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A CENTURY OF COMMUNICATION STUDIES

THE UNFINISHED CONVERSATION

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CONCEPTUALIZING MEANING IN COMMUNICATION STUDIES

Brian L. Ott and Mary Domenico

Meaning, some have suggested, is the common concern that unifies the diverse and fragmented discipline of communication.¹ As communication scholars, we are all concerned with the matter of meaning, whether it is the meaning of speeches, of small group discussion and dynamics, of interpersonal and intercultural interactions, of organizational roles, rituals, and relations, of everyday cultural practices and performances, or of media events, flows, and assemblages. Our common *concern* with meaning should not be confused with a common *conception* of meaning, however. While communication scholars routinely speak of conveying meaning, sharing meaning, expressing meaning, making meaning, decoding meaning, and uncovering “hidden” meaning, there are nearly as many conceptions of meaning today as there are scholars concerned with it. Indeed, after surveying the literature on meaning in the field, we are tempted simply to agree with Dennis Stampe that:

The concept of meaning is as dismayingly complex as any concept which suffers the attentions of philosophy. So diverse and apparently miscellaneous are the senses, uses, and meanings of the words *mean* and *meaning* that the very integrity of “the concept of meaning” is subject to doubt.²

Despite—or perhaps because of—the “dismaying complexity” of meaning, however, it is crucial that communication scholars continue to wrestle with this singularly important concept. The aim of this chapter is not to reconcile the various ways that meaning has been conceptualized within the discipline and even less so to advocate for some views over others.

Rather, we have something far more modest in mind. Our central objective is to survey the key theories of meaning that have been influential within the field over the past hundred years and to point to a few of the ways they have been taken up by communication scholars. We are not the first to undertake such a task. In a 1974 article for the *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, John Stewart conducted a comparative study of how the field conceptualized meaning from 1953 to 1970.³ A decade later, Gary Cronkhite comprehensively explored the topic in Carroll C. Arnold and John Waite Bowers’s 1984 *Handbook of Rhetorical and Communication Theory*.⁴ Cronkhite’s whopping 178-page

chapter on “Perception and Meaning” was followed more recently by Bryan Crable’s five-page synopsis of “Meaning Theories” in Stephen W. Littlejohn and Karen A. Foss’s 2009 *Encyclopedia of Communication Theory*.⁵ Our own enterprise registers somewhere between Cronkhite’s colossal undertaking and Crable’s succinct summary.

But before we begin, we would like to briefly reflect on the general approach, scope, and organization of our project. In preparing to write this chapter, we conducted an exhaustive search of the *Communication and Mass Media Complete Index* to identify the scholarship on meaning published in the discipline over the past century. Based on that research, we identified what we take to be the seven key theories of meaning: general semantics, new materialism, the new rhetoric, ordinary language, semiotics, symbolic forms, and symbolic interactionism. Given the broad scope of the topic, however, we limited our research to the field’s qualitative, interpretive, and critical work. So, while we present a broad spectrum of views on the meaning of meaning, we make no claims about the centrality of our survey to the discipline’s considerable body of social scientific research. We also wish to note that nearly all of the theories of meaning central to communication studies have been imported from other disciplines (e.g., linguistics, sociology, philosophy, and psychology). The study of meaning is a decidedly interdisciplinary affair.

Given the historic anniversary that this volume marks, it was tempting to organize our discussion chronologically. But such an approach proved both unsuitable and unworkable, as the theories we discuss were not taken up by the discipline in a sequential way. Rather, they were invoked in fits and starts as suited the needs of various sub-specialties within the field at particular historical junctures. Some have influenced the discipline broadly, others have only influenced select segments. Some have steadily exerted their influence over time, while others have risen and fallen in prominence. To prevent the misperception of any sort of developmental progression within the discipline, we have arranged the subsequent survey of theories alphabetically.

Finally, while the seven theories we survey are all distinct, drawing upon different philosophical and intellectual traditions, they nevertheless share some common concerns and governing impulses. Chief among these, we suggest, is a rejection of early transmission models of communication, such as the Shannon and Weaver model (1949), the Carroll model (1953), and the Westley-Maclean model (1955).⁶ These models tended to reflect a correspondence theory of truth that reduced meaning—inasmuch as they were concerned with it at all—to an uncomplicated representationalism or primitive labeling theory in which words referred to things. Thus, as we proceed, we highlight a few of the ways the theories reviewed challenge and contest the assumptions underlying simple representational and transmission models of communication.

General Semantics

Coming to terms with the aftermath of the moral and material devastation of two world wars, communication scholars in the mid-twentieth century turned to the pressing need to increase the ability of humans to critique communicative phenomena such as propaganda, mass media, and consumer media. Support for these efforts was found in the

theory of *general semantics* which, rather than strictly a study of language, involves “applying the techniques, habits, and viewpoints of science to problems of everyday living.”⁷

The founder of general semantics, Alfred Korzybski (1879–1950), was a Polish-American philosopher and scientist who conceptualized the faculty of *time-binding*—the ability to organize social cooperation at a distance and accumulate knowledge over generations of time—as the most salient human characteristic.⁸ For Korzybski, human survival depends on fruitful time-binding in which communication is employed to foster agreement and peaceful coexistence. During the latter half of the twentieth century, Korzybski’s student S.I. Hayakawa (1906–1992) continued the effort to make general semantics a discipline that could advance the practice of time-binding by training people to use the scientific principles of observation, hypothesizing, and testing in order to “think more clearly, to speak and write more effectively, and to listen and read with greater understanding.”⁹ General semantics approaches meaning on several interconnected levels including the relationship of words to external reality, the difference between *extensional* and *intensional* meanings, and the problems inherent in abstractions.

