



Exploring the Sources of Meaning-Making: Culture, Convention, and Their Relevance and Value to Learning

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Abstract

This paper explores how a linguistic expression derives meaning from culture and norms. An initial investigation into how meaning is not wholly and always dependent on a.) sentence structure, b.) the speaker's intention, c.) the audience's perception and acceptance will be undertaken. Using local examples and cases, it will be shown that a more plausible approach to locating the meaning of an expression in a language is by successfully converging the speaker's intention and the receiver's understanding of what was expressed. This intersection point is only possible within the same conventional, cultural, and linguistic background. Hence, meaning cannot be seen separately from these antecedent situations and information. Towards the end, Wittgenstein's idea of '*meaning-as-use*' will be juxtaposed with the initial thesis that meaning is to be found within its cultural milieu, thereby aligning well with the kind of theory this paper seeks to realize. It will be concluded that the two are compatible, as the use can only be understood in relation to its setting and the 'rule' identifiable only within a given 'game.'

Keywords: Meaning, Philosophy of language, culture, language, Wittgenstein, Grice

Introduction

One unexamined generalization we have come to accept as true is the belief that everything we do has some implication or effect. Our decision to take either the jeepney or the cab will affect the driver's income for the day. Even going to church has an effect. The sitting space we occupy inside the church might have been occupied by someone else had we not gone to the church. Does this prove that Newton's third law of motion is true, that every action seems to yield a corresponding reaction? We are neither prepared nor interested in defending the metaphysical or ontological basis for this unfounded belief. Regardless of this uncertainty, though, there appears to be a grain of truth in this temporal phenomenon.

Belief in this generality is not exclusive to us. It is confirmed by the widely held notion that every utterance of a word means something. The sounds we produce when uttering a word contribute to conveying the word's meaning. Hence, it appears that vocal sounds themselves coexist with what they signify. Sounds cannot be produced under normal conditions without the 'effect', implication, or 'reaction' attached to them. This 'effect', implication, or 'reaction' that we are talking about, we commonly refer to as *meaning*.

Of course, the perennial ontological question is where this 'meaning' is derived from? Many of us tend to use a term or phrase to convey a different meaning than what others assume we mean. Some say we employ figurative language and are prone to hyperbole. Where does meaning really lie? Drawing on available studies and everyday experiences, this essay explores possible sources of meaning and which among the many possibilities seems most plausible, especially in light of our own local experiences and background.

The Beginning of the Query and the Sources of Meaning and Its Production

One day, while strolling around a mall, one of us witnessed a baby utter, in its baby-like, innocent tone, a foul Filipino expression,

"p*ta\$g i^a." Hearing such an expression, especially seeing the mother and the older lady accompanying them (perhaps the baby's grandmother) giggling and laughing at the baby's adeptness at mimicking what could have been a staple of family conversations at home, was puzzling. Not totally surprised by the seemingly counterintuitive reaction of the mother and grandmother, in this paper, we want to explore the dynamics that govern this and many other similar contexts in the Philippine setup. Why would a curse/expletive/swear, which is supposedly disgraceful, muster a reaction such as theirs? Why are insults sometimes taken as compliments? Conversely, how could an innocent opinion be considered sarcastic? Where does the meaning of ordinary utterances originate? This essay will examine three sources that form the foundations of meaning and its production. To be sure, we are not claiming these three are the only possible sources of meaning. We are interested in these three because they are the most potent and are commonly cited in the literature. We will try to explain these three and draw implications for various linguistic practices in the succeeding sections.

