

Introduction

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► **To cite this version:**

Ruth Millikan. Introduction. The Jean Nicod Lectures 2002 (expanded version), 2003.
<ijn_00000395>

HAL Id: ijn_00000395

https://jeannicod.ccsd.cnrs.fr/ijn_00000395

Submitted on 15 Sep 2003

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VARIETIES OF MEANING

PREFACE

What are the varieties of meaning? And what do they have in common, so as to be treated together under one cover?

People mean to do various things. Body organs are meant to do various things. Tools and other artifacts are meant for various things. Conventional signs such as words and sentences mean various things. People mean various things by using words and sentences, and not always the same things that the words or sentences mean. Natural signs mean things. Contemporary psychologists and neurologists claim that there are representations in people's brains. Presumably these also mean things. What is in common among the various things that are said to mean things? Nothing, I think. Yet the story of how these various phenomena are related to one another, how they cross and overlap such that the term "meaning" moves freely among them, is deeply interesting. Indeed, none of these kinds of meaning can be thoroughly understood, I believe, without grasping its relation to the others.

In one basic sense, what something means, or is meant for, or is meant to do has to do with its purpose. What a sign means, however, is not usually described as its purpose, but rather as what it represents or signifies. What does meaning in the sense of purposing have to do with meaning in the sense of representing or signifying? According to the Oxford English Dictionary, all three of the following senses of the verb to mean go back as far as can be traced: to have in mind, to intend, to signify. The original connection seems to be that intention or purpose is what one has in mind as one acts while signification is what one has in mind as one speaks. What one has in mind as one speaks is what it is one's purpose to represent or signify. But there are other places where purpose and signification intersect as well.

The paradigms of purpose are explicit human intentions. I will argue that these intentions are represented purposes. This does not mean merely that they represent purposes. They possess the purposes that they represent. They are self-representing purposes. The paradigms of things that signify are intentional signs such as sentences. These are distinguished from natural signs by their capacity to misrepresent or be false. (For example, black clouds can be a natural sign of rain, but they don't mean rain unless it actually rains. They cannot be false.) Intentional signs, I will argue, have purposes essentially. The reason they can be false is that they have purposes, and purposes can always fail to be fulfilled. This is true of all conventional signs, of all signs by which animals communicate, and of all inner representations such as perceptions and thoughts.¹

I begin in Part I by discussing what purposes are, the purposes of people, of their behaviors, of their body parts, of their artifacts and of the signs they use. Then I begin again at right angles in Part II, describing a variety of natural signs that I call "locally recurrent" natural signs.² These are more user-friendly than those that convey "natural information" in the sense of Dretske (1980). Similarities between locally recurrent signs and natural language signs are discussed, for local signs are intrinsically "productive" and admit of embedding. Moreover they can represent individuals, which natural signs have

not previously been thought to do. Several varieties of intentional signs are then introduced, and their relations both to natural signs and to purposes described. Part II ends with a discussion of how representations themselves sometimes get represented. Hence how the phenomenon of intensionality (with an 's') emerges.

Part III concerns important continuities between the ways local natural signs and public language signs are read and understood. Perception involves the interpretation of local natural signs, and interpreting conventional language signs is surprisingly like perception. The result is quite a different interpretation of the relation between semantics and pragmatics than has been traditional.

Part IV speculates about stages in the development of inner representations, from the most primitive kinds in the simplest organisms up to the perceptions and intentional attitudes of humans. The most primitive representations are what I term "pushmi-pullyus." Their functions are undifferentiated between description and direction. The problem is how and why any more specialized signs should ever have been evolved, and ultimately, what the value of subject-predicate judgment and the peculiar ability to think negative thoughts is in humans. Sophisticated biological mechanisms are often built on top of more primitive ones, riding piggyback, as it were, nor is their higher authority always secure. For this reason, speculation about the evolution of increasingly differentiated forms of behavior control in animals is directly relevant to understanding the complexities of human behavior.

The book is written so that those more interested in thought than language can safely skip Part III, and those more interested in language than perception and thought can safely skip part IV.

I am extremely grateful to the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS) for sponsoring the lecture series that initiated my writing this book and to my audiences in Paris who challenged me with excellent constructive questions every step of the way. I profited greatly from those meetings, during which much of the first two parts of the book were initially presented, and much enjoyed both the good company and the cultural setting in Paris. Gunnar Björnsson and Nicholas Shea offered comments on the first two parts of the book that were both sympathetic and helpfully critical. Carol Fowler, Bruno Galantucci and I discussed the first three parts, at Bruno's request, in a wonderfully cheerful tiny seminar in the fall of 2002. I learned from them where terminology and ideas that are home ground for philosophers are foreign to psychologists, and have tried to adjust various passages accordingly. Crawford (Tim) Elder has read all the chapters in all of the parts. His interest in the project has been unflagging and an indispensable source of support. He is the chairman of my department, and I am deeply grateful to him for this and for many other kind gestures as well.

FOOTNOTES

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1. Notice that I do not say that the purpose of an intentional sign is to represent. That formulation muddles together a number of issues that need to be carefully separated. See Chapter Five below.

2. In (Millikan 2000) Appendix B I called these signs, or an earlier version of them, "soft natural signs."