Laying out his theory in *Science and Sanity*, Korzybski claimed that theories of meaning that are based on referents and operational methods are confused and inadequate.¹⁰ Korzybski’s famous dictum, “the map is not the territory,” spoke to his belief that there is a fundamental difference between the sensory world of experience and the world of symbols and language. The world itself is continually changing and in flux, but words “lock the gaze” on partial phenomena, condense the field of reality, and set up false distinctions between body/mind, emotions/rationality, and objective/subjective.¹¹ In other words, language is never the territory, but always an abstraction that depends on its context for meaning. For general semanticists, words never *mean*, people do, and to understand what an expression means it is necessary to ask what the person who uses it means. General semantics therefore posits a highly contextual sense of meaning.¹²

The meanings of words—which are in themselves merely complicated noises—are learned from hearing noises as they accompany actual situations in life and learning to associate certain noises with certain situations. This association results in words having both *extensional* and *intensional* meanings. The extensional meaning of an utterance is that to which it points in the physical world. This meaning linguistically maps, or denotes, a territory it can never reach or comprehend. The *intensional* meaning of an utterance is that which is suggested within people’s minds, a content that is highly individualized, never consistent from one utterance to the next, and inevitably ambiguous. Critiquing what he terms the *one meaning fallacy*, Hayakawa points out that ambiguity in language use is inherent because words are always shifting and changing meanings. For example, the statement “I *believe* in you” (an expression of confidence) is different than “I *believe* democracy is the best political system” (an acceptance of a set of principles). Likewise, “my computer” denotes a different object when uttered by Donna, Christy, or Jeff. The implication is that the meaning of a word can be known only approximately until it is uttered; all words interact and meanings emerge in the context of other words and the situation in which they arise.

That the *map is not the territory* implies that all words are abstractions, and for general semanticists, it is confusion about the multi-modal character of the various levels of abstraction that confounds communication and makes language dangerous. In *Language in Thought and Action*, Hayakawa introduces his “abstraction ladder” and uses the example of Bessie the Cow to exemplify how, in variously viewing and expressing this creature as “Bessie,” “cow,” “livestock,” “farm asset,” “asset,” and “wealth,” speakers invoke various levels of distance from the actual object under discussion.¹³ Abstracting is a necessary human convenience—time-binding and sharing knowledge would be impossible without this process—but when people fail to perceive that they are interacting via abstractions, and often from different levels of abstraction, disagreements and even wars can result. Particularly on the top rungs of the ladder, where high-level abstractions such as *justice*, *democracy*, and *patriotism* emerge, the actual condition of the world fails to be depicted, arguments result, and lethal antagonisms may develop.

To avoid such confusions in meaning, general semantics seeks to train people to apply scientific ways of thinking so that humans can co-create better discursive maps of the world. Only scientific methodology—observing, hypothesizing, and testing—enables the systematic selection from prevailing ways of abstracting that can ensure the “maximum increase in knowledge through ensuring the maximum of human agreement.”¹⁴ In recognizing the map is not the territory, the differences between intentional and extensional meanings, and the pitfalls of abstraction, people are able to strengthen the cultural institutions under which time-binding best flourishes.

In the decades following S.I. Hayakawa’s 1939 “General Semantics and Propaganda,” communication scholars applied or critiqued general semantics over a range of subjects, including public speaking, speech situations, persuasion, and speech education.¹⁵ From 1953 to 1970, the general semanticists were, according to Stewart, among the “primary sources for referential treatments of meaning,”¹⁶ and general semantics was a standard part of communication curriculum during the 1960s and 1970s.¹⁷ Despite these engagements, interest in general semantics slowed during the latter part of the twentieth century and has been revived only in the last two decades with studies that, for example, explore the influence of general semantics on Kenneth Burke’s theories¹⁸ and apply the theory to media ecology and theology.¹⁹

New Materialism

In the late twentieth century, communications scholars, like other scholars in the humanities and social sciences, developed a renewed interest in “the primacy of matter.”²⁰ This interest, variously dubbed the “material turn” and the “new materialism,” has prompted a crucial rethinking of the concept of meaning. The two theorists we have grouped under the banner of *new materialism*, while distinctive, share the belief that meaning is grounded in the materiality of the body. This perspective is, of course, not without precursor. Figures such as Charles Sanders Peirce, Ernst Cassirer, Susanne Langer, I.A. Richards, and Kenneth Burke, among others, have all suggested that meaning involves both sensory experience and human cognition. But what distinguishes new materialists such as Julia Kristeva (1941–) and Mark Johnson (1949–) from the aforementioned

scholars is their insistence that body and mind (matter and consciousness) are not separate, ontologically distinct entities. These theorists maintain that physical (material) states and psychical (mental) states are co-extensive, if not entirely reducible to one another.

Julia Kristeva first began to sketch her materialist view of meaning in her 1969 book, *Semiotiké: Recherches pour une sémanalyse* (*Semiotics: Investigations for Semanalysis*). Since only two chapters of *Semiotiké* were translated into English, however, Kristeva's theory of meaning is generally traced to her groundbreaking 1974 text, *La révolution du langage poétique*, a third of which was translated into English and published as *Revolution in Poetic Language* in 1984. In this latter work, Kristeva examines avant-garde literature and the ways "poetic language" undermines a traditional conception of meaning in which words simply denote things or thoughts. Instead of viewing meaning as separate from subjectivity, Kristeva regards it as the outcome of a dynamic *signifying process* in which language discharges the subject's bodily drives and energies. For Kristeva, the signifying process is comprised of two modalities that, while conceptually distinct, are wholly inseparable: the *semiotic* and the *symbolic*.²¹

To avoid confusion, it should be noted that Kristeva's use of the term "the semiotic" (*le sémiotique*) differs from Peirce and others' use of the term "semiotics." Whereas semiotics refers to the science of signs, the semiotic refers to "the heterogeneous, affective, material dimension of language,"²² which is to say, to the "drive-based dimension of language."²³ The semiotic entails the transverbal qualities of language, "such as rhythmical and melodic inflections."²⁴ Though the semiotic facet of language does not signify, it motivates (even as it threatens) signification, discharging drives in symbols and making symbols matter.²⁵ In contrast to the semiotic, the symbolic is associated with syntax and grammar, with the rules that govern language and its use. Following Jacques Lacan, Kristeva regards the symbolic as the domain of logic and law: it is that which provides stability and structure and makes representation possible. Meaning is a product of the dialectical oscillation between the semiotic and the symbolic.