The first of the three sources is the idea that meaning resides in the very structure of an expression (call it 'meaning-as-form').¹ According to this view, each word has a corresponding objective meaning or, in the case of a proper name, a rigid designator.² By word, we mean an atomic unit composed of letters or sound/s that together carry meaning. This definition excludes instances of combined words (like acronyms or just plain series of letters). In parallel, each sentence derives its meaning from its composite parts. For example, 'dog' means 'an animal which in science is known as *Canis familiaris*.' The use of the term 'dog,' therefore, is bound by this meaning, which means that uttering the term 'dog' linguistically forces the audience to infer that what the speaker meant is the organism *Canis familiaris*. Thus, according to Paul Horwich, a notion of indication is present. In his words, "When we specify the meaning of a word, we are claiming

¹ See, for example, Gottlob Frege on the idea of compositional semantics in "On Sense and Nominatum," in *The Philosophy of Language*, 3rd edition, edited by A.P. Martinich (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 186-198. Noam Chomsky, *Syntactic Structures*, 2nd edition (New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 2002), 92-105. Rudolf Carnap, *Logical Syntax of Language* (London: Routledge, 2001), 153-166.

² Saul Kripke, *Naming and Necessity*, in *The Philosophy of Language*, 3rd edition, edited by A.P. Martinich (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 255-270.

that someone's use of the word would provide a good reason to expect the occurrence in his mental state of a certain concept."³ The utterance or mention of the word *indicates* a particular idea, which we refer to as the word's meaning. Each word in each language has a signification regardless of its surrounding situations.

Quite related to the above discussion is Frege's account of sense and reference, which helps us further understand how meaning, in relation to word-meaning, develops and is understood. Frege explains, "The regular connection between a sign, its sense, and its nominatum is such that there corresponds a definite sense to the sign and to this sense there corresponds again a definite nominatum [reference]."⁴ The former is what the word or sign points to in the world, and the latter is what force the word or sign carries in relation to the reference. Notice that both, as determinants of meaning, are to a certain extent connected to the logical structure of the expression.⁵ A particular sign has a specific reference and sense, regardless of who uses/mentions it, to whom it was said, and the context in which it was said. We believe this long tradition was carried and supported by many thinkers. Even earlier, Wittgenstein bought the idea and used the term 'picture' to analogize the relationship between words (that make up a proposition) and their meanings: "What the picture represents is its sense."⁶ In this sense, a proposition (composed of words) *pictures* a particular aspect of the external world.⁷

It is easy to buy into this view, especially given that this is our elementary idea of meaning. When we teach a child the meaning of a word, we do so by ostension or demonstration (pointing to the object).⁸ For example, when a baby is first taught what the word 'mama' means, the mother points to herself and tells the baby, 'mama', as if pairing the word with herself, the entity the word supposedly means. Later in life, many other words will be taught to the child in the

³ Paul Horwich, *Meaning* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

⁴ Frege, "On Sense and Nominatum," 187.

⁵ By the structure of expression, we mean that the meaning of a whole expression, say a proposition like "The morning star is the evening star," depends on the meanings of its parts and the way those parts are structurally combined.

⁶ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus-Logico-Philosophicus* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Press, 1922), 2.221.

⁷ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus-Logico-Philosophicus*, 2.1.

⁸ St. Augustine shares the same view. See Augustine, *Confessions*, book 1, chapter 8.

same manner. Consider the alphabet and number charts. Usually, these charts include words starting with each letter of the alphabet, along with illustrative pictures of the words. Ideally, the child learns the words by correlating the picture with the word. The word 'ball', therefore, to the child is a circular figure usually with longitudinal lines all around it, as seen on a common alphabet chart. This ostensive meaning approach illustrates the rudiment of the first leg of the sources of meaning we intend to pursue: each word derives its meaning from an external source, suggesting that meanings are inseparably linked to words, and that words are correspondingly fixed to meanings.

But if meanings are fixed to words, why can some words have more than one meaning (polysemy)? Why is the same meaning available to more than one word (synonymy)? Why are words rarely monogamous to a single, fixed meaning? If meaning is dependent on words themselves, why is it that another word can also carry the same meaning? Should not that meaning belong exclusively to a single word? Why can one and the same word mean differently in two different places (lexical variation) if meaning depends on the word? How can '*libog*' be 'lust/sexual arousal' for the Tagalogs and 'confusion' for the Visayans like Cebuano and Hiligaynon? If meaning is really derived from the word, then should it be that there will be no diversity of meaning for a single word? Common experience tells us otherwise. Meaning does not seem to completely depend on the word, and more so, on the expression.⁹ If the notion of meaning is this simplistic, there will be no disputes in language. The notion of ambiguity and vagueness won't even get into the vocabulary because there would be a clear correspondence between words and their meanings. But obviously, such is not the case. There is more fluidity in everyday language, so we cannot program software that can completely mimic human language and converse in the same way a human does, which we think is the limit of AI today.¹⁰

⁹ One famous expression from Hilary Putnam, "meaning isn't in the head!" See Hilary Putnam, *Reason, Truth and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 22-48.

