

What is Meaning

READING PASSAGE

You should spend about 20 minutes on **Questions 27-40**, which are based on Reading Passage 3 below.

What is Meaning

—*Why do we respond to words and symbols in the ways we do?*

The end product of education, yours and mine and everybody's, is the total pattern of reactions and possible behaviors we have inside ourselves. If you did not have within yourself, at this moment, the pattern of reactions that we call "the ability to read" you would see here only meaningless black marks on paper. Furthermore, because of the trained patterns of response, you are (or are not) stirred to patriotism by martial music, your feelings of reverence are aroused by symbols of your religion, you listen more respectfully to the health advice of someone who has "MD" after his name than to that of someone who hasn't. What I call here a "pattern of reactions," then, is the sum total of the ways we act in response to events, to words, and to symbols.

Our reaction patterns or our semantic habits, are the internal and most important residue of whatever years of education or miseducation we may have received from: our parents' conduct toward us in childhood as well as their teachings, from the formal education we may have had, from all the lectures we have listened to, from the radio programs and the movies and television shows we have experienced, from all the books and newspapers and comic strips we have read, from the conversations we have had with friends and associates, and from all of our experiences. If, as the result of all these influences that make us what we are, our semantic habits are reasonably similar to those of most people around us, we are regarded as "normal," or perhaps "dull." If our semantic habits are noticeably different from those of others, we are regarded as "individualistic" or "original" or, if the differences are disapproved of or viewed with alarm, as "crazy."

Semantics is sometimes defined in dictionaries as "the science of the meaning of words"—which would not be a bad definition if people didn't assume that the search for the meanings of words begins and ends with looking them up in a dictionary. If one stops to think for a moment, it is clear that to define a word, as a dictionary does, is simply to explain the word with more words. To be thorough about defining, we should next have to define the words used in the definition, then define the words used in defining the words used in the definition and so on. Defining words with more words, in short, gets us at once into what mathematicians call an "infinite regress". Alternatively, it can get us into the kind of run-around we sometimes encounter when we look up "impertinence" and find it defined as "impudence," so we look up "impudence" and find it defined as "impertinence." Yet—and here we come to another common reaction pattern—people often act as if words can be explained fully with more words. To a person who asked for a definition of jazz, Louis

Armstrong is said to have replied, "Man, when you get to ask what it is, you'll never get to know," proving himself to be an intuitive semanticist as well as a great trumpet player.

Semantics, then, does not deal with the "meaning of words" as that expression is commonly understood. P. W. Bridgman, the Nobel Prize winner and physicist, once wrote, "The true meaning of a term is to be found by observing what a man does with it, not by what he says about it." He made an enormous contribution to science by showing that the meaning of a scientific term lies in the operations, the things done, that establish its validity, rather than in verbal definitions.

Here is a simple, everyday kind of example of "operational" definition. If you say, "This table measures six feet in length," you could prove it by taking a foot rule, performing the operation of laying it end to end while counting, "One...two...three...four." But if you say—and revolutionists have started uprisings with just this statement "Man is born free, but everywhere he is in chains!"—what operations could you perform to demonstrate its accuracy or inaccuracy?

But let us carry this suggestion of "operationalism" outside the physical sciences where Bridgman applied it, and observe what "operations" people perform as the result of both the language they use and the language other people use in communicating to them. Here is a personnel manager studying an application blank. He comes to the words "Education: Harvard University," and drops the application blank in the wastebasket (that's the "operation") because, as he would say if you asked him, "I don't like Harvard men." This is an instance of "meaning" at work—but it is not a meaning that can be found in dictionaries.

If I seem to be taking a long time to explain what semantics is about, it is because I am trying, in the course of explanation, to introduce the reader to a certain way of looking at human behavior. I say human responses because, so far as we know, human beings are the only creatures that have, over and above that biological equipment which we have in common with other creatures, the additional capacity for manufacturing symbols and systems of symbols. When we react to a flag, we are not reacting simply to a piece of cloth, but to the meaning with which it has been symbolically endowed. When we react to a word, we are not reacting to a set of sounds, but to the meaning with which that set of sounds has been symbolically endowed.

A basic idea in general semantics, therefore, is that the meaning of words (or other symbols) is not in the words, but in our own semantic reactions. If I were to tell a shockingly obscene story in Arabic or Hindustani or Swahili before an audience that understood only English, no one would blush or be angry; the story would be neither shocking nor obscene-induced, it would not even be a story. Likewise, the value of a dollar bill is not in the bill, but in our social agreement to accept it as a symbol of value. If that agreement were to break down through the collapse of our government, the dollar bill would become only a scrap of paper. We do not understand a dollar bill by staring at it long and hard. We understand it by observing how people act with respect to it. We understand it by understanding the social mechanisms and the loyalties that keep it meaningful. Semantics is therefore a social study, basic to all other social studies.

Questions 1-5

Choose the correct letter, **A**, **B**, **C** or **D**.

Write the correct letter in **27-31** on your answer sheet.

1. What point is made in the first paragraph?
 - A. The aim of education is to teach people to read.
 - B. Everybody has a different pattern of reactions.
 - C. Print only carries meaning to those who have received appropriate ways to respond.
 - D. The writers should make sure their works satisfy a variety of readers.

2. According to the second paragraph, people are judged by
 - A. the level of education.
 - B. the variety of experience.
 - C. how conventional their responses are.
 - D. complex situations.

3. What point is made in the third paragraph?
 - A. Standard ways are incapable of defining words precisely.
 - B. A dictionary is most scientific in defining words.
 - C. A dictionary should define words in as few words as possible.
 - D. Mathematicians could define words accurately.

4. What does the writer suggest by referring to Louis Armstrong?
 - A. He is an expert of language.
 - B. Music and language are similar.
 - C. He provides insights to how words are defined.
 - D. Playing trumpet is easier than defining words.

5. What does the writer intend to show about the example of "personnel manager"?
 - A. Harvard men are not necessarily competitive in the job market.
 - B. Meaning cannot always be shared by others.
 - C. The idea of operationalism does not make much sense outside of physical science.
 - D. Job applicants should take care when filling out application forms.

Questions 6-9

Do the following statements agree with the information given in Reading Passage 3?

In **32-35** on your answer sheet, write

TRUE	if the statement agrees with the information
FALSE	if the statement contradicts the information
NOT GIVEN	If there is no information on this passage

6. _____ Some statements are incapable of being proved or disproved.
7. _____ Meaning that is personal to individuals is less worthy to study than shared meanings.
8. _____ Flags and words are eliciting responses because of the same reason.
9. _____ A story can be entertaining without being understood.

Questions 10-14

Complete each sentence with the correct ending, **A-H**, below.

Write the correct letter, **A-H**, in **36-40** on your answer sheet.

10. _____ A comic strip
11. _____ A dictionary
12. _____ Bridgman
13. _____ A story in a language the audience cannot understand
14. _____ A dollar bill

A	is meaningless.
B	has lasting effects on human behaviors.
C	is a symbol that has lost its meaning.
D	can be understood only in its social context.

E	can provide inadequate explanation of meaning.
F	reflects the variability of human behaviors.
G	emphasizes the importance of analyzing how words are used.
H	suggests that certain types of behaviors carry more meanings than others.

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