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MEANING AS LANGUAGE USE: THE CASE OF THE LANGUAGE-LINKED VALUE OBJECTION[1]

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"When I use a word," Humpty Dumpty said in a rather scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean - neither more nor less."
"The question is," said Alice, "Whether you can make words mean so many different things."
-Lewis Carroll, Through the Looking Glass

In Wittgensteinian terms, Humpty Dumpty would not have been considered much of a linguist. By presenting meaning as a simple choice made and imposed by the language-user, this view seriously endangers any possible concept of language as an active and consensual process.

While it is perhaps unsurprising to recognize philosophical naivety in the characters of Carroll's book, it should be more surprising to recognize Humpty Dumpty's analysis in the defining norms of contemporary academic debate. When we tell an affirmative team that they have a "right to define," we are telling them that they, as language users, can select meaning -- can choose what a word will mean, neither more nor less. The legitimate question to be asked -- Alice's question -- is whether words can, in fact, be made to mean at all.

This paper focuses on the debate community's conception of meaning. I suggest that seeing meaning as something that an affirmative team, or any team, has an open right to pre-select is dramatically inconsistent with modern philosophies of language, specifically with Wittgenstein's conception of meaning as use. The application of a more functional perspective on meaning will present academic debate with a much less problematic method of determining meaning.

Certainly, it is justified for the philosophy of language to intrude on the world of academic debate. Debate is an activity intimately involved in communication, not an activity separate from other communication disciplines. Goodnight (1981) and Hingstman (1983) have argued that the practice of forensics should forge a closer relationship to communication theory. A broader and more informed perspective can be gained by promoting more relationships between forensics and other communication-related theories.

Specifically, modern theories of meaning should be applied to academic debate. Since debate is most fundamentally a thinking and communicating activity, concepts of meaning which are

[1].An earlier draft of this paper was presented at the 1990 Speech Communication Association conference in Chicago Illinois. The author would like to thank several debaters whose advocacy of this position has furthered his own understanding of it: David Devereaux, Jennifer Dunn, Marty Horn, Joe Sullivan, and Mark West.

over-simplified or which serve to mask the nature and effects of language are harmful to the activity since they would distort the process of reasoning and advocacy. Debate and argument critics agree that debate begins with definitions. Ziegelmueller, Kay, & Dause (1990) note that "the definition of terms affects every step of the argumentation process - from initial research to final judgement" (p. 26). For this reason, debaters should be especially critical toward the views of meaning that are explicitly or implicitly espoused in our community.

Initially, I will look at the current attitudes surrounding meaning in debate, embodied in the right to define. Next I will consider one, often implicit, challenge to this right that recently has been emerging in debate rounds. Following this, I will look at Wittgenstein's philosophy of meaning as use, as it might be applied to defining in academic debate. Finally, I will consider some of the practical effects that this new perspective might have on academic debate.

CURRENT ASSUMPTIONS: THE RIGHT TO DEFINE

The doctrine granting the affirmative side a "right to define" is certainly one of the more resilient sacred cows in the theory of academic debate. The defining power of the affirmative is almost always taken for granted as a necessity of the debate process and as something that the affirmative need not specifically justify. As Snyder (1979) simply puts it, "The affirmative has the right to define terms in the first affirmative speech" (p. 90, emph. added). While an affirmative team often must defend their definitions, the simple power to define is most often taken for granted. The provision of a definition by the affirmative team is most often seen as a choice that the affirmative makes, rather than an argument that the affirmative advances. As Freeley (1981) explains, "it is the privilege of the affirmative to stipulate which legitimate definitions of terms it will use" (p. 46). And, of course, this stipulation is not without consequence. According to conventional wisdom, with a successful affirmative claim of right to define, "alternative definitions are irrelevant" (Smith, 1980, p. 54).