Kristeva's theory of meaning is bound up with her conception of the *chora* (roughly, "space"). Adapting the term from Plato's *Timaeus*, Kristeva understands the *chora*, which she frequently couples with the semiotic, as the "receptacle" that registers (but also provisionally orders) the bodily rhythms, intensities, and pulsations connecting mother and infant before and following birth. Inasmuch as these kinetic energies are discharged in verbal and gestural expression, the *chora* is the locus of the socio-biological drives that underlie the semiotic and, by extension, all signification, though Kristeva prefers the term *signifiance* to signification, as it accounts for the non-signifying facet of language and communication. Just as a baby's "first sounds and gestures express and discharge feelings and energies" of the *chora*,²⁶ so too do the timbre and tone of one's voice, the rhythm and tempo of poetry, and the melody and movement of music; these are all material manifestations of the semiotic *chora*. The semiotic, then, is the precondition of the symbolic—the generative "material conditions of meaning construction."²⁷

Whereas Kristeva approaches the matter of meaning from a psychoanalytic perspective, Mark Johnson approaches it from a philosophical perspective, though he

draws support for his theory from neuroscience, linguistics, and cognitive science. His approach to meaning is most clearly laid out in two works, *The Body in the Mind* and *The Meaning of the Body*, though elements of it have also been developed in his collaborative work with George Lakoff, especially *Philosophy in the Flesh*.²⁸ The starting point for Johnson's theory is a critique of Anglo-American analytic philosophy and its attendant *objectivist* theory of meaning, which he maintains, "assumes a fixed and determined mind-independent reality, with arbitrary symbols that get meaning by mapping directly onto that objective reality."²⁹ Like Kristeva, Johnson's theory of meaning rejects a Cartesian mind/body dualism, offering a unified, material, embodied, and non-propositional perspective in its stead.

For Johnson, the material body is the basis of all meaning, for it structures or lends form to all human experience. Combining the pragmatism of John Dewey and William James with the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Johnson suggests that meaning arises from the felt qualities of events and situations generated by active and moving bodies. According to Johnson, meaning emerges out of (or originates with) pre-conscious sensorimotor experiences that precede and, subsequently, structure perception and other higher cognitive processes such as intellectual feelings and reflective thinking. To explain this process, Johnson invokes the concepts of *image schemata* and *metaphorical projections*. Image schemata are basic patterns or recurring gestalts of embodied (visual, auditory, kinesthetic, or cross-modal) experience typically formed during infancy and early childhood, and metaphorical projections are the abstract concepts and inferences derived from those patterns. Johnson further contends that the basic schemas, which give rise to more abstract understanding and meaning (through metaphorical projections), are themselves tied to the aesthetic dimension of all embodied experience. In short, pervasive aesthetic characteristics of the world appeal to our bodily senses, creating relatively stable patterns of sensorimotor experience that, in turn, contribute to the meanings we make through metaphorical extension to nonphysicalistic realms.

Given that new materialism is a comparatively recent perspective on meaning, it has not been embraced as widely as some other perspectives. But in the past ten years, communication scholars have increasingly begun to draw upon its insights to explain how audiences engage in fully embodied sense making. Taking up Kristeva's notion of the semiotic, for instance, media and rhetorical scholars have explored how literature, plays, films, and war rhetoric move audiences at an affective, bodily level.³⁰ Similarly, Johnson's work on image schemata and metaphor has variously been taken up by discourse, intercultural, and organizational scholars to study the role of embodied cognition in information processing and meaning-making.³¹ Animated both by the "material turn" and a rising interest in the body, new materialism is likely to continue to grow in influence in the coming decades.

The New Rhetoric

For nearly 2,000 years, a classical conception of rhetoric rooted in persuasion dominated rhetorical theory. That conception was problematized in the early to mid-twentieth

century, however, as a renewed interest in rhetoric among philosophers, communication scholars, and composition teachers spawned a series of efforts to reconceptualize it. Though diverse, the reconceptualizations of rhetoric that occurred during this period are often grouped, if somewhat uneasily, under the sweeping, nondescript banner of the *new rhetoric*.³² Chief among the thinkers credited with advancing the new rhetoric were the literary scholars I.A. Richards (1893–1979) and Kenneth Burke (1897–1993), both of whom were introduced to communication scholars in large measure by Marie Hochmuth in the 1950s. In separate essays in the *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, Hochmuth outlined the basic contours of Richards’s and Burke’s versions of the new rhetoric.³³ Our interest in the new rhetoric is animated by the context-based theory of meaning at its core.

I.A. Richards’s conception of meaning emerges directly out of his concern with rhetoric. In his 1936 book *The Philosophy of Rhetoric*, Richards laments the state of rhetoric, suggesting that it has changed little since Aristotle. He objects, in particular, to rhetoric’s obsession with persuasion, advocating for a reconceptualization of rhetoric aimed instead at comprehension. Accordingly, Richards defines rhetoric as “a study of misunderstanding and its remedies.”³⁴ In keeping with his desire to promote understanding, he turns to what he regards as the key site of misunderstanding: words. The problem of misunderstanding arises, according to Richards, from two misconceptions about how words work, what he calls the *proper meaning superstition* and the *doctrine of uses*. These principles hold, respectively, that every word has a singular meaning and that its correct usage will eliminate misunderstanding. In contrast, Richards argues that not only do words not possess one correct meaning, but they also have no meaning by themselves. For Richards, meaning resides not in words, but in people and, more specifically, in the contexts in which persons use them.

When Richards insists that meaning is contextual, he intends “context” in two senses. First, meaning is contextual because it depends upon the particular combination of words used in a phrase or sentence. This, the more restricted or literary sense of context, simply refers to the “interanimation of words”—to the ways in which the meanings of words are mutually dependent. Second, meaning is contextual because words summon or call to mind previous events that shape our experience of the present. This, the more inclusive or technical sense of context, which Richards explored with his co-author C.K. Ogden (1889–1957) in their 1923 book *The Meaning of Meaning*, refers to how humans perceive and experience the world. Every event, according to Ogden and Richards, produces stimuli or sensory experiences that are stored as imprints or “engrams” in our minds for later retrieval. Words activate these engrams—the residual traces of previous events—because words are substitute stimuli or signs of the original stimulus. When a person hears a word such as *apple*, for instance, it evokes thoughts of one’s previous experiences with apples, thus triggering the associated engrams—a process called “delegated efficacy.” And since no two people have experienced apples in all the same ways, the word *apple* necessarily evokes different engrams and, consequently, different meanings for each person. In light of the inevitable ambiguity of words, meaning can never be determined by analyzing words as if they are “discrete independent tesserae” in a mosaic; to some extent, all understanding is inference and guesswork.³⁵

Burke features *identification*, rather than persuasion, as his key term and defines rhetoric as “the use of language as a symbolic means of inducing cooperation in beings that by nature respond to symbols.”⁴⁰ Identification is critical to Burke’s new rhetoric because, like Richards, he regards division (or alienation) and conflict to be endemic to the human condition. But whereas Richards locates the source of conflict in misunderstanding, Burke locates it in social hierarchy and human motives. Thus, Burke’s rhetoric is more concerned with *attitudes* than with comprehension. Despite these differences, both Richards’s and Burke’s new rhetorics were responses to World War I and to the social anxieties that it generated.

