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Language, Imagery, and Meaning

F. P. Cotterell

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INTRODUCTION

In 1980 G. B. Caird, Dean Ireland's Professor of Exegesis of Holy Scripture in the University of Oxford, gave us a new book, *The Language and Imagery of the Bible*, published by Duckworth in their Studies in Theology series. I say 'gave us' with malice aforethought; my earliest Duckworth in this same series is Sydney Cave's *Introduction to the Study of some living Religions of the East* at six shillings, while Caird's was priced at £18! The difference in price was sufficiently startling to make me do what I had never done before: write to the publisher. I couldn't afford to buy it (Oh the blessedness of the man who is asked to review worthwhile books, so receiving a free review copy!), and if I couldn't afford to buy it how could I expect my students to buy it? I don't know what effect my *cri de coeur* had, but we do now have a paperback edition at £5.95.¹

Which is as well, since most of the reviewers² shared my view that this is a book that is well worth reading. There was, it must at once be admitted, a peculiarly bad-tempered review in the *Catholic Quarterly* which began,

Students of Scripture may safely ignore this book; it is difficult to imagine any reader who would get much out of it.³

What on earth did Delbert Hillers have for breakfast at Johns Hopkins to make him write with such uncharacteristic pomposity? After all, I would not consider myself to be unimaginable and I have certainly profited from Caird's book!

The book is divided into three parts, the first two parts dealing with language and the third part with *imagery*. The chapter headings give a reasonable indication of the contents: 'The meaning of meaning', 'Opacity, vagueness and ambiguity', 'Simile and metaphor', 'Anthropomorphism', 'The language of myth', 'The language of eschatology' are representative.

Caird disavows any pretensions to being anything other than an amateur linguist (I wonder if Hillers mistook this typical Oxford understatement at its face value?), but in fact he undertakes to examine the language and imagery of the Bible at the most sophisticated level of linguistic investigation, the level of semantics. On the whole his reviewers have failed to take seriously Caird's own delineation of the book as 'a

¹ I cannot refrain from passing on Robert Carroll's comment on the price, taken from his., review in the *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 34, 2 (April 1981) 191:

'Perhaps Duckworth should have retained their originally advertised title of *Apples of Gold*, for it would have been a most appropriate title as an exchange for £18.'

² See, for example, Carroll's review mentioned above, and *ET*, 91 (September 1980) 353-5, Maurice Wiles in *JTS*, 33, 1 (April 1982) 197-9, Delbert Hillers in *The Catholic Quarterly* 44, 1 (January 1982) 118-9, Walter Kaiser in *Trinity Journal*, 2ns, 1 (Spring, 1981) 76-8, Edgar McKnight in *Interpretation*, 36, 1 (January 1982), 81-3 and my own review in *Themelios*, 7, 2 (January 1982), 25.

³ Hillers, art.cit. 118.

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text book of elementary semantics with illustrations from the Old and New Testaments'.⁴

Now semantics is 'the study of meaning'⁵ or, with greater precision if less clarity,

A science dealing with the relations between referents and referends—linguistic symbols (words, expressions, phrases) and the objects or concepts to which they refer—and with the history and changes in the meanings of words.⁶

Classical descriptive linguists such as Bloomfield identified semantics as being central to the entire discipline of linguistics, but in the post-war period the attitude changed. In his introduction to the 1970 *New Horizons in Linguistics* John Lyons commented:

Not long ago many linguists held the view that semantics was not a branch of their science; that linguistics should be restricted to the investigation of 'form' in language... The last few years have seen a very noticeable renewal of interest in semantic theory.⁷

The reason for the period of withdrawal from semantic studies by the pure linguists is partly that 'meaning' itself is difficult to define. Caird's second chapter is headed 'The meaning of meaning', while the first chapter of John Lyons' monumental *Semantics* is (exhibiting the linguist's caution?) 'The meaning of "meaning"'.⁸

But even if we are able to convince ourselves that we know what we are talking about, meaning is often extremely difficult to determine with any objective certainty. The skills required for the elucidation of meaning, say from a passage of the New Testament, are not only linguistic and theological skills. To the question 'What do we mean by the meaning of a word or words?' Wallwork replies:

To answer this with any academic adequacy would require more philosophy and psychology than is here appropriate!⁹

And yet Wallwork goes on, rather as Caird has done, to examine some of the more objective categorising of linguistic forms which, it is hoped, direct us towards an understanding and elucidation of meaning. In the case of Caird's book, avowedly on semantics, we never really come to grips with the central issue, 'How are we to know what this text means?'.

