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Words Don't Mean, Minds Do! An Unconventional View

*Terence Moore**

Cambridge University, Cambridge, UK
*Corresponding author. Email: tm15@cam.ac.uk

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Abstract

In this article I question a long-established, common-sense belief. Namely, that words contain meanings. This belief is the absolute presupposition underpinning the familiar question: 'What does that word mean? Backed by John Locke, I argue that words don't mean. Or as Locke puts it: 'Words are an insignificant noise.' Words become significant, meaningful, once we have each processed them through our own minds. In short, we subjectively make our own meanings. The role of words is to trigger the meanings we have made for ourselves. This is where the inescapable roots of misunderstanding lie. The words that do the triggering are public. The meanings we create for those words are unavoidably private and mobile. The bulk of the rest of the article addresses the question: 'How far can we curb misunderstanding?'

In using language to communicate I am frequently struck by the fragility of our understanding of each other's words. My experience is invariably mixed. Sometimes language appears to work easily. I seem to understand and be understood. Other times I only partially understand or even misunderstand. And at other times I myself am misunderstood and don't even realize it! So what is going on? Why is imperfect understanding between us so rife? What can be done about it? Can misunderstanding be curbed?

I suspect the root of the answer to the fragility of our understanding lies in a deeply-held, common-sense belief about words and meanings. It's a belief that underpins the familiar question: What does that word mean? If there's one feature of language that almost everyone would agree on, it is that words have, or better, contain meaning. We might call this the Container view. This article challenges that view.

On the face of it the Container view seems useful. It allows us to engage in a tacit communal conspiracy. We all tacitly 'act as if' words had meanings. It's common sense! But common sense, we know, can be wrong. Common sense tells us the sun rises and sets. We see it every day. Perception is not however a reliable guide. Great astronomers told us centuries ago we live in a heliocentric, not geocentric, universe. We go round the sun, the sun, whatever we might say, does not go round us!

Not an astronomer but a seventeenth-century radical philosopher John Locke – a bit of a hero of mine – told us that the common-sense view of words containing meaning – the Container view – was not only wrong but also seriously misleading. His actual words in 'An Essay Concerning Human Understanding' ran: 'Words are so much

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insignificant noise.' But if words don't contain meanings where, you may ask, do meanings live? The short answer is in the minds of individual language users. The role of words in any conversation is to trigger meanings in the individual mind of each participant.

Take any act of communication. The words being used I suggest have no meanings at all until each interlocutor independently creates their meaning for themselves. The way we create meanings for ourselves is by filtering public words through little-understood private processes in our own minds. In short, words on their own don't mean. Their role is to excite meanings in individual minds. These meanings may be similar, or they may be significantly different in different minds.

Consider as an example of word meaning the word 'struthious'. Once it was for me, as for many people, empty of meaning, an insignificant noise. Now, however, it excites in my mind the idea of ostriches, yes ostriches. I can recall when young pointing to a picture and asking: 'What's that bird?' It was then I first heard the legend about ostriches. In the face of danger they are said to bury their heads in the sand! It sounded implausible, but it was only a legend! So now 'struthious' in my mind triggers the meaning 'like an ostrich'. Such that I can say of my friend, Max, 'he is a bit struthious', meaning for me that in the face of difficult problems he's likely to bury his head In the sands of distractions. A judgement, while meaningful to me, would not be especially meaningful in the minds of interlocutors who do not share the legend.

This example makes two vital points. Both bear on the degree to which we can understand or only partially understand each other's language. First, it makes clear that meanings are not word-dependent, but mind-dependent. Secondly, probably most easily overlooked, but vital to our understanding of each other's language, it reminds us that meanings are also person-dependent. When we converse, you have your meanings, I have mine. They may at times

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be similar but they are not identical. We need to learn a hard lesson. That meanings are necessarily indeterminate and language, the tool we use to communicate, is shot through with subjectivity.