Burke’s most explicit treatment of meaning and signs appears in a 1962 essay, “What Are the Signs of What? A Theory of ‘Entitlement,’” published in *Anthropological Linguistics*. In that essay, which Burke had previously delivered as an invited talk at Boston University in 1956, he proposes to “reverse the usual realistic view of the relation between words and things” by arguing that “things are the signs of words.”⁴¹ For Burke, the idea that words are unproblematic reflections of the world “clings to a kind of naive verbal realism that refuses to realize the full extent of the role played by symbolicity in his [man’s] notions of reality.”⁴² The position Burke advances is grounded in a constitutive view of rhetoric that sees language as essential to the construction of the social world. While he is quick to acknowledge that there is a material (or nonverbal) world that exists independent of symbolicity, Burke maintains that our experience of that world is so tied up in the way we define, designate, and dramatize it that the “overall ‘picture’ is but a construct of our symbol system.”⁴³

Continuing, Burke posits that words distill and “entitle” complex nonverbal situations.⁴⁴ By singling out certain attributes (as opposed to others) of a situation, language orients us toward that situation; it shapes our attitudes and, thus, our actions. Language, then, is not simply a transparent representation of the nonverbal world, but a kind of action—symbolic action—in the world. While words entitle situations, nonverbal situations also operate according to the principle of abbreviation, meaning that they exhibit “one fragment or portion that is felt to stand for the essence of the situation.”⁴⁵ Since our sensory experience of that fragment signifies or is emblematic of the particular motives that inhere in the entitling terms for that situation, situations can be said to be materializations or signs of the spirit peculiar to words. So, while Burke’s new rhetoric differs from Richards’s in scope, purpose, and terminology, it shares a recognition that meaning is radically contextual in character.

The new rhetoric, generally, and I.A. Richards’s, specifically, was seminal to the study of meaning in communication. According to Stewart, Richards was one of the eleven most cited authorities on meaning through 1970,⁴⁶ and his belief that meaning is context dependent and, thus, never fixed is widely regarded as axiomatic. Richards’s influence continued to be felt, especially in rhetorical studies, throughout the 1970s and 1980s, and, in 1988, *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* hosted a special issue on I.A. Richards and his contributions to rhetorical theory. Burke, perhaps even more so than Richards, has had a profound influence on rhetorical theory and, especially, a constitutive view of language. But Burke’s view of meaning is less well known. Indeed, one of the few sustained

treatments of it is Stewart's *Language as Articulate Contact*, which dedicates a full chapter to its explication.⁴⁷

Ordinary Language

Ordinary language philosophy—a label that was not used by the philosophers themselves—is primarily associated with the views of Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951), J.L. Austin (1911–1960), and John Searle (1932–). This perspective challenges the view that philosophical inquiry requires a specialized language divorced from ordinary use. For proponents, the distinction between ordinary and non-ordinary language is not that of vernacular use on the one hand and academic or scientific language on the other; rather, the distinction is between language as it is ordinarily used and understood and philosophical, idealized language—such as that employed by logical positivists—thought to be more capable of reflecting reality. Ordinary language philosophy also challenges referential theories of meaning; these referential theories assert that the meaning of a word or phrase consists in its relationship to an object or thing, and that the verifiability of this relationship can be determined to be true or false. Ordinary language philosophers point out that, for many words and phrases, there is no identifiable object that constitutes meaning; the meaning of a word or a phrase emerges only through its use.⁴⁸ For ordinary language philosophers, both philosophical methodology and linguistic meaning are found in the ordinary *use* of expressions.

Wittgenstein studied logic and mathematics before becoming a Fellow at Trinity College at Cambridge where he wrote what eventually became one of the most influential philosophical texts of the twentieth century, *Philosophical Investigations*. Published posthumously in 1953, the text explores Wittgenstein's non-referential position toward meaning by analogizing language use with games.⁴⁹ For Wittgenstein, to ask, "What is a word?" is analogous to asking, "What is a piece in chess?" Knowing the shape of the king, for example, explains nothing about its use; how the king functions—what it means—is known only through the rules of the game. The shape and sound of a word is like the shape of the king and functions likewise; to know what any word means it is necessary to know its role in the language-game in which it is used.⁵⁰ The fundamental error of denotative theories of language is that they appeal to something outside of the system of language-games—to objects in the world—in order to explain the significance of words, an appeal that is analogous to trying to explain how the king functions by referring to something outside of the game of chess. For Wittgenstein, a word's meaning cannot be explained by reference to the thought it expresses, nor the thought by some object in the external world. The word, an indivisible unit of sound-with-sense, is explainable only by contrasting its role with that of other words in the language system of which it is a part.

Wittgenstein's language-games are often communication games.⁵¹ Communication is possible because language (like any game) has recognized, albeit arbitrary, rules.⁵² Reference is possible in Wittgenstein's view; the rules of some language-games are founded on conventions through which a language community comes to link sense impressions to conditions in the world. In other words, in the technique of using language, certain

elements or objects come to correspond to signs, to words.⁵³ *Brick*, for example, through practices involving interacting with people and bricks, comes to correspond to a rectangular block of aggregate, but outside of human interactions involving such blocks, *brick* is meaningless. The meanings of words are always highly contextualized, embedded in forms of life that give them meaning. For example, the expression “*Water!*” can be used as an exclamation, an order, a request, or as an answer to a question, depending on how it is used. Language-games are learned by watching others play and by observing utterances and their consequences within the culture and society in which they are used. Without training in the rules of these forms of life, communication between people would be impossible.

