

Husserl's Account of Meaning with Reference to Derrida and Heidegger

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Abstract

This essay deals with language, meaning and communication as developed by Husserl, Derrida and Heidegger. First, we shall develop Husserl's account of meaningful verbal expressions. The crucial question is whether meaning is prior to language or not. To this Husserl's response is, meaning is noematic which is expressed in language. This is to bring home that there is close connection between language and consciousness for language is used to make public what is in our mind. In other words, Husserl makes a distinction between expression and indication. According to Husserl, expression is mental representation which is in the mind of the speaker and through language the speaker indicates that mental representation. But this position of Husserl is questionable according to Derrida and Heidegger. Derrida criticizes Husserl's distinction between expression and indication on the ground that Husserl's commitment to inner speech will put worldly existence into bracket and thereby will make the communication between the (worldly) speaker and the hearer impossible. This is also the position of Heidegger who in keeping with Derrida holds that language is not an inner thing but acquires meaning through engagement in social practices.

I

Husserl in his *Logical Investigations* starts with what we understand by meaningful verbal expressions, for example, expressions like 'Rabindranath is the author of Gitanjali' and 'Rabindranath won noble prize in 1913'. If we hear or read these expressions, obviously we have auditory or visual experience which conveys meaning unlike 'abracadabra', which signifies nothing. Others who understand English, understand what I mean by 'author of Gitanjali' and 'noble prize winner'.

In other words, they understand what I mean, and communication becomes possible.

Now the crucial question is whether meaning is prior to language or not. Husserl would opt for the first. He holds that meaning is derived from a basic mental representation (noematic Sinn) which is expressed in language. Or linguistic meaning is noematic meaning externalized. This is to bring home that there is close relation between language and consciousness. For language is used to make public what is in our mind. As Husserl observes in *Logical Investigations*: “All expressions in communicative speech functions as indications. They serve the hearer as signs of ‘thoughts’ of the speaker, i.e., of his meaning-given mental processes” (E. Husserl, 1970)¹. Language has a physical side consisting of sounds or written marks which expresses meaning. In this way, physics yields to semantics. In the words of Husserl in *Logical Investigations*: “The meaning-animated expression breaks up, on the one hand, into the physical phenomenon forming the physical side of the expression, and, on the other hand, into the acts which give it meaning (*Bedeutung*)...” (E. Husserl, 1970).²

This means that language which begins with noises or written signs becomes a meaningful activity, because it is derived from the noematic Sinn in virtue of which a mental state intends an object or state of affairs. In other words, language is situated in mental representation which forms the core of meaning. It is this meaning which the speaker intends to express in language. Otherwise, his utterance becomes a mere sound which signifies nothing.

From the above, we get what Husserl takes to be the general account of meaning. In meaningful communication the utterance of the speaker and the hearer’s understanding of it involves a common content or meaning. And this is to emphasize the shared character of meaning: speaker’s meaning is shared by the hearer.

Incidentally, Husserl's account of the relation between language and act has striking affinity with Searle's account of it. He also agrees with Husserl that the intentionality of speech acts is derived from the intentionality of mental states. As Searle observes in *Intentionality: An Essay in the Philosophy of Mind*: "...the sounds that come out of one's mouth or the marks that the one makes on paper...are not just objects in the world like any other objects, their capacity to represent is not intrinsic but derived from the intentionality of the mind. The intentionality of mental states, on the other hand, is not derived from some prior forms of intentionality, but is intrinsic to the states themselves" (J. R. Searle, 1983)³.

This shows what Searle means to say. Language itself may be considered only as noises uttered by someone or mere marks on paper. As mere sounds or marks, it is devoid of intentionality or the power to represent. Then from what is intentionality (meaning) derived? How do we get from physics from noises or sounds to semantics? Searle's answer is that linguistic intentionality or meaning is derived from something which possesses intrinsic intentionality, and only mental states are endowed with this intrinsic intentionality. It is only the mind that imposes meaning on linguistic entities like sounds which are not intrinsically intentional, but considered in one way, are just like physical phenomenon like any other in the world. In other words, the meaning expressed by language is the intentional content of an underlying mental state, and hence the linguistic expression expresses or represents the object as prescribed by that intentional content or meaning. In successful communication the intentional content expressed in language is conveyed to the hearer. We may now consider this Husserl-Searle affinity in some details.