¹⁰ Classic argument in support of this view is Searle's "Chinese Room Argument" thought experiment. See John R. Searle, "Minds, Brains, and Programs," in *The Philosophy of Mind: Classical Problems/Contemporary Issues*, 2nd edition, edited by Brian Beakley and Peter Ludlow, 133-150 (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2006).

Going back to the baby's utterance in the example above, if the baby who uttered the foul Filipino word meant by it anything resembling what the expression structurally conveys, then the mother and the grandmother should have been horrified. The baby's knowledge of what it means if meaning is embedded in the structure of words and expressions is highly doubtful.

The Meaning is What I 'Mean' It

If meaning is not in the word or expression, then where do we locate it? Another familiar answer to the question is through the speaker's intention. Sometimes, when the meaning of a particular expression or word is unclear, a Filipino listener would ask: "*ano daw?*" to simply mean 'I do not get the meaning of what the speaker uttered.' "*Ano daw?*" as a Filipino linguistic expression of response to the speaker's utterance can be roughly equivalent to saying "*anong ibig sabihin*". Thus, in this context, meaning is close to what the speaker intends to articulate or communicate to the audience or listener.

P.F. Strawson thinks that "reference to speakers and their intentions is of fundamental importance in the understanding of language."¹¹ This view is compelling considering that if one looks for the signification of a phrase or word, where else do you look it up but from the originator of the expression? For example, a resource speaker from a technical panel, who speaks before the committee of policymakers, tries to persuade these policymakers that we need to trim down the GE courses since they compose more than forty percent of the number of courses offered in a regular tertiary school by uttering some expressions like "GMRC is just the same as Ethics" to that effect. Any competent listener will ask this possible question: "What does the speaker mean by it?" In Filipino, one may say, "*Anong kalokohan naman yan?*" The idea here is that if a particular word or expression carries any idea, the idea must come from the person who utters it. In the case of the expert speaker talking about GMRC and Ethics courses, one may wonder what was really on the speaker's mind when the speaker said it. To explain such a phenomenon, one can say that the process is that the speaker first concocts the idea in

¹¹ P. F. Strawson, "Intention and Convention in Speech Acts," *The Philosophical Review* 73, no. 4 (October 1964): 439-60.

his head and conveys it through his words. Thus, what he means when he states something is the idea that he had prior to the expression. The meaning, therefore, of the expression rests on the speaker's idea in the head, and ultimately on the speaker's intention.

Consider another example, quite different from the previous one, a child who suddenly and unexpectedly calls his mother 'mama'.¹² What could have been the meaning of this word? If you are a structuralist, the word's meaning is what is commonly understood by those who know it. But suppose such a word is not familiar to us, nor can it be found in any dictionary worldwide. What does this word mean, then? If the child can explain himself, then we would have asked. But ordinarily, we make inferences by looking for signs from the child's actions since he cannot yet explain what he said. Say, for instance, in what direction is the child looking? Does the child appear to want his mother nearby, as indicated by raising his hand and pointing toward his mom? We might also consider a trial-and-error approach by handing the kid different toys or objects in response to his summons until we pacify him and finally identify what he wants. Suppose we confirmed our inferences by those actions, we can then say that what he intended to say (i.e., that he wanted his mother) is the meaning of what he uttered, in this case, 'mama'. This kind of meaning-making implies that somehow meaning is related to but not identical with reference, and to see the child's linguistic act as conferring meaning on an object in the world rather than what is in his head.¹³