British philosopher J.L. Austin and his erstwhile American student John Searle developed ordinary language theory based on what Austin called *speech acts*. In 1955, Austin introduced speech acts by publishing his William James Lectures (which had been delivered at Harvard in 1954) as *How to Do Things with Words*. Like Wittgenstein, Austin challenged traditional notions of meaning and insisted that the meanings of all utterances are not referential, nor truth-conditional and verifiable. Creating a distinction between *constatives*, or utterances that are referential, truth-conditional, and mostly descriptive in function, and *performatives*, or utterances that are not sayings but *doings*, Austin says that only the former have truth value. This constative–performative distinction challenged rhetorical, linguistic, and philosophical traditions that establish equivalence between definitions of literal meaning and truth and considered meaningful only statements that are verifiable according to criteria of truth-falsity.⁵⁴ Performatives—“I do” or “I hereby christen this ship *The Queen Elizabeth*,” for example—do not describe or report anything that can be considered true or false. Further, these sentences are, or are part of, the doing of an action—marrying or naming.⁵⁵ While Austin later abandoned a strict delineation between constatives and performatives, he continued to advocate for the position that not all expressions were truth-verifiable. For Austin, language is not merely representational: a theory of linguistic meaning must take into account social and pragmatic features of language use.

Austin further explicates speech acts by conceptualizing three different linguistic acts that can be performed at the same time by uttering the same words: a *locutionary* act of uttering words with a definite meaning as defined by sense and reference; an *illocutionary* act which by virtue of implicit conventions is accomplished in uttering the words; and a *perlocutionary* act of producing some effect as a result of uttering words.⁵⁶ For example, uttering the locutionary act “You’re stupid” accomplishes the illocutionary act of insulting someone and the perlocutionary act of causing anger. According to Austin, while the meaning of a constative can be assessed in terms of truth or falsity—the accused person is or is not stupid—the meaning of speech acts is assessed by an alternate criterion, felicity. For a speech act to be felicitous, several conditions must be met: there must exist a conventional procedure having a conventional effect (for example, saying “I do” making one married), and the speech act must be uttered correctly and completely by appropriate persons in appropriate circumstances (in a ceremony by partners capable of being united in a marriage ceremony).

Austin distinguished meaning as sense and reference from meaning resulting from what he termed *force*, or that which gives information as to how an utterance is to be taken or interpreted.⁵⁷ For some utterances, it is *force*—accomplished through a number of factors including the situation, mood, tone, grammar, and nonverbal gestures—that informs a hearer that a speaker is joking, insinuating, being sarcastic, or merely reporting. Where wording alone is insufficient to clue a hearer into the meaning intended by a speaker, *force*—words like “I argue,” “I demand,” or “I believe”—allows meaning to emerge in a specific context of language use.

John Searle’s theory, initially published in 1969 in *Speech Acts: An Essay on the Philosophy of Language* and in 1979 in *Expression and Meaning: Studies in the Theory of Speech Acts*, is an extension of Austin’s work. Searle, a professor of philosophy at Berkeley, has continued to develop his language theory, and the remarks included here do not reflect the full evolution of his thinking on consciousness, language, and culture. In communication scholarship, Searle may be best known for his conceptualization of *indirect speech acts*, or speech acts in which “the speaker’s utterance meaning and the sentence meaning come apart in various ways” so that the meaning exceeds what is said.⁵⁸ Indirect speech act theory, along with Searle’s Principle of Expressibility and his Literal Meaning Hypothesis, address meaning in language by contrasting literal meaning with nonliteral meaning.

The Principle of Expressibility states that “whatever can be meant can be said.”⁵⁹ In other words, whenever the force of an utterance is not clear, it can be made clear. For example, the proposition “Sam smokes habitually” can be explicated by the addition of expressions of force such as “Sam, smoke habitually!” or “Does Sam smoke habitually?”⁶⁰ The Principle of Literal Meaning addresses those utterances in which a speaker intends to communicate no more than the literal meaning of a sentence. In these cases, the speaker’s meaning and sentence meaning coincide as, for example, when “It’s getting hot in here” is uttered to indicate rising temperature in a room.⁶¹ Nonliteral meaning includes utterances such as metaphors—“It’s getting hot in here” to describe an escalating argument, for example—as well as uses of language that are intended to be sarcastic or jokes. For Searle, as for Austin and Wittgenstein, meaning does not exist prior to utterances; meaning depends upon and emerges within specific language use.

As the field of communication broadened its scope and methodologies in the latter decades of the twentieth century—away from classical conceptions of rhetoric as public address and a scientific orientation to research—communication scholars turned to ordinary language theories to ground their work. While Edward Shirley argued that a satisfactory theory of meaning could not be derived in terms of speech acts, other researchers found ordinary language principles productive. In the 1970s–1980s, Thomas Farrell and Thomas Frenz turned to J.L. Austin and John Searle while Richard Buttny turned to Wittgenstein, for instance, to shift the focus from what language *symbolizes* to what language *does* in a material arena.⁶² During the latter twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, ordinary language theory has been applied to discussions concerning linguistics, the rapprochement of rhetoric and philosophy, realism in news journalism, interpersonal conflict literature, and models of signification and pedagogy, among others.⁶³

Semiotics

Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913), Charles Sanders Peirce (1829–1913), and Roland Barthes (1915–1980) are three theorists, influential in the communication field, who advanced the perspective on meaning known as *semiotics*. Semiotics can be defined as a “science of meaning” that studies signs and their uses in representation.⁶⁴ Two core assumptions of semiotic theory are that any theory of meaning must be conceptualized within the context of a theory of language, and any theory of language must be based on a definition of signs in relation to other signs.⁶⁵ Each of the three major semiotic theorists begins with the sign, but their different conceptualizations yield different implications for meaning.

The Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure is generally credited with revolutionizing the study of language by replacing a substantive view of language as a collection of separate, meaningful units called *words* with a relational, structural model that considers language in terms of the relationships among words.⁶⁶ Saussure’s lectures on his semiotic system—which he termed *semiology*—were delivered at the University of Geneva and published posthumously in 1915 as *Course in General Linguistics*. Interested in establishing a general science of signs, Saussure says that “from the very outset we must put both feet on the ground of language and use language as the norm of all other manifestations of speech.”⁶⁷ Accordingly, he isolates language as a field of study independent of both speakers and of external reality by approaching language as made up of two distinct parts, a structure and the manifestations of that structure. The structure or system of rules and conventions that makes speech possible is *la langue*; the actual use of language by speakers is *la parole*. For Saussure, it is the conceptual structure of *la langue* and not the social use of *la parole* that determines the meanings of words.