Just like Searle, Husserl's theory of intentionality too is based on a distinction between the object and the content of a mental state or an act. The object is some extra-mental object or what it is about. The content refers to only what is in the act in terms of which the act becomes 'intentional experience' it is. The content in act is that act which accounts

for the act being that mental act and the way the act is about its object. Note the following observation of Husserl in *Logical Investigations* where he emphasizes the distinction between object and content: “In real phenomenological treatment, objectivity counts as nothing: in general. It transcends the act, it makes no difference what sort of being we give our object, or with what sense or justification we do so. Whether this being is real ...genuine...the act remains ‘directed upon’ the object.” (E. Husserl, 1970)⁴.

If one now asks how something non-existent or transcendent can be the intentional object in an act in which it has no being, one can give an answer which is wholly sufficient one. The object is intentional and this means there is an act having a determinate intention, and determinate in a way which makes it an intention towards this object. This ‘reference to an object’, according to Husserl in *Logical Investigations*, belongs particularly and intrinsically to an act-experience, and the experiences manifesting it are by definition Intentional experiences or acts. (E. Husserl, 1970)⁵.

The content of an act, according to Husserl, includes (1) quality and (2) matter—which are “two moments, two constituents of all acts”. Every act is an act of certain type, e.g., a perception, a wish or a judgement. Now there must be some inner determination to account for the type to which an act belongs.

If, for example, we call an experience one of “judgement”, there must be some inner determination, not some mere outwardly attached mark that distinguishes it as a judgement from wishes, hopes and other sorts of act. This determination is shared with all other judgements... (quoted from D.W. Smith and R. McIntyre, 1984)⁶.

This “determination” Husserl calls quality of an act. The quality of an act is therefore that component of an act’s content which determines whether the act is a judgement or a perception or a wish. My act of judging that 2+2 is 4, and your act of judging that Ibsen is the principal founder of

modern dramatic realism have the same judgement-quality, though the objects they are different. Or my act of seeing a dog, and your act of seeing the rainbow in the sky have same quality-component (since both are perceptions), even though they are about different objects. But my act of judging that there are living beings on Mars, and your act of hoping that there are living beings on Mars have different quality components, although they intend the same object.

From the above observation one crucial thing follows. Acts with the same quality components may differ in their intentionality; conversely, acts with different qualities may be similar in their intentional relations. This brings another important aspect of act, distinguishable from its quality, which determines what object is intended and how it is intended. This aspect of an act is what Husserl calls matter. Thus, the following is the outcome. We have two sides in every act: its quality, which stamped it as, for example, presentation or judgement, and its matter, that lent it direction to an object, which made a presentation, for example, present this object and no other (quoted from D. W. Smith and R. McIntyre; 1984)⁷.

Obviously, similar acts directed at different objects (for example, my judging that $2+2$ is 4 and my judging that Ibsen is the principal founder of modern dramatic realism) have different matter; while different acts intending the same object e.g., my judging and your hoping that there are living beings on Mars, have the same matter.

But there is also another point to note. Two identically qualified acts, e.g., two “presentations”, in the words of Husserl, “may appear directed, evidently directed, to the same object, without full agreement in intentional essence. In other words, acts intending the same object may have different matters, depending not only on which object is intended, but also how the object is conceived in the act. Thus, though the two acts of judging about equilateral triangle and equiangular triangle have the same quality and are directed at the same object, yet they are not identical

representations or do not have same content or matter, since they present or intend the same object in a different fashion. And differences in the ways or manners of intending an object constitute, according to Husserl, differences in the matter of the acts As Husserl observes:

The matter... must be counted as that in an act that first gives it its relation to object and a relation so completely definite that the matter not merely determines in some general fashion the object meant in the act but also determines precisely the way in which it is meant. The matter... is peculiarity in the phenomenological content of the act that determines not only that the act apprehends the object but also as to what it apprehends it as, which properties, relations, categorical forms it in itself attributes to it.” (quoted from H. L. Dreyfus, 1984)⁸.

So, matter, in short, is that component or constituent of an act’s content which represents the object under a particular aspect—no matter whether the object aimed at by the intentional state exists or not: while the act-quality represents the relation of the subject to the represented object—whether it is believed, desired etc.

Clearly all this about matter and quality is neatly in consonance with Searle’s account. What Husserl calls act-quality corresponds to Searle’s psychological mode, or in linguistic terms, illocutionary force: and what Husserl calls act matter corresponds to Searle’s content, or in linguistic terms, propositional content.