Returning to the example at the beginning of this paper, the toddler who uttered '*p*ta\$g i^a*'. Where do we derive the meaning? Seemingly, this second 'theory' (internalist?) can supply the answer we seek. The meaning, perhaps, is searchable nowhere else but in the kid's imitation of the expression with a certain level of intention (to say it). Perhaps the kid could have just said it in jest, interjecting, or he could have used it in reference to something else around him,

¹² Some studies explain that "mama" is the most straightforward word for babies to vocalize because of "lazy little baby mouths" and the babies' contact with their mom's breast for milk. See Therese O'Neill, "Why Babies in Every Country on Earth Say 'Mama,'" *The Week* (May 2015), <https://theweek.com/articles/464678/why-babies-every-country-earth-say-mama>.

¹³ Hilary Putnam, *Reason, Truth and History*, 1-21. In these pages, Putnam discusses the issue of meaning and reference through an ingenious thought experiment known as "Brains-in-a-vat". The opening statement of the chapter begins with ants forming a face of Winston Churchill.

something which, peculiarly, he came to associate with the expression, perhaps because he heard someone mentioning the term while holding a particular object, say a cup of coffee.¹⁴ The point is that the meaning is intended by the speaker, not the word itself.

However, this kind of interpretation is also prone to criticism. For one, people cannot just use all words however they please. Like, for example, I could not just excuse myself from cursing around and telling people that what I meant when I say “You all look ‘sh*t’ to me” is that they are gorgeous in my eyes. There is a fundamental problem in this kind of thinking. But one may say it can be done, depending on the context and how the word is used in a given expression. Say, “sh*t, *ayos ng awra/porma mo ngayon, ah?*” This expression could mean “you are beautiful/or gorgeous.” Despite the use of ‘sh*t’ in the expression, the meaning of the whole expression, understood conventionally, remains positively encouraging and affirming. But then again, we cannot just use terms unceremoniously and attach meanings whenever they suit our needs. One reason is that linguistic expressions are products of social interaction and exchange. Meanings attached to each expression are certified by its users. In other words, language is a social phenomenon. That is why intention alone cannot, in itself, and by itself, formalize the meanings of expressions. There is another element that should necessarily be factored in: the audience.

Meaning as How I Construe It

In his article “Meaning,” H.P. Grice highlighted the need for another element to complete the formation of meaning: the audience.¹⁵ In Grice’s formulation, meaning is produced when the audience or hearers recognize the speaker’s intention to be understood in a specific way. In Grice’s manner of putting it, “A intended the utterance of *x* to produce some effect in an audience by

¹⁴ Keith Donnellan’s view of referential and attributive uses of descriptions may be instructive in this case. While in the case of the kid’s utterance of an expression, the expression is not a definite description, one can extend the implication of Donnellan’s view of referential and attributive use to expressions that are non-descriptive yet have referential or attributive character. See Keith Donnellan, “Reference and Definite Descriptions,” *Philosophical Review* 75 (1966): 281-304.

¹⁵ See H.P. Grice, “Meaning,” in *The Philosophy of Language*, 3rd edition, edited by A.P. Martinich (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 85-91. The succeeding reference to Grice is from this source, unless otherwise indicated.

means of recognition of this intention.”¹⁶ This meaning is understood as the speaker’s meaning, which is “a matter of expressing and recognizing intentions.”¹⁷ One can disagree with Grice on this point. One thing is clear from his account: he considered the audience a necessary element to complete the equation of meaning-making. Obviously, the syntax of the expression no longer matters. The speakers’ intention matters, but only insofar as it is appropriately transmitted or communicated to the audience. Unless this is the case, meaning is not successfully produced. In the recently concluded midterm elections, we heard, read, or saw many candidates spewing rhetoric just to gain votes from the electorate. Some speeches sent clear messages as intended, while others did not.¹⁸ For the latter, the case of some candidates uttering sexist remarks shows how they would later justify their position, arguing that their statements were taken out of context and the intended meaning is not what the audience understands them to be.¹⁹ If Grice’s condition is to be applied, if the meaning recognized by the audience does not coincide with what was intended by the speaker, then, obviously, meaning recognition as intended by the speaker fails. Here, another question arises. How can we recognize the speaker’s meaning without the speaker’s explicit utterance? In the case of those sexist candidates, to say that they did not intend to insult whatsoever is clearly a nonsensical alibi. Grice provides some means through which an audience can recognize the speaker’s intention, such as implicature, context, inference, and delivery. Through these means, the audience can recognize the speaker’s intention or meaning.