Certainly, there is a spectrum of defining powers that affirmatives are typically allowed: from the most lenient standard allowing an affirmative to pick any definition they can find in print, to the most restrictive standard requiring that the affirmative prove that the definition they picked is the best definition for the debate. Because there is not agreement on these standards, affirmative definitions frequently are contested, but they most often are contested in ways which leave the basic affirmative power to define fundamentally intact. For example, the controversy surrounding the evaluation of affirmative definitions has tended to focus almost exclusively on whether affirmatives should be required to show that they have selected the best definition in the round or whether they need merely select a reasonable definition (see Herbeck & Katsulas, 1987; Parson & Bart,

1987; Unger, 1981). A common assumption held by both sides in this dispute, however, is that the affirmative, within certain parameters, has the power and the right to select meaning for a term in a given round. In other words, we most often grant that defining terms is at least initially an affirmative job, and then argue over whether the affirmative has done its job properly. Regardless of the level of social complexity surrounding a given term's use, the affirmative is given the power to select and impose a simple and concise definition in the round. Affirmative debaters have been permitted and encouraged to use their power to define to pick a representative series of words to stand for the resolutional term in question. Aside from the 'best definition' versus 'reasonability' conflict, this power has remained basically unquestioned in the literature.

EMERGENT ARGUMENT: THE LANGUAGE-LINKED VALUE OBJECTION

The assumed affirmative power to impose definition has remained unquestioned in most debate rounds as well. In recent years, however, a few rounds have witnessed the emergence of a style of argument which, implicitly at least, seems to question this grand assumption. I will refer to this form of argument as a "language-linked value objection." Unlike the conventional value objection which identifies the negative consequences of taking an action or stance in the hypothetical world created by the resolution, the language-linked value objection focuses more directly on the actual language practices of an opponent. Specifically, this could mean identifying the negative consequences of affirming a given term in the resolution.

For example, on the Fall 1985 CEDA debate topic, "Resolved: that significant government restrictions on coverage by the United States media of terrorist activity are justified," one team on the negative argued that affirmation of a resolution including the word "terrorist" is undesirable since the term is a distinctly political label most often applied to ideological opponents. The use of this emotionally-charged term in the resolution, this team argued, would serve to perpetuate a language system that can consider the same action either "freedom-fighting" or "terrorism" depending on the ideological bent of its perpetrator.

More recently, on the Spring 1990 CEDA debate topic, "Resolved: that the trend toward increasing foreign investment in the United States is detrimental to this nation," several teams argued that the evaluative use of the term "foreign" or the phrase "to this nation" naturally appealed to xenophobia or nationalism. The resolution as phrased, these teams argued, ought to be rejected since its language creates a negative impact.

The factual validity of these arguments is not at issue here. What is of note is the fact that these positions reveal a different style of argument. Rather than attaching a negative consequence to some hypothesized affirmative action or value stance, these negative arguments focused on the social effects of the proposition's language. Buried in these arguments is the seed of

the idea that a term can mean something beyond the affirmative's simple and specific denotative definition. These arguments, with varying degrees of explicitness, asserted that language can have an observable social effect, as opposed to a simple representational meaning.

In short, these language-linked value objections questioned the grand assumption that a term means just what the affirmative team says it means; no more, no less. But the arguments did not question the affirmative definition in the time-honored fashion of showing it to be "unreasonable" (or "not best" as the case may be) and offering a counter-definition. Rather, these language- linked value objections challenged the assumption by looking at "meaning" in a distinctly different way. To the affirmative, "meaning" was determined by looking at a variety of denotative dictionary or field-context definitions, and selecting one. To the negatives described above, however, "meaning" was determined by looking at the community of language-users and determining the effect that the term had in use, the role that it played in the language game.

This clash between conceptions of meaning, occurring in academic debates, is similar to a clash over conceptions of meaning which has occurred in the development of the philosophy of language. The next section will outline this clash and more fully develop the concept of meaning as use.