Most importantly, this analysis of quality and matter is parallel to Searle’s approach to intentionality. Like Searle, Husserl also insists that intentionality of an act should be characterized in terms of the act’s content—quality and matter, not with reference to any object outside and further, that this content should be seen only from the perspective of the subject of the mental act.

Thus, Husserl’s analysis of intentionality is perfectly in tune with his transcendental reduction or epoche whose aim is to turn our attention

away from our ordinary beliefs and attitudes to acts, particularly to acts' content which determines the way the act represents or intends the object.

To put it in a different way, transcendental reduction focuses on the internal features of the mind that we know after suspending or bracketing objective existence, or after suspending the truths and falsity of our beliefs about the external world, including our beliefs about the psychological or physical nature of the mind itself. Husserl's analysis of the mental states and their content is thus not an empirical account of the psychological side of the psycho-physical organism. Rather it is transcendental or philosophical in the sense that it concentrates on the features that are inherent in the mental states, that characterize mentality itself—no matter how the internal features are actually realized in the objective world. In this sense, Husserl's analysis is logical, and it is ontologically neutral as well, if ontology means commitment to the reality of the world of nature. Surely one finds in Searle's account of intentional content a reflection of Husserl's transcendental reduction which insists on a distinction between logical and ontological analysis. Searle's notion of content as representation too develops not by considering any reference to extra-mental reality, not by considering whether the notion is a psychological or neuro-physical one, but as part of an explication of what intentionality is, however, it is actually realized in the natural world.

Incidentally, the parallel between Husserl and Searle, as Dreyfus in *Husserl. Intentionality and Cognitive Science* significantly points out, "helps us to understand one of Husserl's most obscure and misunderstood claim viz., that the evidence given to phenomenological reflection is indubitable (H.L. Dreyfus, 1984)⁹. As Searle holds, the representative content is internal to the intentional state. Therefore, to have a conscious belief, for example, is in fact to be aware of its condition of satisfaction. So, no special evidence is necessary to confirm what we mean, or what our intentional states represent. This is something we know immediately. We know immediately and indubitably what will

count as satisfying our intentional states of an order being obeyed, a belief being confirmed. This will be also the position of Husserl. Since the subject has immediate access to his intentional content, or “since the subject,”, to utilize the words of Dreyfus,” must necessarily know what would count as satisfying his intentional state, the phenomenological reduction gives the subject a field of ultimate evidence (the subject) has (him) self-produced” (H.L. Dreyfus, 1984)¹⁰.

The parallel between Husserl and Searle is not affected even when there is shift from quality and matter as in *Logical Investigations* to noema in *Ideas*. In *Ideas*, Husserl introduces the term “noema” to account for a mental act being intentional. Without entering into much detail, we may say that the noema has two components: one that it is common to all acts that have the same object: another, that it is different in acts with a different “thetic” character. Thus, we have two components of noema. One of these components which Husserl call “thetic” (corresponding to quality in *Logical Investigations*) amounts to what Searle would call psychological mode which determines whether a mental act or state is a perception, a belief or a desire. The other component corresponding to matter in *Logical Investigations* is the sense or meaning which Husserl calls noematic Sinn. Noematic Sinn determines just what object is aimed at by a mental act and under what aspect. To translate it into Searle’s terminology, it represents an object or a state of affairs from the point of view of the subject of the mental state. Clearly Husserl’s version of noematic Sinn is Searle’s version of intentional or representative content.

From the foregoing analysis we know something about the similarity between Searle and Husserl regarding intentionality of consciousness. Now to see how it is connected with language. Here Husserl adopts the Searlean strategy of starting from an investigation of language—the way it represents the world to highlight like Searle how the representational feature or meaning is determined from a more basic mental representation (noematic Sinn). It is that he is speaking in a different language. In his terminology, linguistic meaning is noematic meaning

externalized---the contention which is presupposed in *Logical Investigations* but is made explicit in *Formal and Transcendental Logic* and *Ideas*. This is to bring home that there is a close relation between language and consciousness, for language, as already noted, is used to make public what is in our mind. Thus first, when the speaker intends to express himself about something, certain acts of consciousness lend or bestow to his words a meaning, these acts are meaning-giving acts via noematic Sinn in virtue of which the expression is more than a merely sounded word, and means something. Secondly, the speaker communicates this meaning to the hearer.

