

# K I V U N G

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Edited by ANDRAS BALINT

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## LANGUAGE AND EXTRALINGUAL REALITY

(Editorial)

In a controversial article in the present issue of KIVUNG Rudolph Zimek opts for the inclusion of extralingual reality in the semantic interpretation of utterances and stipulates, in addition to the customary "meaning" component of linguistic analysis, a new dimension, that of "content."

Let us consider his first component, the Phenomena of Extralingual Reality in detail.

Zimek argues that "the syntactic functional positions of words (such as actor, goal) should be in compliance with relations in the extralingual situation about which the speaker wants to communicate."

While in many cases such a condition is desirable (Zimek himself describes it as desirable not obligatory), in an equally large number of cases the hearer has no way of knowing whether or not the speaker has complied in his communication with "relations in the extralingual situation." And we mustn't forget all those units of communication, commonly classified as fiction, where the extralingual situation exists in the speaker's mind only, if at all.

That is why many linguists have argued about the inclusion of any reference theory in semantic analysis.

Uriel Weinreich gives a revealing example to illustrate the problem.

"Harry S. Truman was the second king of Oregon."<sup>1</sup>

According to Weinreich the sentence has a normal semantic content. Only people who have acquired certain language-extended special skills (acquaintance with American history and institutions in this case) can judge whether the sentence is factually true or false.

Weinreich does not seem to think that the assertion of the factual truth or falsity of utterances is the linguist's business at all. He advocates the exclusion of the study of denotation or reference from linguistic semantics whose proper interest lies with the study of the designational system proper to each language.<sup>2</sup>

There is however, an area of linguistics that must deal with extralingual reality, that of lexicography.

Many lexical units in a dictionary are correctly defined only if the semantic features given in the definition provide an accurate representation of the object or event they are meant to denote. In many dictionaries this is aided by including a pictorial representation of the particular object or event.

The primary place for the study of reference within linguistics seems to be in lexicography and, on a more theoretical level, in lexicography.

It is a truism to say that the lexicon of a language keeps changing corresponding to the nature of reality surrounding the particular linguistic community. The definition of atom in recent dictionaries differs from the one given in dictionaries of earlier vintage.

Zimek, however, is right in bringing up the question of reference in semantic analysis when he talks about the desirability of making the syntactic functional positions of words comply with relations in the extralingual situation. I believe that Zimek's particular concern is the "anthropocentrism" of syntax, as in

- (1) The tide is coming in.
- (2) The windows look on the main square.
- (3) The sun is rising.

In the semantic interpretation of these sentences the hearer adjusts unconsciously to the world of reality. He will have no inclination to order the tide to stop, the windows to look elsewhere, or to ask the sun to rise an hour later.

He will not think of 'the tide' as an actor performing the particular action of 'coming in.' Accordingly, in the semantic representation of the sentence we should, as Zimek seems to suggest, classify 'tide' as the exponent of a process, the process that is described in the sentence with the words 'is coming in.'

In the light of extralingual reality, the same reinterpretation is needed in (2). In the world of reality 'windows' do not 'look'; 'looking' is a (mental?) activity performed by animate entities only. Sentence (2) seems to describe a permanent condition of 'the windows.' I would interpret the sentence semantically as 'the windows' constituting the exponents of a permanent condition expressed in 'look on the main square.'

Sentence (3) would have to be analyzed as 'the sun' being the exponent of the process 'is rising.'

The most baffling instance of man's anthropocentrism occurs when we talk about God. Modern theology has done a great deal to dissipate the myth that God is a kindly old gentleman with a long beard who sits on his throne in heaven. Yet, in referring to God verbally, we have been unable to develop a metalanguage qualitatively different from the language used about humans.

- (4) Joe's car went out of control but God Almighty has spared his life.

The hearer will normally interpret this sentence with 'God Almighty' in the role of

actor performing the specific action of 'sparing Joe's life.' Nor can the semanticist, whether he is a believer in a 'God' or not, interpret the sentence in any other way.

We can only avoid discussing God in anthropocentric terms by not discussing Him at all. The man who - in mortal danger - will pray:

(5) "Oh God, please get me out of here!" is hoping for divine intervention in the form of powerful, immediate action.

Zimek seems justified in including "extralingual phenomena" among his three components in the semantic interpretation of utterances. There are many instances of discourse, however, when the hearer or the analyst must rely on the designational system of the language as used by the speaker/writer because the denotational validity of the utterance is either nil or cannot be ascertained.

#### Footnotes

<sup>1</sup>U. Weinrich, "Explorations in Semantic Theory." in T. Sebeok, ed., Current Trends in Linguistics, Vol. III, Mouton, 1966, p. 414

<sup>2</sup>U. Weinreich, "On the Semantic Structure of Language," in J. H. Greenberg, ed., Universals of Language, MIT 1963, p. 152