Aspects of linguistics

The title of Caird's book bears with it a warning to the linguist: 'The language and imagery of the Bible'. We are at once reminded of the tiresome fact that human language is a sociological phenomenon and not the activity of a tidily programmed machine.

Language is a *human activity*. Although analogous activities can be identified in animals, birds and insects, there is nothing in those systems

⁴ Caird, *Language* 2.

⁵ John Lyons, *Semantics*, I (Cambridge 1977) 1.

⁶ Pei and Gaynor, *Dictionary of Linguistics* (London 1954).

⁷ Lyons, *New Horizons in Language* (London 1970) 23.

⁸ (Cambridge 1977).

⁹ *Language and Linguistics* (London 1969) 86.

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which have so far been identified and examined that even remotely corresponds to the complexity of human speech.¹⁰ Language is a human *sociological* phenomenon. It is employed in context, and our understanding of the *meaning* of any generated string of coherent word forms is ultimately dependent on our knowledge of the total context within which the string was generated. To use a Pauline figure of speech taken from the language of music, the significance of a trumpet call is not determined by a study of the acoustic properties of airflow through metal tubes, nor even through the study of harmony, but through the sociological study of the use of trumpets in warfare, from which the essential semantic content of the call may be determined.¹¹

The fact is that linguists have learned to incorporate into their theories and notations those prosodic elements of language which can be identified objectively, and even to make a place for collocation and dictionary-entry, but it is much more difficult to find a genuinely objective way of dealing with the ultimately determinative psycho-linguistic and sociological factors which relate to meaning.

Caird does, indeed, venture cautiously into the chilly, choppy waters of *author-intention*, on p.39, but he very quickly returns to the dry ('arid' might be a better word) land and to his labelling of figures of speech. In fact he comes very close to producing a momentous book rather than a merely fascinating book, as he momentarily probes the question of author-intention:

But who in the Bible is the speaker? This question requires an answer at no fewer than three levels: the characters in the narrative, the author and God.¹²

If the book moved on from here to develop the whole issue of hermeneutics at the level of author-intention Caird would have accomplished a tour de force in semantic theory. In fact, the problem is stated at the end of chapter two... and chapter three turns at once to other matters.

And yet Caird is entirely aware of the central problem for every linguist who takes semantics seriously. As Caird admits:

We have no access to the mind of Jeremiah or Paul except through their recorded words. A fortiori, we have no access to the word of God in the Bible except through the words and the minds of those who claim to speak in his name.¹³

If Caird is right, how can anyone write a commentary on any part of the Bible, other than as a generally unhelpful treatise on structure and grammar?

Caird actually proceeds as though the observation that we have no access to the mind of Jeremiah or Paul is unimportant. To use a different metaphor, he correctly identifies the one

¹⁰ cf. R. W. Langacker, *Language and its Structure* (New York, 1973) 12: '...even the most elaborate nonhuman communication systems are strikingly rudimentary alongside the great intricacy and complexity of human language.'

¹¹ See 1 Cor. 14:7-8.

¹² Caird, *Language* 59.

¹³ Caird, *Language* 61, the penultimate sentence of the chapter.

key which will genuinely unlock the semantic door for us, but then turns to a readily available pile of

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quite different keys hoping that one of them, or some combination of them, will take the place of the one essential but unreachable key. And that is my criticism of Caird.

Let me take two examples, one secular, one biblical. Ronald W. Langacker, in a discussion of complex sentences, uses the example

'Pete fainted after the nurse took his temperature.'¹⁴

The sentence is solemnly analysed in terms of its three distinct propositions and in terms of deep and surface structures. But the *meaning* that emerges is entirely pedestrian when compared with my perception that Pete 'swooned' because he had a pretty nurse to take his temperature. It is entirely arguable that *my* perception was entirely erroneous. But that was my perception, and it is difficult to see how a decision could be made between my perception and that of Langacker merely by reference to the linguistic symbols.

