Hermeneutics:
Some Linguistic Considerations

PETER COTTERELL

1. What is 'Language'?

Human language is a highly sophisticated, complex, but ultimately imprecise communication system or semiotic. It has its origins in a desire, an intention, to communicate. It originates inaccessibly in a human mind.[1] Spoken language is primary, an attempt to express the inaccessible intention in sound. Written language is secondary, conforming to the primary spoken form in ways specific to each particular language. The task of interpreting an ancient written text is much more difficult than that of interpreting spoken text. Written language, in practice, involves language with two absences: the absence of the speaker, the author or the redactor, and the absence of the referents. The interpretation of a written text involves some measure of dialogue with the author or speaker, and some attempt to identify the referents.

It is precisely these absences that precipitate the problem of polysemy in the written text. With the presence of the speaker there is experienced what has been termed a metaphysics of presence, but which might better be termed a metalinguistic of presence, providing its own bounds to polysemy. With the speaker and author removed, that is to say with a written text, a plurality of text meaning may be identified by the deprived (or, arguably, by the liberated), reader.[2]

This process of interpreting written language is ultimately an art rather than a science, still less an exact science. We are dealing with a semiotic which we employ without, in general, being overtly aware of the code which lies behind it. We learn to employ hyperbole, litotes, metaphor, to use rhetoric as individual devices or as sequential schemes, we learn to identify implicature, we learn even to create for a text

an appropriate context[3], without consciously identifying the devices we employ.

Context is of great importance for any viable hermeneutic. For example, a speaker generated a sequence which could be represented by 'I am Esau your firstborn' (Gen. 27:19) (or rather the Hebrew equivalent, a further problem). The information recorded in this transcript is heavily edited. We do not know anything (from the actual text, although the surrounding text, the co-text, could tell us a good deal) about the setting in which the sequence was generated, we do not know what time of day it was, we do not know what the person addressed was wearing, we are not told whether or not the speaker bowed, held out his hand in paralinguistic gesture, or made some other gesture, nor what his facial expression was. And yet we know from our own experience of spoken language that any of this information might be important in interpreting the sequence.

Thus in Proverbs 6:13 the worthless person is described as one who goes about 'with crooked speech, winks with his eyes, scrapes with his feet, points with his finger, and with perverted heart devises evil.' Here are three gestures and yet we cannot be sure of the meaning of any one of them. Proverbs 10:10 comments: 'He who winks with the eye causes trouble, but he who boldly reproves makes peace.' The parallel and semantically determinative phrase 'he who boldly reproves' has the Septuagint as its source since the corresponding Hebrew text 'but a prating fool will come to ruin' appears to be unrelated to any conceivable antithesis to the significance of winking. But this uncertainty leaves us without any sure guide to the significance of winking. The Psalmist prays, 'Let not those rejoice over me who are wrongfully my foes, and let not those wink the eye who hate me without cause'

(Psalm 35:19). In contrast to the significance of contemporary western gesture winking in the Old Testament culture was never mere facetiousness: winking is 'always associated with sin'.[4]

Not only are we without information on gesture in the Jacob text, but we also lack information regarding the intonation pattern employed for the sequence, the medial *loudness* of the speech, the pitch of the speaker's voice or the place of stress within the sequence. This is, of course, typical of written text, typical of the two absences, of speaker and of referent.

We may go further: although the import of the sequence is quite clear, that the name of the speaker is Esau, in fact we know (either from general knowledge or from reading the co-text), that his name was not Esau. We conclude, then, that the meaning of a sequence is not merely some kind of summation of the meanings of the constituent elements which comprise the sequence. We need also to know the co-text, the total text of which the sequence is a part. That in turn requires that we identify the boundaries of the text, those limits within which we may expect to locate the clues which might serve to resolve our inescapable exegetical uncertainties, before proceeding to an analysis of any part of it. In the present example, expanding the analysis of the text into its immediate co-text shows that the speaker's name was Jacob, and that he was presenting himself to his father as Esau, his elder brother.

