

Imaging Meaning

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This paper is part of a larger project aiming at the conception of a theory of meaning and speculates on the specific importance of imagination as a milestone for such a theory. The subject is introduced by an account of customary uses of the concept of imaging, followed by the presentation of alternative senses as they will be used in this context to elucidate how an analogy between imagination and meaning may be constructed. This is to present the contention that both realms of imagination and meaning are analogical.

The terms 'imaging' and 'imagination' are generally conceived in their visual sense, as the action or the ability to form mental pictures. The reason for this preference is grounded both on a traditional hierarchy of the senses, clearly instantiated in Locke's (1690) model of sense perception (the stand and validity of which will not be analyzed here), and on the orientation of our language towards objects (Reed 2003). If due to the structure of our language, we tend to think of imagination in terms of the objects which are visually represented by it; this essay presents two additional senses for this family of concepts: (1) the action of making explicit spatial relations, and (2) the dimension where all other senses are rendered.

Imaging as spatial relations can be well understood in pictorial terms, like composition in a painting; but in order to throb any prejudice that may accompany the visual conception of this word I suggest, for this exercise, that we use our imagination to form a mental conception of spatial relations acoustically. Firstly because it helps to situate ourselves as a referential point for those relations, which makes it clearer that we understand them in relation to us and how we perceive the relation between the different elements. Secondly, because the difficulty in limiting this imaginative space is more concrete as there is no horizon compared to that of the visual field, but rather sounds fade in the distance without us being able to draw the line where they become inaudible; thirdly, because an acoustic conception brings forth phenomena like echo, which reveal something about the importance of the form of space as a defining characteristic; and finally, because perhaps this notion can help conceive of the world as relations which are (or not) the case; and these, in turn, as events taking place, instead of thinking of the world as composed of static things standing in certain relations.

So, just as 'imaging' may be conceived of beyond its object-oriented connotation, also 'meaning' can be understood not as an entity standing somehow before words or sentences like Aristotle's essences stood before things, nor as metaphysical referents, like Platonic ideas, to which words return to obtain their characteristics; but rather, meaning can be understood as spaciousness: as the absolute dimension upon which languages are patterns of edification and texts are constructs. This dimension, then, is what may be made explicit by the imaginative superposition of languages, the translations and creation of texts, and the passing between modes of presentation, just like space is made explicit by that which occupies it.

This proposition is a threefold notion of imaging, as explained above:

Firstly there is the recognition and consequence of our own position with regards to meaning: in the sense in which the meaning of words is the use they are given in a particular context; moreover, regarding the idiosyncratic connotations that the speaker and interlocutor bring, as well as the possibility of interpretation before malapropisms, or of misinterpretation of the intentions linked to the meaning (provided we are not solipsists, of course). Take Austin's (1962) example of marriage: the event is sensed as unique and inimitable, yet its success can only be guaranteed by the repeatability of the institution, of the convention and of language. Of course, there's the performance, prompted by one intention or other, yet only citing 'I do' in the correct context guarantees the success of the matrimony.

Secondly, the space of meaning is infinite; not only in temporal terms, which are understood with regard to the evolution that meaning goes through as language, by the introduction of new intentions and new idiosyncratic connotations and the such, but if we think about the multiplicity of languages and the infinitude of modes of presentation of the meanings, which is what Walter Benjamin (1923) calls the kinship of languages, we begin to comprehend the magnitude of this spatial dimension, and how it expands in its infinity.

Thirdly, regarding the relations, imaging, as we have mentioned before, consists in making explicit spatial relations. We can think of a musical composition, for example: what makes the construction work is the dynamic relationship between the possible patterns of composition (and the intentions which prompt them). And as soon as the opus begins, silence is altered just as much as the notes which come to form the structure, and just as much as the mental state of the performers or the audience. This is to say that all which is the case (as well as that which is not the case) is found in a never-ending reciprocal relation with the space which it produces and in which it is produced. By the same token, the space or realm of meaning is an initial complex network from which each and every singularity of language is derived, where the simple elements are defined by the relations of the system as a whole, instead of there being basic simple independent elements which come together forming the network. (De Saussure 1959)

If we think about what imaging is, as an implementation of our faculty of imagination, we may conclude that it is a cognitive exercise that takes us from the informational to the descriptive. For example, to say that the temperature is 0°C is an informative proposition about a state of affairs, it may be empirically verified and what not, but to imagine that the temperature is 0°C is to evoke the meaning of such a statement, namely, that it is cold. Still, there is no absolute cold, things can just be cold in relation to something else, to the fact that our body temperature is around the 36°C. Imagination avails meaning. The metaphor 'the temperature is ice-cold' is only meaningful for whoever can understand the description. And again, this is a way of saying that something can be meaningful in as much as it can be differentiated from other elements of the system without losing its pertinence to the system.