In contrast to how correspondence theories of meaning treat a symbol as the link between a name and an object, Saussure’s linguistic sign is a two-sided psychological entity consisting of a *signifier* (sound-image) and a *signified* (the concept). The signifier is the material form of the sign as perceived by the listener’s senses, while the signified is the mental image or idea evoked by the signifier. Importantly, Saussure regarded the relation between the signifier and the signified to be arbitrary. For example, the concept “tree” and the sound /tri/ have no necessary connection beyond shared social convention. Communication is possible because all individuals who are socially linked by a common language will establish among themselves a kind of average of meanings: all will reproduce—not exactly, but approximately—the same signs linked to the same concepts.

Saussure shifts the question of meaning away from how language relates to the external world and toward the internal relations of signs in a structured system of “organizational categories and forms through which the mind is able to experience the world, or to organize a meaning in what is essentially in itself meaningless.”⁶⁸ For Saussure, then, given the arbitrary nature of signs, signs do not reference external reality and meanings do not reside in the signs themselves, but in their relationships. Fixing signs in relation to one another in the sign-system underlying language use allows the possibility of meaning. Signs thus *mean* in advance of communication events and exclusively due

to the differences among them in *la langue*. Meaning is possible, but to decipher meaning would require knowledge of exclusively symbolic and abstract language codes.

Charles Sanders Peirce, the founder of modern pragmatism, is considered along with Saussure to be a founder of modern semiotics, calling his theory *semiotics*.⁶⁹ Educated at Harvard, Peirce taught logic and philosophy and wrote prodigiously, filling eight dense volumes that began to be published in 1932 as *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*. Like Saussure, Peirce rejects a correspondence view of meaning and frames the study of language on the basis of signs. However, Peirce does not approach language from a perspective divorced from language use and he extends the category of signs to include all modes of human communication. Taking a pragmatic stance, Peirce acknowledges that humans cannot directly know external reality, but he asserts that people take for real what their community considers real, including the fact of consciousness. Beginning with consciousness, Peirce approaches his system of signs by asking, “what *must* be the character” of signs used by “an intelligence capable of learning by experience?”⁷⁰ He answers this question by theorizing three levels of meaning that correspond to levels of consciousness and result in a triadic theory of the sign.

Peirce notes that signs are not constructed simply to name and classify objects but because people want to understand objects in a sensory-based fashion.⁷¹ This understanding is possible because of the basic components of consciousness which Peirce terms *firstness*, *secondness*, and *thirdness*. Firstness is immediate sensation derived from bodily and sensory processes; firstness is pure experience without recognition, analysis, or reference. Secondness is derived from relating signs to one another; secondness is human lived reality of the fact of things existing in the world. Thirdness is the level of meaning derived from symbolic processes; thirdness is the world of sign relations in abstractions, theories, and concepts. From these levels of consciousness, Peirce theorizes a triadic sign as “an object which stands for another object to some mind.”⁷²

For Peirce, signification requires a relationship not only between a sign and an object, but also with an interpretant, a human mind that must conceive of the sign as connected with its object. For example, as a hearer encounters the spoken word “flag,” there is an immediate, non-conceptual experience of vibrations on the eardrum. Next, there is the experience of having a thought—a sign in the mind as “flag” becomes conscious. Then, the sign’s interpretant *re-presents* the thought-object as a sign of the waving, striped object. It is the sign in the mind that meaningfully connects the other two.⁷³ A sign often has more than one thought-object. “Flag” might mean “my father’s coffin cover,” “the United States,” or “US imperialism.” Indeed, any sign or collection of signs resulting from prior experience can become an object in the sign-object-interpretant relationship. Communication is possible because experiences form the basis of sign-object-interpretant relations that are shared by members of a language community.

French philosopher, literary and social critic Roland Barthes built on the language theories of both Saussure and Peirce to develop his own theory of signs which might be termed the *signifying system*. Saussure’s and Peirce’s conceptualization of a sign is that of a signifier that then leads to a signified; the relationship between the two is one of *equality*. For Barthes, however, the relationship between the signifier and signified is one

of *equivalence*, a non-sequential correlation that unites the two in an indivisible unity.⁷⁴ What a hearer grasps as *meaning* is the entire sign, the sound-image *and* the associated concept. This insight led Barthes to make one of his most important contributions to semiotic theory—the distinction between *denotative* and *connotative* meanings.

Denotative meaning involves the literal or explicit meanings of words and other phenomena. On a denotative level, the word “lion” (signifier) evokes the mental association of a large feline mammal (signified). But Barthes recognized that meaning goes beyond the literal; the word “lion” also evokes other associations such as “courage” and “pride.” This second level of meaning, connotation, operates at the level of ideology and myth. For example, “dog” and “perro” may both denote a hairy mammal that barks, but, depending on the culture, the word might connote “faithful companion,” “family member,” “pest,” or even “food.” One consequence of connotative meaning is that all meaning is fundamentally culturally determined.

For Barthes, the semantization of cultural items is inevitable because “*as soon as there is a society, every usage is converted into a sign of itself.*”⁷⁵ For any object not to signify would require that it be absolutely divorced from all human experience up to its creation. This insight led Barthes to extend his study of signs beyond language to such areas as myth, clothing, food, advertisements, and photography. All of these for Barthes function as planes of expression (signifiers) associated with planes of content (signifieds).⁷⁶

Though William Hardy first began to explore a semiotic conception of meaning in a 1944 *Quarterly Journal of Speech* article, this perspective did not become popular in communication studies until the late 1960s and early 1970s. The popularity of semiotics largely corresponded with the dominance of structuralism, an (largely European) intellectual tradition concerned with the rules that govern all aspects of social life. As such, semiotics generally reflected an *objectivist* orientation, i.e., “a commitment to the belief that one could describe the world as it exists objectively, without reference to observers.”⁷⁷ Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, interest in semiotics grew exponentially, especially with regard to the study of media and culture, where it was used to account for the meanings of everything from fashion and film to advertising and architecture. Semiotics, which is still widely used in visual communication and media studies, has spawned thousands of articles in communication. Consequently, it is difficult to overstate the influence of semiotic theory on conceptions of meaning in communication studies throughout the latter half of the twentieth century.