We are confronted here by the essential difference between a *sentence* and an *utterance*, a useful distinction which will generally be maintained in this article. A sentence has no immediate co-text. The *sentence* rendered as *I am Esau your firstborn* does mean what it appears to mean: that the speaker is someone's firstborn son and is named Esau. The sentence may be generated by a speaker or may be written down, but there is no co-text which could bring into question the information being communicated within the limits of that sentence. An utterance has both context and co-text, and the meaning of an utterance must be determined in the light of text, co-text and context. The possible range of meanings and the probable meaning of an ancient utterance may be ascertained through dictionary, grammar, thesaurus, lexicon, context, co-text, encyclopaedia, history, geography, and a knowledge of linguistics and especially of socio-linguistics and discourse structure.

Perhaps it should be added, here, that this complex view of the process of the interpretation of a text is very different from Schleiermacher's concept of a *psychological* absorption into the text. We are now reasonably confident that because of our pre-reading of texts an objective and existential re-creation of any ancient context is denied to us. However, this does not deny to us the attempt *objectively* to re-create that context, without attempting *existentially* to experience it.

2. What is 'Meaning'?

Semantics subsumes a subsidiary science concerned with text-meaning. In normal usage it would be expected that we could ask what the meaning of a text was, and expect to find a generally acceptable answer. A little thought will show that this is an assumption, and that in some literary forms there is explicitly nothing corresponding to a text-meaning. Anthony Thiselton (I think uniquely) has drawn attention to the Zen *koan*, a text-form which observes the usual grammatical and linguistic regularities but which explicitly has no text-meaning (*New Horizons in Hermeneutics*, Harper Collins, 1992, 119). The *koan* may be an apparently normal text, 'Who is it that recites the name of the Buddha?' or it may be an apparently nonsensical but grammatical string, 'The sound of one hand clapping'. The Zen master is concerned to bring the student to the point where the *koan* is resolved not by analysis of any kind, but by intuition. The student takes the *koan* and 'slowly recites the words of the question and watches it as a cat watches a mouse, trying to bore deeper and deeper into it, till he reaches the point from which it comes and intuits its meaning'.[5]

The postmodernist deconstructionist approach to text has clear affinities with the Zen perception of the role of language. Strings of words have apparent superficial 'meanings' which, however, cloak the true function of language which is not to communicate any intended meaning but to activate intuitive meaning. The meaning for one intuiter need have no relation whatever to that of another. In other words the process of deconstruction as exemplified in J. D. Crossan, for example[6], starts from the denial of embodied meaning, and replaces the traditional emphasis on cognitive content with a concern for the *form* of the linguistic vehicle.

This approach certainly serves to remedy the traditional concern with text as though it were no more (and no less) than a shopping list. It emphasizes the emotive force of text, and the role of intuition in perceiving text as more than a mere summation of lexicon and grammar. But epistemologically the approach offers serious problems to those who assume that a text not only has cognitive content, but also has ethical imperatives and, still more, objective prophetic significance.

With these preliminary reflections we move to the more traditional questioning of the locus of text-meaning.

3. Where Does 'Meaning' Come From?

Among linguists there continues to be debate on the question of the locus of meaning in a text. There are broadly three options: that meaning lies in the text alone, that meaning lies in the intention of the author of the text, or that meaning lies in the reader of the text. It is intuitively apparent that there is a measure of truth in all three possibilities, and that alone is sufficient to warn us against any uncritical and exclusive adoption of one or another of them. We consider each of these in turn, and then draw some conclusions.

3.1 The Objective Text

The text is, of course, the objective reality, whether it is a written text or a spoken text. *This* is what was said or written. However, when the phrase *objective reality* is used it applies solely and exclusively to the sounds used or the symbols written, and not at all to whatever *meaning or intention* might be supposed to lie behind the sounds or the symbols. Meaning and intention are always subjectively derived from objective text. It then appears that in using a term such as *objective* to describe any aspect of a text we must disassociate it from the human interpretive sequence. But it is then arguable that we do not have a text at all, nor any communication. We have only a set of written symbols with no receiver to decode them. However, for the present we may assume, with a mental note of caution, that a written text consists of a set of coded symbols and exists unchallenged as such. Is such a text of itself susceptible to interpretation as having a single, agreed and identifiable meaning?