II

As the foregoing analysis shows, Husserl indeed admits that expression is “originally framed” to serve the function of communication: meaning, as he says, can be shared by the speaker and the hearer. But this position of Husserl becomes questionable if we bear in mind Derrida’s persuasive reading of Husserl’s *Logical Investigations* in *Speech and Phenomena and Other Essays on Husserl’s Theory of Signs* (J. Derrida, 1973)¹¹. Derrida’s position is also explicated by J. N. Mohanty in *Explorations in Philosophy* (J. N. Mohanty, 2002).

Derrida’s point is this. Husserl’s meaning is based on a radical dissociation between different kinds of heterogeneous signs, between indication and expression. From ‘indicative signs’, as Husserl puts it in Section 5 of the First Investigations, we distinguish meaningful signs i.e. expressions from indications. But how does expression differ from indication?

Husserl introduces this distinction in the following way: ‘every sign is a sign for something, about something, but not every sign has a “meaning”, a “sense” that the sign “expresses”.’ (J. Derrida, 1973)¹². Only an expression is a sign that is ‘charged with meaning’. Meaning-intention is present as the signified content only of an expression; only expression is always inhabited and animated by a meaning which occurs in the sphere

of solitary life. But in indication, the picture is quite different. Indication has a physical or a worldly side: it takes place when the speaker existing in the world indicates or communicates something to his fellow being by means of concrete physical event, the written or the spoken word.

This shows why he intends to separate expression from indication. This ensures what constitutes expression qua expression as distinct from indication is the ‘voice’ that is internal, the vehicle of meaning as an ideality existing nowhere in the world, but this reduction to ‘monologue’, according to Derrida, will be to put worldly existence into brackets (J. Derrida, 1973)¹³. All this is the consequence of Husserl’s commitment to a metaphysics of presence, as Derrida calls it, which posits a monologue or inner speech endowed with self-complete meaning which is directly and immediately present to the solitude of the mental life of the speaker.

But if we are primarily concerned with speech or expression as mental soliloquy taking place in the solitary mental life of the subject, then we have the following consequence according to Derrida:

When I listen to another, his lived experience is not present to me “in person” in the original... (H)is consciousness, in particular the acts by which he gives sense are not immediately and primordially, present to me as they are for him mine are for me (J. Derrida, 1973)¹⁴

But then what we are to say about communication which requires moving outside the inner sphere? Not that Husserl was not aware of this problem. That is why he says that in the case of a fruitful communication, expression is always interwoven with indication (J. Derrida, 1973)¹⁵. This means that communication is a representation of a ‘meaning-intention; of the subject that primordially occurs in his inner sphere. What is meant by the subject is indicated by means of a sensible sign (audible or visible) by the actually spoken or the written signs. But the significance of this “interwoven” is not clear. If we keep in mind how Husserl looks at expression, it is evident that expression must occur ‘within the internal sphere in the absence of indication. Now if

expression is a solitary case of silent monologue, there will be no room for meaningful communication here. In the case of silent monologue, where meaning is immediately present to the subject, there is nothing to communicate, nor is there any need of it. The result is, we have speech or expression (internal monologue) without any communicative function. In view of the seeming impossibility of having an adequate grasp of abstract noematic Sinn which is inner, is it not better to abandon the idea of it? Even if we concede that we can know sense or noematic Sinn that primordially takes place in the inner sphere, e.g. even if we can know a route to Durham without taking it, as Cooper points out in *Existentialism: A Reconstruction*, it is not sensible to say that I can take this or that particular route without being “a participant in a society where people engage in the activity of going from one place to another” (D.E. Cooper, 1997)¹⁶. Thus, according to Cooper, we may refer to Wittgenstein’s “slab example” where the meaning of slab, like most other expressions, is social, since it is embedded in social practices. And only by being a participant in those social practices, we can understand the meaning of “bring me a slab”.

III

The foregoing comments directed against Husserl’s account of meaning has pointed us in the direction of Heidegger’s position and suggested a defence of this position. He discards the idea of identical cognitive meaning or ‘irreal’ abstract meaning. His general position is to underline the crucial contributory role of social or community practices in our understanding of meaning. Language, pace, Husserl does not come to us as a stream of meaningless sounds that are then interpreted. For Heidegger in *Being and Time*: “When we are explicitly hearing the telling of another, we immediately understand what is said, or to put it more exactly, we are already with him, in advance, among the entities which the telling is about...what we do not hear is the pronunciations of sounds” (M. Heidegger, 1962)¹⁷.

