describe the object or situation it refers to. Language-world relations are described in the same way as world-world ones.

Warlpiri does, however, have a way of explicitly mentioning the language-user, as can be seen in the following example:

- (16) *Mirni-nya karnalu wurnturu ngarri-rni. Kala mirnimpa,*
mirni-FOCUS 1PL.SUBJ far call-NONPAST but mirnimpa
ngula-ju kutu-pardu karnalu ngarri-rni.
that-TOPIC close-rather 1PL.SUBJ call-NONPAST
 ‘We use *mirni* to mean far, whereas by *mirnimpa* we mean rather close.’ (WlpD: *mirnimpa*)

But the verb used here, *ngarri-rni*, which simply means ‘call’, does not make any reference to the speaker’s intentions, an important component of the notion of ‘meaning’ in English. The literal meaning of (16) is something like ‘we call far things *mirni*, whereas we call close things *mirnimpa*.’ This is simply a fact about language use: *ngarri-rni* ‘call’ makes no reference to any intention of the speaker, and the verb *manngi-nyanyi* ‘think, intend’, is not typically used to refer to the meaning of words.

1.2.3 ‘Meaning’ in French

Whereas, in Warlpiri, the meanings of words are not discussed in the same terms as the intentions of speakers, in French there is a close link between these two domains. The most common way of expressing ‘mean’

in French is the expression ‘vouloir dire’, which literally means ‘to want to say.’ To ask ‘what do you mean?’ in French is to ask ‘what do you want to say?’ Talking about meaning in French, then, inherently involves talking about volition (‘wanting’), as in the following expressions:

- (17) *Qu'est-ce que tu veux dire par cela?*
 what is it that you want to say by that?
 ‘What do you mean by that?’
- (18) *Que veut dire cette phrase latine?*
 what wants to say this phrase latin
 ‘What does this Latin phrase mean?’
- (19) *Que veut dire ce vacarme, cette agitation?*
 what wants to say this clamour this agitation
 ‘What does this clamour and agitation mean?’
- (20) *Le baromètre a baissé; cela veut dire qu'il va pleuvoir.*
 the barometer has gone down that wants to say that it
 is going to rain
 ‘The barometer has gone down; that means it’s going to rain.’

As (19) and (20) show, this is even the case when talking of what words, phrases and non-linguistic things mean: as in English, the same expression is used to refer both to the meaning of language, and the meaning of non-linguistic occurrences. *Vouloir dire* is not, of course, the *only* word available in French for the expression of ideas about meaning; the verb *signifier* (from the Latin *signum* ‘sign’ and *facere* ‘to make’) has a similar sense. Another contrast between French and English is that unlike in English, the French words that express the noun ‘meaning’ and the verb ‘to mean’ are not related. In French the noun ‘meaning’ is translated by the word *sens*, from which English gets the word ‘sense’, and which has a similar range of meanings: as well as referring to linguistic meaning, *sens* refers to the perceptual senses (sight, hearing, etc.), to a direct and intuitive grasp of something (e.g. a ‘sense’ of rhythm), as well as having the meaning expressed in English by saying that something ‘makes sense’. Just like *vouloir dire*, then, *sens* classes linguistic meaning together with certain inner, subjective processes of human consciousness; not, however, as in the case of *vouloir dire*, volitional ones, but ones connected with the faculties of perception and judgement.

1.2.4 ‘Meaning’ in Chinese

In Mandarin Chinese, there is no single word with the same range of meanings as English *mean* or *meaning*. The verb *zhi*, whose core meaning is ‘point’, can express all of the relations between mind, language and world discussed in the previous sections, except the world–world relation. Thus, we find *zhi* used for the mind–language–world relation, as in (21):

- (21) *Dang wo shuo 'Coles', wo shi zhi Central de*
 when I say 'Coles' I BE point Central POSS
 'Coles', *bu shi TownHall de 'Coles'.*
 'Coles' not BE TownHall POSS 'Coles'
 'When I say "Coles", I mean the "Coles" in Central but not the
 "Coles" in Town Hall.'

As well, it can be used for the language–world relation:

- (22) *Zao-can shi zhi zao-shang chi de yi can.*
 breakfast BE point morning eat POSS one meal
 "Breakfast" means the meal you have in the morning.'

Zhi may also be used to specify a word's translation:

- (23) *'Linguistics' shi zhi yu-yan-xue.*
 'Linguistics' BE point yu-yan-xue
 "Linguistics" means *yu-yan-xue*.'

However, when a monolingual definition is given, the noun *yi-si* 'meaning' is typically used:

- (24) *Miao-tiao de yi-si shi shou ji xian-xi*
 'Miao-tiao' POSS meaning BE thin and delicate
 "Miao-tiao" means thin and delicate.'

Yi-si is also used in a way that parallels the English use of *meaning* to express the language–mind relation:

- (25) *Wo ming-bai ne de yi-si.*
 I understand you POSS meaning
 'I understand what you mean.'

A native speaker explains *yi-si* here in the following way: 'the speaker is conveying the message that he can reveal what's in the hearer's mind and the intention behind it. It is actually similar to saying "I understand what you are thinking about"' (W. Chor, p.c.). But *yi-si* cannot be used for the world–world relation:

- (26) **Jin-qian de ji-si shi quan-li.*
 money-POSS meaning BE power
 'Money means power.'

To express this, *deng-yu* 'equal' may be used:

- (27) *Jin-qian deng-yu quan-li.*
 money equal power
 'Money means power.'

We thus find that, taken together, the translations of *mean/meaning* in Mandarin have a similar range of senses to their English equivalents, except that Mandarin has no equivalent to *money means power* or *clouds mean rain*. However, the fact that the verb meaning ‘point’ is the basic way of expressing the verbal notion brings in a connection between meaning and gesture which is not familiar from English.

1.3 The semiotic triangle: language, mind, world and meaning

We have seen in the previous section that a number of languages, including French and English, make an important connection in their standard vocabularies between language and the world of inner conscious processes like volition, perception and intention. Other languages, by contrast, like Warlpiri, seem to bypass this connection by talking about the meaning of language in the same terms used to talk about the identity of things in the world. All of these relations are important. To describe meaning fully, we seem to have to make reference to three principal terms: language, the world, and the human mind. Following Ogden and Richards (1949: 10), these three aspects of the meaning phenomenon are often symbolized as the ‘semiotic triangle’, as shown in Figure 1.2 below.

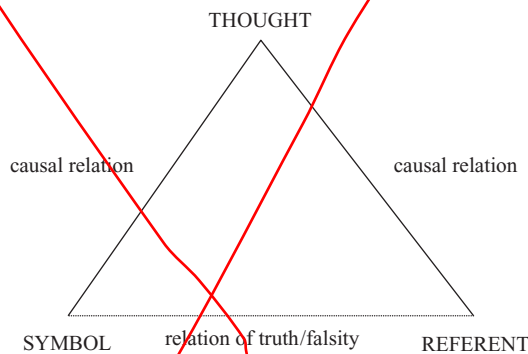


FIGURE 1.2
The semiotic triangle.

At the top of the triangle is what Ogden and Richards called ‘thought’. This reflects the fact that language comes from human beings, and is therefore ultimately a product of processes in the mind or brain. But ‘thought’ can be a misleading label for these processes, for two reasons. First, these mental processes need not be conscious. Even though we sometimes do consciously think about what we are going to say, our speech is more often spontaneous, emerging without our being aware of any preliminary stage of mental preparation. Since it is the brain that produces language, we know that some such preliminary stage must have taken place, but since this stage is so often unconscious, the label ‘thought’ is not the most appropriate (see Chapter 11 for more discussion).