Symbolic Forms

By the late 1960s, communication scholars had developed a keen interest in the complex relation between rhetoric and knowing, one that led them to explore the theory of symbolic forms. Two of the key philosophers responsible for this theory—Ernst Cassirer (1874–1945) and Susanne K. Langer (1895–1985)—believed that reason alone is a “very inadequate term with which to comprehend the forms of man’s cultural life in all their richness and variety.”⁷⁸ Reason as developed in mathematical and scientific thinking is

inadequate to study mental phenomena such as the symbolic capacity of human consciousness.⁷⁹ Cassirer and Langer revise traditional notions of meaning that focus exclusively on language and discourse by extending symbolic behavior to the realms of sensation and emotion, and to considerations of myth, religion, music, and art.

Cassirer was a philosophy professor at Frankfurt and Hamburg universities before immigrating first to England where he taught at Oxford, and then to the United States where he lectured at Yale and Columbia. In one of his two books written in English, *An Essay on Man* (1944), Cassirer shifts attention from conceiving of objects *substantively* as things independent of conceptualization to considering objects *functionally* through how they are experienced by conceptualization. For Cassirer, experiencing something takes place according to the rules of a *symbolic form*, a framework that encompasses the experiencing agent and that which is experienced and made meaningful. For example, an electron is not an independent, substantial thing, but a functional term in the context of a certain conceptualization; an electron becomes comprehensible only within the framework of a scientific theory like quantum mechanics. Like electrons, all objects are made meaningful only with a symbolic form that determines the “reality” of what one understands.⁸⁰ Even a tree is symbolic, something different to an artist or a biologist, depending on the symbolic form through which it is understood. The symbolic form, then, *forms* a world as a meaningful context and what is experienced is not the thing—the electron or the tree—but a phenomenon within this context. Symbolic forms are multiple and vary for different realms of human reasoning such as mythology, language, and science.

Cassirer designates three functions of symbolic meaning that apply to different symbolic forms: *expressive*, *representative*, and *significative*. Expressive meaning, the most basic and primitive type, is the emotional significance of experiences of events in the world. This function of meaning is evident in mythology where a unity of consciousness results in a world where inner and outer realms and the names for objects and the objects themselves are not distinguished. Representative symbolic meaning results in a *natural language* that distinguishes stable and enduring substances that are re-identifiable and communicable. Through natural language, the world of ordinary sense perception is constructed. The third type of meaning, the *significative*, is exhibited in a scientific view of the world and in the pure concepts that characterize mathematics, logic, and physics. Freed from sense perception, this form of meaning is abstract and universalizing.⁸¹ All three types of meaning are found in human culture: expressive meaning in religion and art, representative meaning in everyday language, and significative meaning in scientific discourse.

Susanne Langer, who taught at Harvard and was the first American woman to receive professional recognition as a philosopher, based her theory of symbolic functions on Cassirer’s work. In a 1960 article, “The Origins of Speech and its Communicative Function,” published in the *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, Langer challenges the traditional conceptualization of language as having evolved from more primitive forms of animal communication. Building on biological and psychiatric research, Langer claims that human language is the result of a unique human capability—that of generating and using

symbols. Like her predecessor, Cassirer, Langer considers symbol use as a natural and biological human characteristic, one that must be adequately conceptualized to distinguish human symbolic behavior from that of other animals.

Langer considers meaning not a quality of objects but a function or pattern viewed with reference to one special term that is related to others.⁸² The meaning of any symbol emerges in relationship to other terms and always has both psychological and logical aspects. Psychologically, any item that has meaning must be employed by *someone*. Logically, any item with meaning must be capable of conveying that meaning. Citing Peirce's triadic sense of meaning, Langer posits meaning as involving three things—a function that rests on a pattern, an object that is “meant,” and a subject who uses the term. A certain symbol “means” an object to a person; this is the logical meaning. A person also “means” the object by the symbol; this is the psychological meaning. There is no symbolic meaning without these relations.

Langer critiques the traditional philosophical notion that language is the only means of articulating thought and that everything that is not speakable is mere feeling or intuition. Believing this notion, says Langer, leads erroneously to the idea that thought is the only rational intellectual activity.⁸³ This idea also limits the symbolic function to discourse, a position that Langer finds untenable as a way to explain the range of human thought and understanding. Langer extends the symbolic function beyond discourse to the senses and points out that the forms recognizable through sight or hearing, for example, are genuine symbolic materials that function as media of understanding.⁸⁴ In other words, sense organs are not merely receptors or recorders; from a myriad number of sensations, the eye and the ear abstract to make symbolic forms that are meaningful.

To explain the difference between meaning in language and meaning in other symbolic processes, Langer differentiates between *discursive* and *presentational* meanings. Discursive meaning is the type of meaning in language. Every language has a vocabulary and a syntax; its elements are words with relatively fixed meanings that are linked by grammatical structure to make more complex terms whose meanings are special constellations of the united symbols. Language is a temporal series of words and the meaning of language is thus necessarily successively understood. Presentational meaning is the meaning that pertains to art, photography, and music. In these cases, there is no defining dictionary of terms and meaning depends not upon successive understanding or the equivalence of symbols with referents, but upon the simultaneous apprehension of forms through the senses. Like words, visual forms—light, shadow, line, coloration, and proportion, for example—are capable of complex combinations, but the laws governing this articulation differ from the syntax that governs language. Gradations of light and shade cannot be separated from an image, enumerated like words, or correlated in a one-to-one sense with meanings. An image, therefore, has *wordless symbolism*, a meaning that provides a route to understanding that does not involve discourse. Importantly for Langer, her understanding of nondiscursive symbolism established a basis for a symbolic understanding of art, music, and photography by including in human reasoning those mental processes that traditionally have been devalued as emotion and intuition.

The theory of symbolic forms put forward by Cassirer and Langer was central to the ideational views of meaning that were popular in communication studies in the mid- to late twentieth century.⁸⁵ In contrast to a referential perspective, which suggests that symbols refer to objects, an ideational view holds that symbols refer to ideas. In locating meaning in the mental idea that a symbol represents, the ideational view, especially as articulated in the theory of symbolic forms, broadened the scope of rhetoric by expanding the range of what constitutes “symbolic” forms beyond that of discourse and language. As Joddy Murray explains, “what philosophers such as Langer and Cassirer do for us is de-emphasize the exclusivity of verbal logic as the only form of legitimate articulation . . . [through] a more inclusive definition of symbolization.”⁸⁶ Although the theory of symbolic forms is cited less frequently today, its insights hold particular promise for the recent “affective turn” in the humanities.