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Consider the implications for us trying to communicate. As a starting point I believe we need to recognize and acknowledge openly to ourselves that all communication is interpreted through individuals' minds. Each mind differs. Our experience of the varied stages of the life we've lived gives each of us a different, constantly changing mindset. The unavoidable consequence is we can never know for certain what others have understood by what we have said or that we fully understand what they say. The level of uncertainty varies. The better we know our friend and something of their experience of life, the closer our private meanings may become. But meanings never resemble numbers. In simple arithmetic $(2 + 2) \times 5 = 20$. No misunderstanding there! No indeterminacy. Now try three words: 'I love you.' Its meaning in minds we all know changes over time, over decades, over circumstances, even becoming at times its antonym.

We may like to think the words we are using are exciting the same meanings in your mind as they do in mine. But don't think it too long. It's a thought that stokes the fires of imperfect understanding, a thought that lies at the roots of misunderstanding. A better thought is to consider reappraising the Container view, the misleading common-sense view that words contain meanings. It can be moved in what I see as the right direction by adding to it two short words: 'to' and 'you'. Instead of endlessly asking 'What does that word mean?' we might more profitably ask: 'What does that word mean to you?' For example: 'What does the word "Brexit" mean to you?' This small change has huge consequences. 'To you' focuses the attention not on the word but on the individual and the private meanings they carry in their mind for that word. The mind-dependent, person-dependent nature of meaning demands of us that we expunge the Container question 'What does that word mean?' from our mental vocabulary and replace it minimally by: 'What does that word mean to you?' Or more helpfully and more pointedly by: 'What feelings, what ideas, what thoughts does that word excite in you?' The response to my asking this question should enable me to begin to see which of my words have not excited similar meanings in others' minds as they do in mine. For curbing, questioning matters.

Curbing Misunderstanding

What can we do to diminish the fragility of our understanding of each other? The best I have to offer is a partial answer and a warning. The warning: the most we can hope for in using language is to diminish our degree of misunderstanding. But we can never hope to erase misunderstanding from our talk or writing. The potential for misunderstanding is with us whenever we use language to communicate because, as we have seen, the meanings of words are inherently subjective.

My partial answer begins by asking you to accept that the meanings say of words like 'Brexit' are not so much ambiguous as indeterminate and of course subjective. The meanings we have in our mind today for Brexit are not necessarily the ones we had yesterday or the ones we'll have tomorrow. How much our individual meaning changes may depend to some degree on what influences we have come under during recent years.

Accepting this helps us to remember the vital point. Meanings are creatures of our own making. Or as Wittgenstein would say more

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poetically: 'Words strike a note on the keyboard of our imagination.'

Without the work of our mind's imagination words themselves are without meaning, as 'struthious' once was to me, meaningless, but is I trust no longer so to you. What's to be done? I have two tools I try to remember to use when it matters to be clear. One tool is CHECK, the second is CHALLENGE. Both tools involve asking the right questions.

'The better we know our friend and something of their experience of life, the closer our private meanings may become.'

CHECK: I had a Chinese student once with near perfect English. After a discussion on English usage I asked her: 'Do you understand me?' As she often did, she replied: 'Yes.' Taking it to be an affirmative 'Yes, I do.' I was naturally pleased. Only when I read her written work on our discussion did it turn out that her 'Yes' was not at all an affirmative, but more a courteous: 'Please go on.' I was mortified. I had been misunderstood. The more helpful question would have been along the lines of: 'What have you understood from our discussion?'

CHALLENGE: When you are in conversation with a friend and you feel understanding of one another is becoming very partial, be bold, ask a question. For example: 'What do you have in mind when you use the word "woke"?'

Seeking clarification may make our understanding of each other's words less fragile. Certainly my Chinese student and I now misunderstand each other less!

Let me conclude with words the radical philosopher John Locke used in his 'Epistle to the Reader' of his *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689). He wrote: 'The greater part of the Questions and Controversies that perplex Mankind depend upon the doubtful and uncertain use of words.'

Alas, they still do. Perhaps we can ease some of that doubt and uncertainty by finding a new home for meanings. Words don't mean, minds do!

Terence Moore

Terence Moore is a philosopher, a Fellow of Clare College, Cambridge, and author of *Understanding Misunderstanding: Locke Holds the Key.*

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