

## ON MEANING

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Having spent some ninety years studying and using different languages, contemplating their word formations with frequently evolving, even unstable meanings, I found corresponding terms in different languages never semantically 100 percent identical, as in mathematics  $x=y$ . I know truly understand what a mysteriously elusive concept meaning is. Elusive is the key to its playful trickery, deluding nature, and effect. Latin *eludere*, with *e*, *ex* (out) plus *ludere* (play literally means to finish playing. It first applied to waves of the sea as they quietly end their choreography playfully reaching the shore. With a direct object it meant to parry a blow, play or dexterously evade and beat an opponent, delude, mock, precisely what meaning constantly achieves. Mean is several words. Some are from Latin, *minari*, to threaten, through French *mener* (to lead), the idea being that threatening someone enables you to make him do what you wish. Thus amenable, with *ad* (to) means easily led to one's own purpose and goal. Amenity, though, is pleasantness, with *a* (without) and *moenia* (walls, ramparts), hence unthreatened.

Let us now focus on to mean and meaning referring to everything that is mental, takes place in the mind, Latin *mens*. Here to mean is from Anglo-Saxon *maenan*, German *meinen*, to have in mind, to intend, related to the Celtic Old Irish *mian* (wish, demand, desire) eventually even coining such terms as the German poetic *Minne* (love) and *minnesinger*, German lyric poets or minstrels of the 12<sup>th</sup> to the 14<sup>th</sup> centuries with love as their theme. Another word of similar semantic content is *sense*. Through French *sentir* and *sens* from the Latin *sentire* (to feel), perceive, realize a truth, hold an opinion, judge, suppose) and Latin *sensus* (sense, feeling, judgment, perception, understanding, meaning of words) English *sense* represents a multitude of mental processes, actions and reactions. It corresponds to German *Sinn* (sense, faculty, mind) and the verb *sinnen* (to think, meditate, muse, reflect, ponder and speculate). Originally, like English *mean*, it meant to desire, strive for, and at the very beginning even motion, journey, path, course, direction toward some goal. French *sens* still deals with all such semantic nuances (faculty of feeling, the five senses, judgment, common sense, meaning, even direction back and forth or up and down. In French *sens unique* is the unique or only direction, in English "one way only."

Meaning plays an ever present, unceasing role in our lives. It is not just present in language, but in all our activities, goals, desires, preferences, dislikes, reasoning, thoughts, absolutely everything. It ends up as some, however elusive, often to one's own self inexplicable meaning, affecting our ensuing actions and reactions. It is also a vacillating, inconstant, perhaps even somewhat uncontrollable mental activity. John Logan wrote a fascinating play *Red* in 2009 about the abstract-impressionist Russian American painter Mark Rothko, born Marcus Rothkowitz (1903-1970). Speaking of meaning and Rothko's own reaction to the label of abstract-impressionist that he was never able to accept it or sympathize with, reflect the brittle, elusive nature thereof. The crux of the matter is that meaning is present and changing not merely in language but in absolutely everything that occurs in everyone's life all the time. Any of us can stand in front of a red painting, a flat red surface, and its meaning shall change in our minds as long as we keep contemplating it, staring at it, affected by our own, peculiar personal memories, associations, any facets of our human experiences.

Alfred Korzybski (1879-1950), a Polish-born American semanticist, propounded what he called General Semantics, an approach to semantics that rejects the Aristotelian language structure with its "is" of identity, as tending to confuse words with the things for which they stand, to see propositions as either right or wrong, and to limit severely the levels of abstractions, individual endless associations that make it practically impossible for any individual mind ever to come up with one final, immutable, permanent

meaning of anything. As Korzybski summed it up in *Science and Sanity: An Introduction to Non-Aristotelian Systems and General Semantics* (1933), “the word is not the thing, the map is not the territory.” Think about it! Nothing in our mental lives is ever fixed, final. Be it love, preferences, likes, dislikes, there is no end to it. Meanings change for every human with every breath and heartbeat. What is mental in the brain might be; all else remains a mystery.