If the text includes the utterance, *I am Esau your first-born*, it must certainly be distinguished from a nearby utterance, *Who are you, my son?* But since we have already seen that the meaning of the utterance, *I am Esau your first-born*, is significantly different from its apparent meaning it is clear that reference to an utterance is isolation will not in all cases lead to a correct understanding of its meaning. Indeed the situation is sometimes made complex by the rhetorical device of ambiguity. Modern Amharic, and before it classical Ethiopic, developed an entire literary genre known as *sem inna werq*, 'wax and gold', in which each word, each phrase, each sequence might be seen either as (relatively value-less) wax, an external dressing, or as significant (but indelicate or potentially politically compromising) gold, the concealed essence of word, phrase, sequence.[7]

This at once raises a further point still vigorously debated by linguists: is there such a thing as *the correct meaning* of a text? Granted that we must accept that some supposed interpretations of a text are simply crass or obtuse is it possible to assert that there is a uniquely correct meaning to be assigned to it?

Traditionally literary scholars have debated the *meanings* of their texts, separating out the 'scientific', or 'standard' or 'normal' use of language from the 'poetic' or 'emotive' use of language, classifying the poetic forms and developing principles for their interpretation, and assuming that texts using 'normal' language are in no need of such interpretive tools.[8] But the very concept of 'scientific' or 'normal' or even 'normative' language must be challenged, firstly because there is no taxonomy that can delimit the normal, but secondly because the category 'poetry' does not represent a boundaried class. All language, written or spoken, has a context and that context always involves individual speakers and every speaker's use of language is idiosyncratic, always consisting of an undefined and unknowable mixture of denotation and connotation. In other words all language may be represented as a poetical or rhetorical continuum with every particular expression of language having a place somewhere along the continuum.

3.2 Authorial Intention

If, surrendering the concept of the autonomy of the objective text, we locate meaning in the intention of the author, we are confronted by a different set of problems. Perhaps the most obvious of these, in the case of biblical text, is the fact that the authors are long since dead, and their intentions are usually not available to us (but cf Luke 1:1–4, John 20:31, 1 John 2:2).

Secondly we have the problem of linguistic competence to face. The readily demonstrable fact is that we may, because of linguistic in competence, both say and write not merely what we do not intend, but the very opposite of what we intend. Lessing's slip has become the classic example, in which Emilia's mother is made to say 'My God! If your father knew that! How angry he was already to learn that the prince had seen you *not without displeasure*.'[9] The co-text makes it perfectly clear that what was *intended* was that the prince had seen Emilia and been pleased by her, but a vigorous litotes has defeated the linguistic competence of the author. The celebrated problem posed by 1 Cor. 14:22 may have a similar explanation: 'Thus tongues are a sign not for believers but for unbelievers, while prophecy is not for unbelievers but for believers.' The immediate co-text, however, states unequivocally that the unbeliever hearing tongues would think the speakers mad, but that unbelievers hearing prophecy would be convicted and would be led to worship God. There are too many negatives in the crucial statement, and J. B. Phillips in his paraphrase supplies what he considers to be the *discourse meaning* of the text, that glossolalia provides *a sign* for believers and prophecy *a sign* for unbelievers.[10]

3.3 Reader-Response[11]

Consider the narrative relating to Mephibosheth in 2 Samuel 9–19. The story is part of the longer Court Narrative of David and Saul. Saul has died and David asks: 'Is there still anyone left of the house of Saul, that I may show him kindness for Jonathan's sake?' (9:1). By the end of the chapter Mephibosheth has been found, and is established at David's court: 'He ate always at the king's table.' In chapter fifteen David is forced to flee from Jerusalem because of a *coup* mounted by Absalom. He is met by Ziba, the servant of Mephibosheth, who tells David that Mephibosheth has elected to stay in Jerusalem, hoping that the revolt would mean the restoration of the kingdom to Saul's successors. David apparently believes him and rewards Ziba with the grant of all Mephibosheth's lands, though we note that the reward is in one sense pointless: Ziba cannot have the lands unless and until David returns safely to Jerusalem. In chapter nineteen David returns to Jerusalem: the revolt is over. Mephibosheth meets him: we now are told that since David left Jerusalem he had demonstrated his loyalty to David: he had not cared either for his person or his clothes. Ziba, he insists, had deceived him. David now decides that Mephibosheth's lands should be equally shared between the two men.