¹⁶ Grice, “Meaning,” 89.

¹⁷ Peishu Zhou, “The Gap between Speaker’s Meaning and Hearer’s Meaning in Communication: Within and Beyond Classical Gricean Theory of Meaning,” *Studies in Linguistics and Literature* vol. 9, no. 1 (2025): 14-25. See p. 15.

¹⁸ Case in point, Ian Sia’s sexist remarks. JC Gotinga, “Pasig Candidate Ian Sia Says Single Mothers May Sleep with Him,” *Rappler* (April 3, 2025), <https://www.rappler.com/philippines/elections/ian-sia-pasig-candidate-congressman-says-single-mothers-sleep-with-him/>. Also, Michelle Abad, “LIST: 2025 Candidates Who Have Made Public Sexist Remarks,” *Rappler* (April 8, 2025), <https://www.rappler.com/philippines/elections/list-2025-candidates-made-public-sexist-remarks/>.

¹⁹ See report by Jauhn Etienne Villaruel, “Pasig Bet Ian Sia Defends Controversial Remarks, Invokes ‘Free Speech,’” *Nation*, ABS-CBN News (April 9, 2025), <https://www.abs-cbn.com/news/nation/2025/4/9/pasig-bet-ian-sia-defends-controversial-remarks-invokes-free-speech-1252>.

However, this view has its strengths, too. In ordinary situations, for example, when parents tell their teenage children not to 'go to dark places,' with the intention of telling their children to avoid places where they could possibly be raped or abused, the children should be able to recognize the intention. Otherwise, the meaning does not hold. If and when, what the children understand because of their background schema, is that their parents are forbidding them to go out at night with their friends, and there is no possible way, say, for them to validate this belief since they cannot muster the strength to ask their parents, then, we can suppose that the meaning already lies on how they understood their parents. Since the intention cannot be transmitted without an explicit utterance by the speaker (parents), the attachment of meaning to the words spoken depends on the audience.

A lot of situations in everyday life are of this type, where the speaker's intention is unclear, and the responsibility of meaning-making is left to the audience. Again, the common expression "*ano daw?*" Unless the context is clear, one can easily recognize the meaning of such an expression. However, there are cases where "*ano daw?*" becomes a problem for the hearer. For example, if you requested someone to do extra work and asked if it was fine with them, and you heard them say "*ano daw?*" but deep down, they are not okay with it. When someone said "*ano daw?*" about your last-minute cancellation of a meeting or date. Or asking someone, a friend, or colleague regarding a sudden change of decision, and would reply to you, "*ano daw?*" Also, back to the toddler case, we suppose the meaning does not come so much from the toddler's intention, since the toddler cannot directly express it. Rather, the intention is something read and interpreted by the audience. In that case, the meaning of the curse uttered is really not of the toddler's making but of how the audience took it, the mother and the grandmother, thus their eventual reaction of laughter.

This view is also tenable because, for one, since the language structure failed, we are only left to take the meaning from the speaker's intention. However, as we have shown, the speaker's intention is not always as apparent as it should be. Moreover, the randomness of the speaker's expressions may not match their intentions, making the second option less viable. Given these, this third option of basing meaning on audience reception is more practical, since, at the end of the day, communication requires that the

audience get the message, and whatever the audience gets, assuming the communication process succeeded, is rightly the meaning of the utterance.

