

Means Means Means

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The idea of a general, domain-transcendent theory of "interpretation" that is philosophically substantive can appeal only to academia's uncritical lumpers, caring no better than a general a general, domain-transcendent theory of "doing". There are a great many disparate activities, processes or outcomes to which we apply the word 'interpretation'. Those lured into offering generalities have tended to pin their hopes on uncritical appeals to "meaning". Across disciplines and subject matters, notions of meaning and interpretation are routinely paired, of course. (Or, at least, the nouns 'meaning' and 'interpretation' routinely co-occur, along with the verbs 'mean' and 'interpret'.) But if there is something common to such pairings, it is no stronger than this:

(1) To interpret something is to determine its meaning.

But this is not worth calling a philosophical thesis. The fact that (1) seems perfectly intelligible and potentially true does nothing to support the idea of a substantive, underlying notion of "meaning", or a substantive, underlying notion of "interpretation". There are simply too many disparate things to which we apply the word 'meaning', and too many importantly different notions we call 'determination'—epistemic, causal, constitutive, and stipulative, for example—to treat (1) as embodying a substantive claim. In the humanities, the traditional way ahead here involved going "Gricean", which involved (a) identifying "scientific" interpretation with the determination of (factive) natural meaning, (b) identifying "cultural" interpretation with the determination of an intentional notion of (nonfactive) nonnatural meaning, and (c) forging an evolutionary link between natural and nonnatural meaning, the latter emerging from behavioural patterns involving the former. But this overlooked (i) the fact different notions of determination still needed to be invoked in connection with both scientific and cultural meaning, and (b) the fact that Grice's notions of natural and nonnatural meaning were neither exclusive nor exhaustive — much cultural meaning does not involve anything as rich as Gricean intention, and some does not seem to involve intention at all.

Despite the hopelessness of the idea of a general theory of interpretation, order can be imposed by providing a formal semantics of "X means Y" that emerges from analysing its logical grammar and reflecting on Grice's informal suggestion that talk about meaning rests on talk of "consequence". The apparent factivity and nonintentional nature of natural meaning, and the apparent nonfactivity and intentional nature of nonnatural meaning, are usually taken to thwart a unified semantics of 'mean'. The semantics I propose (i) rejects the *semantic* factivity of natural meaning, (ii) invokes a well-motivated account of *pragmatic* factivity, and (iii) involves a neat twist on the Lewis-Kratzer theory of conditionals.