So much for the text. But how is it to be understood? What does it *mean*? A multitude of questions have to be considered: Was Mephibosheth being honoured, or merely put into protective custody when David brought him to Jerusalem? Did Mephibosheth understand the situation? Why did he remain in Jerusalem rather than accompany David? Had he accompanied David, surely his lameness would have been a hindrance, possibly a fatal hindrance, to David? As a fellow fugitive would he, in fact, have been more of a threat to David than as a potential rival in Jerusalem? Did Ziba tell the truth, half of the truth, a total lie? Did David believe him . . . after all David sequestered Mephibosheth's land? During David's absence had Mephibosheth really neglected himself as the narrative says, or was this a quickly adopted subterfuge to allow him to escape from a dangerous situation? Whom did David believe? Why did he divide the land between them: was it to save face after his earlier unjust decision? Was it because he really didn't know whom to believe?

Throughout the story we are given no clue at all as to the characters of Ziba or Mephibosheth. The reader today might well be inclined to take the side of the old man Mephibosheth, to see him as a man of integrity, his infirmity exploited by Ziba, and so to assign to Ziba a sneaking, sycophantic, grasping role. But there is no more evidence in support of the one view than of the other. In other words, even given an *objective* text the reader must *subjectively* interrogate for its meaning, at each point in the development of the story modifying any views previously held and projecting forwards to anticipated future developments. No reader who has read as far as chapter 15 could fail to anticipate a further encounter between the three protagonists, David, Ziba, and Mephibosheth, and yet for the modern reader there is nothing in the *objective* text to announce such a development. We have inevitably projected ourselves into the text to find a meaning.

Jacques Derrida's celebrated statement that a text has no meaning represents the extreme expression of anti-foundational theory. Defending his own fiercely held but perhaps less extreme anti-foundationalist position, Stanley Fish insists that its essence

> is not that there are no foundations, but whatever foundations there are (and there are always some) have been established by persuasion, that is, in the course of argument and counter-argument on the basis of examples and evidence that are themselves cultural and contextual.[12]

In other words, any conclusions we may draw with respect to the Mephibosheth narratives will be consensus conclusions, not conclusions forced upon us by the text, and the consensus will be determined by cultural factors and by the context within which the consensus is reached. For example, we are likely to be influenced by the opinions of our peers.

To take an immediately relevant example, it has been a commonplace of New Testament scholarship to assign late dates to most of the books of the New Testament and to question their traditional authorship. In 1976 John Robinson published *Redating the New Testament* (SCM), in which he dated the whole of the New Testament before AD70, and to drive home the lesson appended a letter from no less a scholar than C. H. Dodd affirming:

> You are certainly justified in questioning the whole structure of the accepted 'critical' chronology of the NT writings, which avoids putting anything earlier than 70, so that none of them are available for anything like first-generation testimony. I should agree with you that much of this late dating is quite arbitrary, even wanton, the off-spring not of any argument that can be presented, but rather of the critic's prejudice that if he appears to assent to the traditional position of the early church he will be thought no better than a stick-in-the-mud. The whole business is due for radical re-examination. (p. 360)

Contemporary scholarship has yet to come to terms either with John Robinson, whose views could be dismissed, or with C. H. Dodd, whose views could not. The point is, however, that the interpretation of text is not in fact determined by an objective text alone, nor

by author intention alone or with text, co-text and context, but by all of this moderated through the subjectivity of the reader and the reader's culture and context.

4. Conclusion: Discourse Meaning

With the debate among the linguists unresolved we must still come to some conclusions about the locus of meaning in biblical text. First of all it seems that the distinction between *meaning* and a multiplicity of *significances* is still valuable. Behind the text stands an author, an editor, a redactor, with some intention lying behind the production of the text. We have no access to that intention, although an understanding of contemporary and cognate languages and cultures, of related texts, of grammar, syntax, lexicography, and possibly some knowledge of the author might at least indicate what the intention was *not*, and might even indicate what it most probably *was*.

It seems to me that the clear overtones of a humanistic nihilism apparent in the more radical forms of Reader-Response theory are to be resisted. They appear to be designed not so much to explain texts as to dissolve significant meaning and to enthrone relativity in the person of the reader. Thiselton quotes Paul Ricoeur who insisted:

> Writing renders the text autonomous with respect to the intention of the author. What the text *signifies* no longer co-incides with what the author meant.[13]

The difficulty here is firstly that Ricoeur does not, in fact, distinguish between meaning and significance (*meaning* as the original intention of the author, *significance* as the significance for the contemporary reader), so that he asserts a distinction between authorial intention and *meaning*, and secondly he appears to assert that the meaning intended by an author is *necessarily* different from the meaning perceived by the reader. That the intention of an author *might* not be perceived by a reader is admitted; to suggest that it *cannot* be perceived by a reader is simply perverse.