Or take John 3:2, 'Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God'. How are we to *know* what Nicodemus *meant* by that? Or what the author of the Fourth Gospel intended us to understand by it? Or why the Holy Spirit directed its inclusion in Scripture?

Now the reasons for our difficulty are readily stated. First of all, we do not know the total objective context of any verbal communication. Secondly, even if we did know the total context we would be unable objectively to identify that element of the totality which was truly relevant to the communication. Thirdly, we could not ask the speaker to enlighten us for he might either be unaware of the real pressures which produced his utterance or be unwilling to confess them even if he knew them. And fourthly, the communication itself is ultimately a subjective sociological phenomenon but it is deceptively clothed in objective and more-or-less readily analysable linguistic symbols (phonemes, morphemes, tagmemes or whatever).

And as a result of our genuine difficulties we might well be tempted to abandon the search for *meaning* and content ourselves with manipulating the more amenable *symbols*. As we have seen, until the late 1960s that is just what the linguists did.

The father of modern linguistics, de Saussure, differentiated between *la parole*, an individual's use of a particular language, his idiolect, *la langue*, the common stock of speech used by all those who are mutually comprehensible (and so 'speak the same language') and *le langage*, the general phenomenon of language.¹⁵ The modern linguist has tended to deal with *la langue*.¹⁶

¹⁴ *Language and its Structure* 109-110.

¹⁵ de Saussure, *Cours de Linguistique générale* (Paris 1949) and see Wallwork, *Language and Linguistics* 116-117.

¹⁶ As de Saussure himself pointed out, *le langage* is in one sense 'inconnaissable', because there is too much of it. *La parole* is very susceptible of analysis in its objective symbolic manifestation, but on the semantic level can be, arguably, just as 'inconnaissable'.

If de Saussure is the father of modern linguistics, Noam Chomsky is the father of generative grammar, an approach to language which has as its characteristic the development of a methodology capable of generating grammatically correct sentences instead of taking grammatically correct sentences and analysing them. One of the more useful of the con-

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cepts that have emerged from generative grammar has been the concept of surface and deep structure, the recognition that the analysis of apparent and surface structures may be inadequate and even misleading. The early forms of generative theory left semantics on one side, but modern theories have repented of this earlier and regrettable lacuna.¹⁷ For Chomsky, in his later theory, 'all the information that is relevant to the semantic interpretation of a sentence is present in its deep structure.'¹⁸

However, Chomsky's theory assumes a dichotomy between syntax and semantics which is difficult to justify philosophically, and makes the deep structure the base, upon which transformational rules act to produce the infinite variety of language. But is Chomsky right in giving to *structure* the fundamental role?

The generative semanticists, a comparatively new school, say no. Dispensing altogether with Chomsky's deep structure, they begin with semantic intention. Transformational rules and phonological rules then can be used to produce the phonological representation of the original semantic intention. Thus *meaning* is not an incidental by-product of the application of transform rules but is the foundation of the entire linguistic process.

But once again we face *practically* an apparently intractable problem: how are we to identify semantic intention?

Humpty Dumpty

Although Caird proclaims himself an amateur linguist, he is able to quote Humpty Dumpty along with the professionals (p.38, p.62, the footnote on p.67, p.83).¹⁹ It happens that Lewis Carroll has, in a striking way, highlighted the problem of the ultimate impenetrability of meaning because of the potential for author obtuseness. After telling Alice of the 364 days annually when she might receive un-birthday presents, Humpty Dumpty continues,

'And only one for birthday presents, you know. There's glory for you!,
'I don't know what you mean by "glory"', Alice said. Humpty Dumpty smiled contemptuously.
'Of course you don't—till I tell you. I meant "there's a nice knock-down argument for you!"'
'But "glory" doesn't mean "a nice knock-down argument" ', Alice objected.
'When I use a word,' Humpty Dumpty said in rather a scornful tone, 'It means just what I choose it to mean - neither more nor less.'

