

JACK BILMES

MEANING AND INTERPRETATION*

In writing this article, I have three objectives. The first (and the foremost) is to propose a model of interpretation. Second, I want to demonstrate that the model of interpretation places limitations on what can be accepted as an adequate notion of 'meaning'. Finally, I will suggest a broad basis for the construction of an adequate conception of meaning.

We can place definitions of meaning into two broad categories. One type of definition locates the meaning of an utterance in some state of affairs external to the utterance. An example is Bloomfield's (1933) definition of "the meaning of a linguistic form as the situation in which the speaker utters it and the response which it calls forth in the hearer" (139). The second type of definition finds meaning in the word itself. That is, given a word, with no (or minimal) specification of situation or response, the meaning of the word can be stated. Componential analysis is one approach which seeks to elaborate this 'internal' meaning. Finally, there are heterogeneous definitions, which combine elements of both of the above types. I believe that the issues involved here can be clarified and perhaps resolved through an analysis of the process of interpretation.

INTERPRETATION

Any 'meaningful' phenomenon is first of all simply a phenomenon. It can be apprehended by the mind and looked on as an object, and the fact of its existence can be used to provide information about the entity which produced it, the situation in which it occurs, and other objects to which it is related. We may speak here of the object's 'evidential meaning', and, clearly, any phenomenon has, or may have, such meaning. Therefore, if we define 'sign' as any phenomenon with meaning (the phenomenon being a sign of that which it means), then every phenomenon is potentially a sign. Limiting ourselves for the moment to utterances, which will be the objects of primary interest in this article, we may note that, for example, when people gather in church on Sunday, one person produces utterances in a loud voice, while the rest talk in whispers, if at all. This tells us something