Now, this claim that the act of imaging affords something with meaning is not new; it can be derived from many propositions that have been put forth before in different forms many times: for instance, Hume (1739) says, that if we may conceive of something then it is not logically impossible; while Wittgenstein (1921), explains how language can be senseless and say nonsense, and only the sentences which form a picture, an image of the world, i.e. only that which may be imagined, has sense or is sensible.

But the point can be carried beyond the above: the imagined is unique and exclusive in its mode of presentation. It is harder to appreciate this element in philosophy, because we seek to translate the ideas from one mode of presentation to another, to ensure they are sound or that we understand them; because if they are, and if we do, then we should be able to present the same relation from different perspectives, bypassing the mode of presentation, and the relation should remain sound. There is a similar tendency in the scientific process that leads from a hypothesis to a natural law by parting inductively from the gathered evidence. This, of course, has its advantages, most of them practical, some even ethical, but we should not lose sight of the fact that every universalization neglects the uniqueness of every particular instance even when it precedes the possibility of actual visualization; like the scientific diagram, for example, that succeeds in expressing or evoking universality. Imagine Bohr's atomic model, the nucleus at the center, protons and neutrons, and the electrons orbiting around it, much like the planets orbit around the sun. This illustration was meant to schematically represent a universal construction which was impossible to capture by any perceptual means (either the atom or the universe). By doing so, however, it limits our conception of the system to what the model expresses (within the model). In other words, the very success of the depiction is what makes it unique as an image, even if the meaning is supposed to be universal. This is acceptable if the claim of such a portrayal is normative, because then we need only to multiply it infinitely, and we have reached the proposed universality, but as Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* (1953) clearly exemplifies in its album-like construction, the character of universality is quite problematic if we do not imply essentialism.

Let us explain: it is possible to assert a universal proposition which is descriptive and not normative. Of course this requires the introduction of modality into logic, but granted this possibility, the assertion does not fall before the problem of induction, because the proposition does not claim that things will continue to be the way they have been, but rather, it just says that they have been so thus far. Still, the universal proposition is only imaginable as the totality of the instances that constitute it, and not as a whole, since the proposition is not claiming an essential necessity of a Platonic ideal concept. Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* are thus written as an album, because he recognizes the uniqueness that may only exist in the particular. Each context, each language game, each instantiation is unique, just as each mode of presentation, even if that which is presented can be reiterated. Even when it is precisely the fact that it can be repeated, like the ceremonial 'I do' by which people are wedded, that makes it successful at all.

It doesn't take Nietzsche's proposition that language is intrinsically metaphorical to understand that this applies to every mode of linguistic presentation as well, but the present author agrees with this proposition, which also strengthens the suggestion furthered here.

Now, let us recapitulate: the tendency of language in philosophy is to bring us beyond its arrangement into the realm of meaning, as if meaning was a transcendental referent which could be reached and unchanged. This realm of meaning can be alternatively understood as the network created by the relationships between the different modes of presentation in different languages, as well as within the languages themselves; and this network is in an ongoing process of inexhaustible construction and change, where each instance is in fact unique, and cannot really be represented, but only presented. For when they are symbolically represented in some other way, the mode of presentation has changed, and so have the sense, the particular meaning, and the state of mind to which it relates in the intention of the interlocutors. This is quite clear in art, for it is a form of arrangement that is concerned solely with the perceptible, with the symbols' presentation, what they are in form, and not what they represent as symbols. The representation and exemplification of anything other than their formal characteristics remains as part of the idiosyncratic weight that enriches the experience, but it is part of the aesthetic appreciation only in as much as this experience can result from the very mode of presentation.

Now, this context may be clarified through imaging in any of its forms (visual, acoustic, sensory, etc.). Precisely by the understanding of the multiplicity of modes of imagination, and the uniqueness of each description which contains the three elements mentioned before: the intention – the presence of the agent for which this relationship may be meaningful; the infiniteness of the process – seen in the fact that new masterpieces are still being written despite the fact that they use the same finite vocabulary, along with the continuous evolution of language and thought and finally, the relationships which are determinant of the particular elements (including the agent of intention) – these define and are defined in terms of the meaning they are made to evoke by those who understand them.

There is a fourth element which was briefly mentioned at the beginning of this essay, and has somewhat remained concealed, intermingling. And that is the performative element, the act of imagining. The importance of the actual exercise of imagination is linked to the conception, also briefly presented, that reality is a conjunct of events and not of objects. This action may also be said to be what bridges the gap between the intentions of the speaker and the actual linguistic construction. But it can already be seen that this element invites issues which demand much more attention than can be presently given, such as the problem of translation, and even, if expanded enough, the problem of consciousness. If these are mentioned here, it is only as a tempting enticement towards further thinking on the subject, and will be given full attention in due time.

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