MEANING AS USE

The conception of meaning as representation has a long history to it. The idea that a word "stands for" something else is a very intuitive one. This representational view of meaning is implicit in the debater's practice of using a one- or two- sentence definition to "stand for" a term in the resolution. The idea that debaters can represent meaning in a simple and discrete sentence or two that replaces the term in the resolution has some serious problems. One of the most serious problems is that representational definition imparts a quality to language that would not exist absent the practice of defining. By substituting a very clear and concise denotative description for a word, the illusion is created that there are specific boundaries on term meaning. This illusion, as Polkinghorne (1983) notes, can lead to a "fake precision which is not part of the vagueness of experience" (p. 262). In life, the criticism goes, meaning is not bound by a simple description of what a term can mean but is influenced by individual connotation as well as the conditions of actual use.

The early 20th century German philosopher, Ludwig Wittgenstein, after initially seeming to embrace a representational view of meaning, later rejected it, and his influential criticism led to the development of a conception of meaning as use or function. Viewing meaning as representation, Wittgenstein said, can promote an artificial separation between the word and what the word means:

> You say: the point isn't the word, but its meaning, and you think of the meaning as a thing of the same kind as the word, though also different from the word. Here the word, there the meaning. The money and the cow you can buy with it. (1968, p. 49)

This reification of "meaning" as an entity that "stands for" the word and is represented by it, to Wittgenstein, overshadows a more productive conception of meaning which focuses on the function of language itself. In his later writings, particularly Philosophical Investigations, Wittgenstein claimed that a focus on meaning as representation can lead to distortion and confusion by ignoring the actual uses of words (Hallett, 1967). Placing this primary emphasis on function rather than form, Wittgenstein naturally believed that much of the concern with meaning was misplaced:

> There is always the danger of wanting to find an expression's meaning by contemplating the expression itself, and the frame of mind in which one uses it, instead of always thinking of the practice. (1969, p. 79)

The most productive course, to Wittgenstein, was to not assume that meaning corresponds to some psychological or objective entity -- not to an object outside of language or to a sensation that accompanies word use -- and to instead focus on the work that a word does. To use an analogy, if one asked a chess player what the knight "meant," the most productive answer that the player could give would not be to say that it is a varnished piece of wood of a specific shape, nor that it is a crude image of a medieval soldier. The most productive answer would be to describe the move that the knight can make and its role in the game.

The analogy holds for language. What is most useful to the student of language is not a precise description of the word's phonology and grammar, nor a description of what the word can be said to stand for. Rather, what is most useful is a discussion of what use, what function, what work a word does in the language game. One need only think of the language category of profanity to understand the difference between what a word represents and what it does. The case of sexist language also reveals the distinction between meaning as representation and meaning as function. Any grammarian or dictionary will tell you that the generic term "man" stands for "human beings," yet the function of the term in use is arguably to include males and exclude females (West, 1991). To Wittgenstein, meaning is use:

> For a large class of cases - though not for all - in which we employ the word 'meaning' it can be defined thus: the meaning of a word is its use in language. (1968, p. 20)[2]

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[2].Wittgenstein's caveat in this frequently cited passage is most probably a reference to those cases in which the operational meaning of a noun is clear enough that the noun can truly be said to denote an object.

In looking predominantly at practice, Wittgenstein's view of meaning as use is a challenge to the presumed ability to define words in isolation. While we do talk about meaning independent of a specific use, Wittgenstein says that this is possible only through imagining possible uses -- through imagining circumstances in which the word would do work. This seems true even in the context of academic debate where new resolutions, presented in isolation, are given meaning through the imaginative process of considering what arguments might be used to justify or oppose them. As Dilman (1981) explains, "if we meet such words in isolation our understanding them is in part at least our ability to fill out the picture, to invent a context in which it is appropriate to speak them" (p. 141). Thus, even in apparent isolation, the ultimate grounding for our conception of the meaning of a term must be practice.