Symbolic Interactionism

One of the most influential conceptions of meaning in the field of communication and, in particular, the qualitative study of interpersonal communication derives from the sociological theory or perspective known as symbolic interactionism. This perspective maintains that human behavior and, therefore, social life are best understood in terms of the subjective meanings that people attribute to the world, as opposed to the world as it objectively exists. This view was attractive to communication scholars, who in the latter half of the twentieth century had increasingly begun to subscribe to the view that reality is socially constructed. Though symbolic interactionism, which has its roots in the philosophy of German idealism, owes a debt to both the German sociologist Max Weber (1864–1920) and the American sociologist Charles Horton Cooley (1864–1929), its development and systematization is typically credited to the pragmatist philosopher and social behaviorist George Herbert Mead (1863–1931).

For Mead, meaning involves more than the simple transmission of messages between persons. Rather, meaning arises from and is endlessly modified through persons’ symbolic interactions. In other words, meaning is a social product generated by interactional partners within a shared context. Consequently, it originates in neither objects nor individual psychic processes. To better appreciate this perspective, it is useful to consider Mead’s discussion of meaning in his book *Mind, Self, and Society*, which was published posthumously in 1934 based upon the notes of Mead’s former students; it was edited by Charles W. Morris, the semiotician responsible for establishing the distinction among semantics, syntactics, and pragmatics.⁸⁷ For Mead, the nature of meaning is “implicit in the [triadic] structure of the social act,”⁸⁸ which involves:

- (1) a gesture made by one person;
- (2) a response gesture made by a second person based upon an interpretation of the initiating gesture; and
- (3) completion of the act begun by the gesture of the first person based upon an interpretation of the response gesture.

Meaning, then, always involves an interaction between at least two persons engaged in what Mead described as a “conversation of gestures” (unconscious) and “significant gestures” (conscious). While a conversation of gestures is characteristic of all animal communication, a conversation of significant gestures or symbols (such as that involving language) is unique to human communication because responses are not chiefly automatic or reflexive, but call for interpretation. Since one’s interpretation will influence one’s response, which will then be interpreted by the other human actor and influence her or his response, communication is an ongoing process of modified responses. Emerging as it does from contextual responses, meaning is always collaborative and conditional.

Mead’s ideas regarding the nature of meaning and social life would later be refined and extended by Herbert Blumer (1900–1987), a former student of Mead’s at the University of Chicago. In his 1969 book, *Symbolic Interactionism: Perspective and Method*, Blumer outlines the three central premises of symbolic interactionism. “The first premise,” according to Blumer, “is that human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings that they have for them.”⁸⁹ According to Blumer, humans have meanings for everything in their social world, including physical objects, persons, categories, ideals, institutions, activities, events, etc., and these meanings shape our attitudes and actions. Blumer’s second premise is that “the meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with one’s fellows.”⁹⁰ In locating the source of meaning in interaction, this premise explicitly rejects theories of meaning that regard meaning as either intrinsic to the essence or makeup of a thing or attribute it to a psychological accretion that a person brings to a thing. The third premise holds that “meanings are handled in and modified through, an interpretive process used by the person in dealing with the things he [*sic*] encounters.”⁹¹ Interpretation in this schema is not “a mere automatic application of established meanings” but a formative process in which each person revises meaning as a guide for action based upon situated interactions with others.⁹² The conception of meaning that underlies the theory of symbolic interactionism reflects an important challenge to those theories that regard meaning as transparent or unimportant. In particular, symbolic interactionism is critical of social science research concerned with human behaviors and the factors—stimuli, motives, attitudes, etc.—thought to produce them. The problem with this approach to the study of human behavior, according to interactionists, is that meaning is either ignored or subsumed to the factors being studied “by regarding it as a neutral link intervening between the initiating factors and the behavior they are alleged to produce.”⁹³ In contrast to this perspective, symbolic interactionism sees meaning as contingent, co-constitutive, and crucial to all human behavior. This view of meaning also contests the belief that meaning is a personal or private affair, e.g., that it is something created in the individual psyche. In fact, for symbolic interactionists, both the concepts of self and mind are social constructions that develop out of “the dynamic, ongoing social process” that is symbolic interaction.

Within a decade of the publication of Blumer’s book, symbolic interactionism had begun to gain traction as an approach for studying human communication. Stephen Littlejohn’s 1977 *Quarterly Journal of Speech* article outlining the key figures and major schools of thought associated with this perspective was particularly important in its adoption.⁹⁴ So, too, was JAI Press’s 1978 release of the first volume in a series edited by

Norman Denzin titled *Studies in Symbolic Interaction*. This series, which includes forty volumes to date, consists of “original research and theory within the general sociological perspective known as Symbolic Interactionism.”⁹⁵ During the 1980s and 1990s, symbolic interactionism was used to study interpersonal and organizational communication, as well as social movements and media. More recently, this perspective has been influential in the study of mobile and online communication.

Conclusion

During the discipline’s first few decades, the concept of meaning was only sporadically mentioned in communication scholarship and, even then, it was mentioned only in passing. Meaning was, for nearly forty years, somewhat of a mystery. Indeed, in 1948, Lester Thonssen and A. Craig Baird explicitly reflected on its mysterious nature, observing that “the phonetic and gestural symbols we call language are the external aspects of a highly complex and not too well-known psychological phenomenon, namely the conception and transference of meaning.”⁹⁶ But that would soon change. By mid-century, as philosophers called into question correspondence theories of truth and communication scholars critiqued transmission models of communication, meaning had become the subject of sustained study and scrutiny.

While no single theory would secure disciplinary consensus in the ensuing decades, all would complicate our ideas about communication, pointing to meaning’s subjective character, its relational quality, its contextual nature, its non-linguistic dimensions, its embodied tenor, and its indirect referentiality. Today, there is still no consensus about precisely what meaning is and how it functions. But communication scholars do seem to agree that it is far more complex than the simple “transfer” of ideas through words and symbols. How our understanding of meaning will evolve over the next hundred years is difficult, if not impossible, to predict. But if history is any indicator, then there is good reason to believe the field will not be dominated by a singular view. And perhaps that is as it should be—that a field with such a diverse array of interests, methods, and commitments is built upon an equally diverse conception of its unifying concept: meaning.

Notes

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