¹⁷ 'When Chomsky first put forward his theory of generative grammar (in a version that has since been substantially modified), he had little to say about the possibility of integrating phonology, morphology, syntax and semantics within a unified model of a language-system.' (John Lyons, *Semantics*, 2, 409).

¹⁸ The whole of John Lyons' section 10.5 of *Semantics* repays careful study, as it outlines the developing awareness of those involved in generative grammar theory of the centrality of semantics to all worthwhile linguistic analysis.

¹⁹ Note Peter Heath's *The Philosopher's Alice* and E. D. Hirsch, *The Aims of Interpretation* (Chicago 1976) ch.4.

But, as Alice herself asks, can that really be the position? Am I free to make words mean what I choose that they shall mean? The answer is not

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quite as simple as we might wish. Humpty Dumpty, from his side of the argument, admits as much:

‘...adjectives you can do what you like with, but not verbs.’

But what about nouns? Or conjunctions? Or prepositions?

Caird does point out the difficulty caused by the general problem of polysemy. He identifies no fewer than nine distinct meanings for the monosyllable ‘myth’, but in doing so lends some support to Humpty Dumpty’s insistence that *he* is master, not the words.

From the other side of the argument it must be said that since language is a sociological phenomenon of communication, Humpty Dumpty can’t be entire and undisputed master or his version of *la parole* will simply provide an unusable (as *communication*) and unique example of *la langue* with a single speaker. To be communication, linguistic forms must be used *either* in a way already familiar to the listener, *or* the meaning must be made clear by the context of its generation or some further means of elucidation must be possible. But of course there is no requirement that the speaker shall provide sufficient clues in his communication to enable future *readers* of the written transcription of his communication to understand it. And once again we are forced back to the task of attempting to determine author-intention, even if the author should happen to be as autocratic as Humpty Dumpty, for the communication always was and remains *his*.

In general, however, a speaker *does* intend to be understood, and so words are used in conventionally accepted syntactical settings and in accordance with conventionally accepted dictionary entries. To use Humpty Dumpty again, ‘glory’ does *not* usually mean ‘a nice knockdown argument’²⁰ (although having used it in that way and having so defined it he could, presumably, continue using it in that way, with Alice, without loss of comprehension).

Even so we must recognize that it may prove exceedingly difficult to tease out the full meaning of a single word. Normally speaking ‘impenetrability’ does *not* mean ‘we’ve had enough of that subject, and it would be just as well if you’d mention what you mean to do next, as I suppose you don’t intend to stop here all the rest of your life’ (Humpty Dumpty again). And yet the single word *inja*, in Amharic, the official language of Ethiopia, may, in a suitable context, mean ‘I hear what you are saying, and you may be right, but just now I’m really not prepared to take any action on the matter.’ And what about some of the Greek particles: *te* in Romans 1:16, for example?²¹

* * * * *

²⁰ Nor, in Biblical Hebrew, does *kabod* mean ‘heavy’. Caird points out that it means ‘glory’ and ‘there is no recorded instance of the literal use of *kabod*’ (76). In Amharic, however, *kebbad* does mean ‘heavy’.

²¹ cf. C. E. B. Cranfield’s *International Critical Commentary on Romans* (Edinburgh 1975) *ad.loc.*, ‘The word *te* is suggestive of the fundamental equality of Jew and Gentile in the face of the gospel (the gospel is the power of God unto salvation for believing Jew and believing Gentile alike).’

The fact is that while we are immensely grateful for Caird's book and his careful and illuminating study of allegory, ambiguity, comparison,

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connotation, eponymy and so on through the alphabet, he does not deal with what he has himself identified as an often-overlooked and vital principal for semantics, *author-intention* and the Bible.

For if author-intention plays a controlling role in interpretation then we have been right all along in insisting that an adequate translation of the Bible, and an adequate exegesis of any biblical passage, and an adequate hermeneutic, all demand more than skill in the biblical languages even if supplemented by skill in the linguistic sciences and a long apprenticeship in theology. They demand that the translator or commentator should know the mind of the author. Not merely the mind of Jeremiah and Paul. But the mind of God. The mind of Christ. The mind of the Spirit. Paul said something to that effect in 1 Corinthians 2!

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