However, something still seems problematic about this third suggestion. For one, misinterpretation and misunderstanding are endless threats to the communication process. In Grice, this happens when the audience fails to recognize and infer the speaker's intention. Perhaps the failure to understand one another in communication is due to the violation of some presupposed communication principles.²⁰ Indeed, misinterpretation has to do with a certain feature of language, such that the text's meaning is open to various meanings or interpretations.²¹ Relying solely on how the audience understands the message to determine meaning undermines the speaker's salient contribution and intention in meaning-making. This view overestimates the speaker's capacity to convey their message and the audience's capacity to always clearly grasp it.

Take into account the example of a mother and her child. The mother tells her child, "Listen to your father," intending to have her child follow her husband. Now, the child, on the other hand, took his mother's words literally, and by it, he understood that his mother wanted him to just listen, as in hearing his father out without necessarily following his advice. In this scenario, can the understanding of the child be the meaning of the mother's statement simply because that is how he understood her? This is not very likely. The failure to express the meaning of an expression is not a problem of meaning. Failure on the part of the utterer to express what he intended to convey, or the audience's inability to understand, is sufficient grounds to rule out the correct meaning. To claim that the right meaning is what the audience apprehends rules out the possibility of an objective meaning over and above how it was transmitted and received. This view places too much power on the audience. Thus, it is crippling other features of the communication process.

²⁰ See Jürgen Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action*, vol. 1, translated by Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984).

²¹ Jacques Derrida, "Signature Event Context," in *Margins of Philosophy*, translated by Alan Bass (Brighton, Sussex: The Harvester Press, 1982).

Furthermore, how do we deal with multiple interpretations if the meaning is like this? In a class of 30 or 40, for example, who determines the meaning of what the instructor teaches, assuming there is a conflict of understanding among students? In some cases, when an instructor gives detailed instructions for an output, the instructor thinks that such instructions are already clear and easy to understand for everyone. Yet, it turned out, after submitting the outputs, that some members of the class understood the instruction differently. In such a case, can one say that the speaker's intention has not been communicated clearly? Or do the students have a different understanding of the instruction, resulting in a different output? What if only one group out of seven misunderstood the instruction? Who among them is said to recognize the instructor's meaning or intention? Apparently, the group whose output coincides with the instructor's intention or meaning correctly recognizes the meaning of the instruction. However, it leaves us wondering: Is it the only way to understand how meaning-making works? Should it only rely on the dominant meaning-maker, or is there another way to see meaning-making outside of this penumbra?

Meaning as a Reconciliation in Culture and Normative Practice

It seems that none of the three options we examined proved very promising. Each carries its own deficit and is thus ruled out as the best possible way of determining meaning. Our cogitation on these three gives us insight into the possibility that there is a way to make them compatible or mutually inclusive. This intersection point is where meaning really resided.

The syntax or the structure of expressions, although arbitrary in nature, is not so loose and arbitrary for us to totally abandon the idea that some words and expressions retain the meaning usually attached to them. The term 'usually' is fitting to underscore the notion of normativity. A term, a word, or an expression carries a meaning, regardless of the situation, that is normally attached to it. However, this meaning can be overridden by situations that make the expression's employment no longer 'normal'. Perhaps an example of this is when a parent, furious at the moment, says to their child, "I hate you!" and later apologizes for it. Therefore, a meaning assigned to a given expression or word may be scratched in favor of another

meaning, given that the terms are no longer employed in a 'normal' way. In other words, context matters in meaning-making. Of course, the next logical question is, when is employment normal? The normal use of expressions is determined by culture and practice. The giving or stipulating of a word's meaning is determined and is fortified by a particular linguistic community's continuous adherence to a specific normative linguistic practice and, in effect, confirmation of the meaning.²² For instance, if we use the term 'circle' to signify any object resembling an idea of points equidistant to a particular center, and my community of speakers employs the word in the same manner, then the meaning becomes normal. This normal use is the default meaning of words and expressions. However, in real-life situations, default meanings are not always the meanings we attach to words and expressions. More often than not, the speaker's intention and the audience's perception are really the determining factors. As such, we will zero in on these two notions.

It is clear at this point that the speaker's intention and the audience's reception are both important to successfully grapple with the meaning of an expression. The problem is how to make them compatible. How can the speaker's intention be effectively transferred to an audience? How can there be a possibility of ruling out inconsistencies and problems in misinterpretation?