Wittgenstein's emphasis on function has been very influential. In The Power of Words, Stuart Chase observes that "The true meaning of a word is to be found by observing what a [person] does with it, not what [they] say about it" (in West, 1975, p. 151).[3] This general notion of meaning as function has found its way to even the most basic levels of communication instruction. In a fundamentals text, Zimmerman, Owen, and Seibert (1986) clearly reject representational meaning in favor of a functional approach:

> It is commonly understood that words have meanings and that the proper meanings of words can be found in the dictionary. This is a serious misconception. Words do not "have" meanings any more that sharp knives "have" cut fingers. (p. 13)

The reason for this widespread appeal of conceiving of meaning as use has not so much to do with 'validity' per se, as it has to do with pragmatics. There is a utility to focusing on word function which is lost when one is bogged down looking at a word's specific definition or representation. As Hallett (1967) noted, Wittgenstein was primarily interested in the "therapeutic value" (p. 164) of looking at meaning as use. A focus on actual use is productive in leading to a focus in language studies away from meaningless terms and closer to practice. A student of society is simply going to be most interested in what language does.

Once it is established that meaning is most productively conceived as use, the question which follows is "whose use?" Perhaps the most intuitive answer would be, "the use of the speaker," seeming to vindicate Humpty Dumpty's view of meaning as a speaker's choice. Wittgenstein's conception of meaning as use, however, must be seen as centered on the communicative exchange. Wittgenstein saw language from the perspective of communication, saying that "the concept of language is contained in the concept of

[3].Gender specific reference omitted,

communication" (1974, p. 193). The simple statement that meaning is use might be taken to mean the use of the sender or the use of the receiver. To focus on these individual participants is to suggest that meaning as use might stem from a specialized and wholly individual "private language." In Philosophical Investigations, Wittgenstein rejects the notion of a "private language" as convincingly as he establishes meaning as use.[4] As Sefler (1974) notes, "When Wittgenstein asserts that meaning is use, he is not completely and unreservedly acknowledging as meaningful all existing usages of the language precisely as intended by the user" (p. 171). While an understanding of both the use of a given speaker and of a given receiver would undoubtedly be important to an understanding of how we use language, it is not the individual user that is important to broadly determining meaning, be that user the sender or the receiver. Rather it is the community of language use, "the role this word plays in the whole life of the tribe" (Wittgenstein, 1965, p. 103). In short, rules are not made by the individual player, but by the community to which the game belongs.[5] "If meaning is tied to use" Gallagher (1981) notes, "it is tied to the 'public'" (p. 46). Looking at use within a language community, then, becomes not simply a handy tool for discovering meaning, but rather the locus of meaning itself:

> If the meaning of the word is understood by the comportment of the community of users, then it is clear that the notion of a community of speakers is going to be a primary phenomenon in language itself. The notion of a community comes first; the ultimate source for meaning is the form of the life of the community in which a certain word arises. (Gallagher, 1981, p. 46)

Even when language is used to evoke the most private of thoughts and experiences, it makes use of the rules and norms that are established by the overall society of users.

To summarize this section, the philosophy of language contributes two very relevant points. First, the meaning of a term is best conceived not as a representation of some entity but as a function of a term at work. Second, it is not the individual user of language that is important but the use of the whole community in which the language game is played. Returning to a consideration of defining in academic debate, these two arguments can serve both as

[4].For a concise description of Wittgenstein's rejection of private language, see Gallagher, 1981, p. 46.

[5].The existence of multiple meanings can be seen as introducing some vagueness into the concept of meaning as use. This vagueness can be resolved by taking care to determine which word we are talking about (homonyms are best thought of as different words which simply share the same spelling and sound) and which community we are talking about.

a critique of defining by fiat and as a pointer toward a more productive conception of meaning in debate.