A *text is a communicative occurrence which meets seven standards of textuality*[14] and of these seven standards the first three have particular importance: they are grammatical and syntactical cohesion, semantic coherence, and intentionality. That is to say, an author produces a communicative text consisting of related strings across which there are certain constants (pro-forms having identifiable antecedents, for example) and with the meanings of the strings related so as to produce a topic or theme or thematic net. The reader seeks to identify the *discourse meaning* of the text.

The term *discourse meaning* is particularly import-

ant. On the one hand we seek to avoid the notion of the semantic autonomy of the text. A text cannot carry *any* meaning, but it does carry a meaning *intended* by the original speaker or author, related to the context within which it was generated and the co-text of which it is a part. On the other hand we avoid also the complete relativity of meaning inevitable when meaning is no more than that meaning perceived by the reader, however much that meaning might appear to others to be inimical to the objective text. In approaching a text, then, we are searching first for the *discourse meaning* and not for the *significance* of the text for us. It is certainly true that in some instances we may be for ever unsure of what the intended meaning was, and may have to admit to the possibility of several distinct meanings. But again it must be emphasized that the range of possible meanings is not infinite: Uriah was *dead*, not attending a banquet in Jerusalem.

The issue of the locus of meaning is particularly important in the case of biblical text. Rightly or wrongly biblical text, along with other sacred texts and most didactic and historical material, is perceived as having an external, forensic, hortatory role in relation to the reader. It is expected that the text will challenge assumptions, mores, expectations, value systems by placing them alongside an alternative system. If the relativization of Reader Response theory is accepted then, as Thiselton has pointed out:

> the text can never transform us and correct us '*from outside*'. There can be no prophetic address '*from beyond*'. This may still leave room for a measure of *creativity and surprise* in *literary* reading. For *in such cases it does not profoundly matter whether it is ultimately the self* who brings about its own creative discoveries. But in the case of many biblical texts, theological truth claims constitute more than triggers to set self-discovery in motion (even if they are not less than this). If such concepts as 'grace' or 'revelation' have any currency, texts of this kind speak *not from the self*, but *from beyond the self*.[15]

Footnotes

1. The sociolinguist H. P. Grice would insist that text originates not in a *mind* but in a *person*, reacting against the concept of a psychological other. It seems to me that we have here a distinction without a difference.

2. See Anthony C. Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics*, Harper-Collins, 1992, 83.

3. Any native speaker of English could create an appropriate context for the utterance 'Let me make you a nice cup of tea.'

4. See art. 'Winking' in *International Bible Encyclo-*

pedia and art. *qāras* in *BDB* and *KBL*. In Semitic Ethiopian culture to wink at a woman is to invite her to have sex.

5. Peter Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhism*, CUP, 1990, 274.

6. See, for example, *The Dark Interval: Towards a Theology of Story*, Argus, 1975.

7. Donald Levine, *Wax and Gold*, University of Chicago Press, 1965. In the cafes of Addis Ababa in the early 1960s the apparently unexceptionable 'wax' toast 'Government! The government!', *Mengist! Mengistu!* was regularly heard. The 'gold' was rather different: *Mengistu* Neway was the recently hanged, popular revolutionary, leader of the 1960 attempt to overthrow Haile Sellassie.

8. See especially Stanley Fish, 'Literature in the Reader', in his *Is there a Text in this Class?*, Harvard University Press, Harvard and London, 1980, especially his comments on Riffaterre's distinction between ordinary and poetic language, 59ff.

9. Cotterell and Turner, 1989, p. 58.

10. For a discussion of the significance of the ommission of the second 'sign for' in connection with prophecy see D. A. Carson, *Showing the Spirit*, Baker, 1987, chapter 4.

11. See, for example, Jane Tompkins (ed) *Reader–Response Criticism*, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980.

12. Stanley Fish, *Doing What Comes Naturally*, Clarendon Press, 1989, 29.

13. *New Horizons in Hermeneutics*, 56.

14. Robert de Beaugrande and Wolfgang Dressler (eds), *Introduction to Text Linguistics*, Longman, 1981.

15. *New Horizons in Hermeneutics*, 531.