These remarks relate to his more general thesis that we do not experience sense data ‘raw’, but as already interpreted (as the sound of a motorcycle whatever).:

What we first hear is never noises or complex of sounds, but the creaking wagon, the motorcycle. We hear the column on the march, the north wind, the woodpecker tapping, the first crackling. It requires a very artificial and complicated frame of mind to hear a “pure” noise. The fact that motorcycles and wagons are what we proximally hear is the phenomenal evidence that in every case Dasein as being-in-the world already dwells amidst what is ready-to-hand within-the-world; it certainly dwells primarily amidst “sensations” (M. Heidegger, 1962)¹⁸.

These remarks of Heidegger imply that when we are ‘socialized into a community’s practices’, we hear sounds as already with meaning. It is by dwelling in shared practices that we understand and directly experience meaning in linguistic communication. Now the meaning of an item of knowledge, for example, the assertion, ‘I require a lighter hammer’ is neither an intentional state (desire for a lighter hammer) nor the intention to communicate that sense by using words, understanding the meaning of that assertion is understanding the purpose of doing something with a lighter hammer. In other words, in the context of a shared activity of building a house, my saying that the hammer is heavy means that I communicate to my engaged mates on the job with me that this is heavy for the specific job we have. What I need let them grasp or see the shared problem. Communication, it follows, is possible if we understand one another’s projects of doing things. Hence, as opposed to Husserl, Heidegger in keeping with Derrida holds that language is not an inner thing, that it acquires meaning through engagement with social practices. It is only through social practices that language becomes meaningful, and communication becomes possible. In other words, language is a being-in-the-world sharing communication with others.

Incidentally, as we pick up from Baker and Hacker, this is also the stance of Wittgenstein:

It is not correlation with things in the world by means of a curious mental mechanism that invests signs with the significance, but the rule governed potentially for use and its corresponding realization in actual use.... Mental acts of meaning do not have the capacity by themselves to endow signs with meanings (intelligible uses). Meaningfulness requires use in accord with a standard of correctness, a rule. Such rules are given by explanations of meaning (G.P. Baker and P.M.S. Hacker, 1984)¹⁹.

Hence Wittgenstein's point is that it is only by socially approved rules or conventions, and not by a curious mental mechanism that an expression becomes meaningful and communicable. In other words, Wittgenstein intends to say that since language is a social affair, we use it only in the context of practical activities which involve our relationship with others.

IV

We are now in a position to give a very brief summary of what is said in the foregoing about Husserl's language and communication, Derrida's response to it, as well as Heidegger's similarity with Derrida in his own way. Husserl understands by meaningful verbal expressions noematic meaning or Sinn occurring in the mental sphere. To explain communication, he distinguishes meaningful expressions from indication. Expression which occurs in the sphere of the solitary mental life is externalized in when the speaker and the hearer existing in the world indicates or communicates things to one another. Crucially meaning, according to Husserl, is prior to language. He starts from language only to bring home that meaning which is derived from basic mental representation is externalized in language. Derrida opposes this stance of Husserl. According to him communication requires moving outside of the inner sphere. Husserl is mistaken when he relies upon the internal sphere to explain everything about meaning and communication. If we keep in mind how Husserl looks at expression, it is evident that

expression must occur within the internal sphere in the absence of indication. Now if expression is a solitary monologue, as it really is, there will be no room for meaningful communication here. Where meaning is immediately present to subject, there is no need of communication to others, because it is already in the mind of the subject to have any outlet to make communication possible.

Thus, the story of Heidegger and Derrida as opposed to that of Husserl has given us the cogent point as not to make appeal to inner mental life in understanding the nature of meaning and communication. On the contrary, this understanding requires engagement with what is outside, with the world---the practical world where alone language communicates successfully. Thus, Heidegger shares with Derrida the rejection of any inner aspect which Husserl upholds.

In speaking, Dasein expresses itself not because it has, in the first instance, been encapsulated as something “internal” over against something outside, but because as being-in-the-world it is already ‘outside’ when it understands; what is expressed is precisely his being-outside’ (M. Heidegger, 1962²⁰).

The paradigm of communication is mutual understanding in the context of a project, e.g. of building a house that we share or in which we participate. Communication is the successful interchange or sharing between the speaker and the hearer. In the words of Dreyfus, “In communication, something is explicitly shared on the background of an already shared affectedness and understanding” (H.L. Dreyfus, 1995)²¹. To make the point by Heidegger himself:

Communication is never anything conveying of experience...from the interior of one self into the interior of another. Dasein is already essentially manifested in co-affectedness and co-understanding. In discourse. Being-with becomes explicitly shared... (M. Heidegger, 1962)²².

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