MEANING AS USE, AND ACADEMIC DEBATE

The idea that a sender of a message can select meaning is threatened at its core by the conception of meaning as use. If meaning is seen as focusing on the function of a term as regards a community of language use, it is nonsense to speak of a right to define. If these propositions of Wittgenstein's philosophy of language, already internalized by much of the communication studies discipline, were applied to academic debate, the change would be considerable. Term meaning would not be considered an affirmative prerogative exercised in the first affirmative constructive. While the affirmative team would most likely be given the role of starting the discussion of term meaning, that discussion would focus on how a term actually functions in its community of use, not on what the affirmative team would like the term to mean in the given round. Definitions of terms would not necessarily be found by looking in dictionaries, but might be found by looking at other indicators of the role that a given term plays. Meaning would become more of an empirical question. The resolution is a sentence in English, and thus comes out of a language community. The question becomes, "What is the function of these terms in this language community?" The traditional affirmative role of initially characterizing the dispute might mean that the affirmative would get the first opportunity to present an answer to this question, but the dispute would focus on the words' function, not on the affirmative's choice.

The casual reader at this point might think that there is nothing new in focusing on usage in academic debate. Currently usage is a standard in many definitional disputes. The perspective that looks at meaning as use, however, is much different than current notions of "usage" as a definitional standard. If a team in a typical debate advanced the definitional standard of usage, it could probably be translated into the following: "we should look to a community's use of the term in choosing between representational definitions." For example, "the dictionary says that 'foreign' can mean 'outside this country' or 'strange,' but when people in political science use the term, they tend to mean 'outside this country' - therefore, that is what we should mean." Thus, the most common application of "usage" currently is in choosing between two or more representational definitions by looking at what a group of people tend to utilize more.

This is not the conception of usage that stems from meaning as use. Using the philosophy of language standards, we would not simply choose the most popular representational definition. Instead we would look more specifically at the function of the term, or the effect that it has when used.

In many (possibly most) instances, the differences between current practice and this new perspective would not be great. Dictionaries and other sources used by debaters to define often

consider the function of a term. For example, the practical effect of a term like "investment" in the resolution would probably be the same whether defined functionally or representationally, with both methods leading to a focus on the use of capital to gain a profit.

In the case of some terms, however, the difference in defining representationally or functionally would be profound, and perhaps decisive in the debate. An extended example might help illustrate. An affirmative team supporting the resolution "resolved that the trend toward increasing foreign investment in the United States is detrimental to this nation" might define the term "foreign" as "characteristic of, or from a country other than one's own." This is basically a representational definition: it does not say to what use the term is put, or what effect it has, it simply says that "foreign" stands for "of another country." A negative team, arguing a language-linked value objection, might argue that while there is nothing negative in the denotative definition of the term "foreign," in use the term can become a pejorative when it is used as a category of negative evaluation:

> ...sometimes people find the foreign to be 'alien' in the pejorative sense; that is, they regard it as bad or ugly or both. (Fearnside & Holthier, 1959, p. 117)

Thus, the negative offers a descriptive assessment of the term's effect that goes beyond the parameters of the affirmative's definition. This effect may not be universal, but presumably the negative would be arguing that the effect is typical or significant enough to dejustify the term in the resolution. The negative argument would be that this resolution, as phrased, ought not be affirmed since it includes a language-appeal with demonstrable negative consequences.

To this the affirmative might respond "the term 'foreign' might be used in a bad way, but that is not how we define it," and invoke their right to define. The affirmative in this case is saying that their right to selectively define a term is more important than the use to which the term is actually put. And it is this thesis that the conception of meaning as use most dramatically refutes. The affirmative response assumes that not only can the highly connotative term "foreign" be distilled into one brief phrase, but that the meaning of the term is somehow independent of its societal function and effect. Whether or not one agrees, factually, with the negative's argument, it must be admitted that the affirmative wraps itself in a highly questionable view of meaning. If meaning is anything, it is the role that a word plays and that role may go far beyond an affirmative's specified definition. As Wittgenstein (1965) says, "the meaning of a phrase for us is characterized by the use we make of it" (p. 65).