In our attempt to provide a reasonable answer to this problem, let us talk about a pair of uncle and aunt. Suppose your uncle knows when your aunt is already pissed at him without her telling him. How? Perhaps the way your aunt calls or speaks to your uncle. When she endearingly calls him, she is in a perfect, sweet, positive mood. When she calls him, however, with his full first name, that implies that something is wrong. Alternatively, when he is called by his last name, that means something terribly wrong is present. Danger is imminent for your uncle. This is not something instituted as a matter of rule in marriage books. This is, in fact, something that may or may not be exclusive to them (We highly believe it's the latter). The point is, they could read each other through a method of codification they have made as a matter of habitual practice and convention. Because of this

²² This issue is also discussed by Gareth Evans in his essay "The Causal Theory of Names." See Gareth Evans, "The Causal Theory of Names," in *The Philosophy of Language*, 3rd edition, edited by A.P. Martinich (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 271-283.

convention, your uncle is supposed to know without pressing what your aunt wanted him to understand. In a social event, for example, where your aunt expressly disapproves of what your uncle says or does, she need not show everybody her disapproval. She simply has to revert to the way she calls him, depending on her feelings. We suppose the same mechanism works in meaning-making. There must be a kind of codified, agreed-upon (consciously or unconsciously) 'contract' where the two conflicting sides may meet. There must be an arbiter who shall judge who is right and who is wrong. In the battle between the speaker's intention and the audience's perception, this arbiter should be the culture and conventions of the place or society.

According to Melba Padilla-Maggay in her book *Understanding Ambiguity in Filipino Communication Patterns*, Westerners often misunderstand Filipinos because of our propensity (actually, a penchant) for not meaning what we say.²³ She gives several examples. For instance, when a Filipino visits someone else's home and is offered to join them in their meal, the Filipino visitor is most likely to decline, even if he would love to. He would probably want to be pressed into giving in and joining them happily at meals. This, according to Maggay, depresses our Western counterparts, as this Filipino way of communicating is highly confusing and causes many misunderstandings. However, as Maggay writes, it has never been a problem for us or among us, since we understand each other's '*pahiwatig*,' which is the key concept in Filipino communication patterns.²⁴ According to her, Filipinos are not always vocal about what they mean, but our nonverbal cues, or *pahiwatig*, convey what we mean well. This, according to her, is also owing to our collectivist culture, a product of our shared history, as opposed to the more individualistic Western culture. There are more ample examples of this indirectness of Filipino communication, such as "*Saan ka na? Papunta na,*" "*Anong ulam? Masarap,*" "*Kain tayo. Busog pa ako.*" "*Anong oras na. Maaga pa*" and the like.²⁵

²³ Melba Padilla-Maggay, *Understanding Ambiguity in Filipino Communication Patterns* (Diliman, Quezon City: Institute for Studies in Asia Church and Culture, 1999).

²⁴ The idea of *pahiwatig* can be likened to what Searle calls 'indirect' or 'oblique' speech. See John Searle, *Expression and Meaning: Studies in the Theory of Speech Acts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 30-57.

²⁵ Jan Apolline D. Estrella, "'Saan Ka Na? Papunta na': The Indirectness of Filipino Communication," *UP Working Papers in Linguistics* vol. 2, no. 1 (2023):125-127.

Using this as a possible case study, one can say that communication can only be effective and, more so, meaning can only be deciphered most successfully if the intention of the speaker and the reception of the audience is arbitrated by a common culture, which gives rise to a common linguistic practice as agreed upon, albeit implicit, by the linguistic community. Therefore, a statement, an expression, no matter how special the case is, no matter how far from the 'normal' employment the use is, will be understood and will reveal its meaning more effectively. This takes into account more sophisticated use of language, such as sarcasm, metaphors, and figurative language. Given a shared stance and cultural background, it is unlikely that meaning will be intentionally obscured by individual biases, thereby enabling clear-cut meaning-making and understanding. When someone utters an expression in mind, the method of delivery of the message will take into consideration the cultural background that is understandable to both parties, and thus will assure the audience's understanding of it.