The affirmative, in this case, does have options other than the simple invocation of a right to define. The affirmative could clash with the negative's assessment of the use of the evaluative term "foreign," or the affirmative could advance its own functional definition of the term. It is important to note that the concept

of meaning as use is not simply an open door to negative abuse. The standard creates just as much ground for the affirmative, enabling them to focus on functional meaning themselves, but requiring them to accept responsibility for the language that they are asking the judge to affirm.

A standard of meaning as use may move the community away from safe and simple assumptions such as the right to define, but the standard would carry several advantages for the debate activity. Initially, the standard would encourage debaters to engage in language analysis -- an activity that is highly consistent with the mission of the communications department, the department that most often supports debate programs. Many debate educators seem to feel that debates over language are "procedural" and not "substantive" (see Dudczak, 1989), but it seems clear that within the field of communications, at least, language is a very substantive concern. Second, the standard would lead to a broader appreciation of the role of language in society. Instead of being left to engage in rote acts of word- replacement, debaters would be encouraged to research and argue over the actual effects of language in creating and maintaining social reality. Third, the standard would expand argumentative ground, potentially opening up a whole new world of argument in academic debate. Linking value objections to language by considering social use potentially leads to a consideration of the ideologies embedded in various language forms (see Edelman, 1964), the ways in which language structures political thought (see Orwell, 1956), the "personas" created by the use of various language styles (see Black, 1970), the cultural embeddedness of meaning (see Whorf, 1959) and a host of other issues in the study of language and rhetoric. Finally, the standard would enhance the debate process by focusing on impacts which are in some measure 'real' and not hypothetical. Language impacts can be considered more immediate and more tangible than the hypothetical impacts which we most frequently focus on: language and its effects uniquely happen as a direct result of our advocacy, nuclear war (hopefully) does not.

The emergence of the language-linked value objection has in a small way disturbed the consensus over the affirmative power to select and impose a simple denotative meaning. By looking at meaning as a societal effect ranging far beyond simple definition, the language-linked value objection may well force the issue and push the debate community's conception of meaning into the 20th century before that century comes to a close.

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AN EXAMINATION OF BLACK PARTICIPATION IN CEDA DEBATE[1]

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Harold Hodgkinson [Senior Fellow, Inst. for Educational Leadership] has succinct advice for anyone planning for the future in higher education: "Learn to read the present more carefully than you used to".

Kelley Fead
Black Issues in Higher Education May 25, 1989

CEDA is not reading the present very well. We need to come to terms with the racial homogeneity of the activity--and work to change it. CEDA debate is, by and large, a white male activity. This is homogeneity is not reflected in society at large, as Harold Hodgkinson points out, "by 2000, most Americans will be descended from non-Europeans" (in Fead 1989 20). Specifically, "...82 percent--of the 20 million new workers in the market between now and 2000 will be `a combination of female, nonwhite and immigrant'" (Fead 1989 20). According to a recent report by the National Task Force on Minority Achievement in Higher Education, "projected labor statistics show that, in less than 10 years, a third of new workers will be members of minority groups and most new jobs will require a college education" (Atlanta Constitution 1990 A-9). To help prepare tomorrow's leaders CEDA must take steps to ensure that the values and practices learned in debate are applicable to tomorrow's world.

This article has four explicit goals: to explore the level of black participation in CEDA; to asses the competitive level of that participation; to discover if these levels are a problem; and if they are a problem, explore some possible solutions.

METHOD

A survey was sent to all schools on the fall, 1989 CEDA mailing list. Respondents were asked to reply to a series of closed ended questions, and room was provided for comments. Follow up surveys were sent to African-Americans who asked for them. Follow up interviews with African-American debaters and coaches were also conducted from Spring 1990-Spring 1991. The numeric data was collected and compiled by the Center for the Study of the Black Experience in Higher Education, at Clemson University.

RESULTS

[1] The author would like to thank the Center for the Study of the Black Experience of Higher Education at Clemson University for compiling the data, and Walter Ulrich and William Baker for their insight and encouragement.