Wittgenstein's Meaning as Use and Rule-Following

A remarkably better way of putting the points across is Wittgenstein's ideas of language games and rule-following. Language always functions in a context and, therefore, has as many purposes as there are contexts.²⁶ In the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein points out that words can have as myriad uses as tools in a toolbox. Just like a toolbox, we find several different tools with different functions or uses. Analogously, language plays a similar role. We use words to state a fact ("Philippines is a country-state"), ask questions ("Why are GE courses necessary in higher education?"), give commands ("Follow the rules"), express emotions ("I love you!"), giving declaration ("I now declare you, husband and wife"), and many others. Therefore, we must not limit our use of words based on our default use or meaning of the words. This is where flexibility, as opposed to the rigidity present in the earlier work of Wittgenstein, the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, is seen. However, in response to the fear in the earlier discussion that there is a tendency for a speaker to

²⁶ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* 2nd Ed., trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (Malden: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1953).

use a word or expression too loosely and thus is too random, Wittgenstein posits the idea of language-games and rule-following.

Using a language is like joining a game. There are a lot of ways of using language, as there are a lot of games. In fact, there is not one thread that unites all of these games. To search for something that is common to all languages, just like looking for what's common to all games, is futile. There is only a resemblance among them, but not a unifying characteristic. In these games, one very salient thing is following the rules. Each game has specific rules to follow, and violation of these rules spoils the whole game. The rules in a language are like the rules in a game. One has to abide by the rules of the language to ensure the yielding of meaning and the success of the communication process. In the discussion above, these rules are the rules of a particular culture, and a specific culture is a specific game where convention may thrive as rules. Violation of these rules guarantees misunderstanding and alienation of meaning. Meaning, therefore, can only be sought in a particular language game. The use of a word can only be within a particular language game or cultural milieu.

Conclusion and some remarks

"It is a platitude that language is ruled by convention."²⁷ Nonetheless, the seemingly endless labyrinth leading to meaning seems to end in convention. Looking for a perennial meaning in words and expressions is not just a fruitless endeavor but rather a thoughtless endeavor because language, as an aspect of human existence, flourishes only in the context of human beings. It cannot be analyzed apart from human experiences and living. This presupposes that words, in themselves, are not analyzable but are understood in a particular background or context. This context will pave the way for the convention and acceptance of ways of expression that are understandable and implicitly agreed upon by a linguistic community. Thus, manners of expression, rules governing the use of language, and other surrounding circumstances in articulation will be uniform. In the end, meaning can only be found, nay, seen in this manner. Only through efficient use, as outlined earlier, can effective communication

²⁷ David K. Lewis, *Convention: A Philosophical Study* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1969), 1.

be achieved. This was seen during the COVID-19 pandemic, when a multitude of proclamations can be dizzying at times, the basic notion of meaning should be impressed upon our policymakers and supposed leaders. Even more so in everyday interactions and various engagements on social media. Perhaps one can say that too much exposure to and consumption of information and data have made us obese,²⁸ so we sometimes have a hard time processing and understanding it, leading to a failure to recognize the proper meaning of things. This is why learning about the nature of language, meaning, culture, and convention is of great intellectual and practical value. Recognizing that meaning is constructed and negotiated helps us become more responsible communicators, attentive listeners, and critical readers in a world saturated with information and shaped by communication. Understanding that meaning is not fixed but context-bound cultivates clarity in expression, prudence, critical thinking, and openness in interpretation. It fosters empathy for others, so that one is careful not to make judgments on issues without grasping the whole meaning of the issue. Language users, especially those who capitalize on communication as a means of power to influence the many, must be mindful that the words they use carry meaning not merely by lexical definition but through lived realities. The need to learn about how meaning works is not only an academic endeavor but also a civic and ethical one.

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²⁸ See Byung-Chul Han, *The Burnout Society*, translated by Erik Butler (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015).

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