MEANING AND INTERPRETATION IN HISTORY

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In the past century, as is well known, there has been constant debate over the proper methodology in history. One side insists that methodologically history is akin to the physical sciences in that it must strive to formulate law-like generalizations and then test them empirically. The other side insists that the historian must strive to interpret and understand historical events, and that law-like generalizations have little or no central role in an interpretation. Just what an interpretation consists in, however, is not usually made very clear. In this paper I shall examine an aspect of the traditional notion of historical interpretation and try to clarify some of its presuppositions.

I would like to focus on the relation between two important aspects of an interpretation as conceived by the classical interpretationists, Dilthey, Croce, and Collingwood. Despite their differences, all of these authors agree that:

1) Interpretations have to do with meanings—it is through interpretation that we come to know meanings.

2) Interpretation involves something like re-enacting or re-living in one’s imagination the historical moment to be interpreted.

Is there any relation between these theses? The interpretationists usually write as if these are two closely related points. I shall argue that there is a clear relationship between the two and a role for re-enactment in historical methodology only if one accepts certain theories of meaning. However, the sense of re-enactment varies depending on what theory of meaning is held.

I shall first claim that there are at least two theories of meaning that can provide motivation for a re-enactment methodology of history. I shall then argue that only one of these two, the translationist theory of meaning, gives us a plausible understanding of such re-enactment.

Let us begin with the notion of meaning. Historians are concerned with the meanings of many kinds of things. They must worry about the meanings of their evidential materials, whether documents or artifacts or natural objects, and they must worry about the meanings of their investigative objects, which I take to be primarily the activities of historical persons and societies. Thus historians utilize a very broad conception of meaning, so broad that no one really seems to have gotten a good grip on the concept.
I think we can minimize this problem, however, by focusing on the notion of linguistic meaning. It seems to be a special case of the kind of meaning historians are concerned with, and we can call upon several familiar attempts to explain linguistic meaning to help us understand what might be involved in the broader conception.

The theory of meaning has been an object of increasingly intense concern in the twentieth century, and approaches to specifying the nature of meaning have multiplied. Many elementary texts discuss at least the following approaches:

1) The referential theory: the meaning of a word is what it refers to.
2) The behavioral theory: the meaning of a word is the set of stimulus-response connections in which it occurs.
3) The ideational theory: the meaning of a word is the idea which it expresses, where ideas are entities in or modifications of minds.
4) The translation theory: the meaning of a word is the role it plays, its use, in some language, and is specified by giving another word or phrase in that or another language which plays a similar role.¹

These are all approaches to specifying what kind of thing a meaning is, and each has methodological consequences for the cognition of meaning.

Let us for the moment disregard questions about the relative adequacy of

¹. For similar lists and more thorough discussion, see W. Alston, The Philosophy of Language (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1964); and J. D. Fodor, Semantics: Theories of Meaning in Generative Grammar (New York, 1977). F. R. Palmer, Semantics (Cambridge, 1976), also eventually discusses all of these alternatives.

The referential theory of meaning is virtually a caricature which has probably never been seriously held. There are traces of it in Plato's Cratylus, perhaps, or in some pre-Socratic thought, but one could as well argue that the theory of meaning really begins only once reference and meaning have been distinguished. (For some, e.g., W. V. Quine, meaning is a hopelessly confused notion, though reference supposedly is not, and the theory of meaning should really end with the distinction between meaning and reference. See Quine, From a Logical Point of View (Cambridge, Mass., 1964).)

The behavioral theory is perhaps best found in B. F. Skinner, Verbal Behavior (New York, 1957); and L. Bloomfield, Language (New York, 1933).

The ideational theory goes back at least to Locke and dominates philosophical thinking about meaning throughout the modern period. In addition to the references cited above, one can also look at (among a plethora of others) Ian Hacking, Why Does Language Matter to Philosophy? (Cambridge, England, 1975).

Under the rubric “translation theory” I have lumped together an otherwise disparate set of attempts to explicate the notion of meaning. These related approaches have also been called “use theories” (see Fodor, Semantics). Pure translationism is a theory in formal semantics in which the translation relation is taken as the fundamental primitive of the system. But my use of the “translationist theory of meaning” is extended to include theorists such as some Wittgensteinians who hold that meaning is use, or, such as Sellars, who holds that meaning is functional classification. For the purposes of my argument, these are close enough to be considered variants on a common theme. A finer-grained analysis might well have to worry over the details of these various theories.

The list of approaches to (or “theories” of) meaning is partial: it is not clear, for instance, that Frege would fit into any of these categories. Furthermore, since the early 1960s, when post-Chomsky linguistics began devoting attention to semantics, the field has been developing (or at least changing) rapidly. That philosophers of history would do well to follow this new field is a corollary of my argument in this paper.
these theories. For which of these theories does it make some sense to think
that re-enactment is the appropriate method by which to come to know a
meaning? The referential theory of meaning seems clearly not to support a re-
enactment methodology. To discover a meaning, according to this theory, one
has to find out what the word refers to, not re-live the experience behind it.
That this theory of linguistic meaning is clearly not what a re-enactment
theorist has in mind comes as a relief, for the theory is seriously flawed in its
own right (what do such words as "when," "although," or "not" refer to?) and
the adoption of such a theory would also make it hard to understand in what
the meaning of an action or cultural event could consist.

Nor does the behavioral theory hold much promise. In order to understand
stimulus-response connections, it is not necessary to re-enact them. They are
best established by public observation and generalization; indeed, that is what
initially attracted behaviorists to such connections.

The ideational theory, however, clearly does point to the possibility of
knowing meanings by re-enactment. If the meaning a word possesses is the
idea in the mind of the user, then knowing what his words mean must be a
matter of knowing the ideas that are in his mind. It does not follow immediate-
ly that understanding someone's meaning entails rethinking his thoughts, but
since we often know our own ideas simply by having them (it is thought), we
have the best grip on what someone else means when we have his very ideas.

Adopting the ideational theory of meaning would provide motivation for a
re-enactment methodology, and we can make sense out of a number of things
that re-enactment theorists such as Collingwood say about the nature of inter-
pretation and history if we attribute to them an ideational theory of meaning.
Thus, it might be held that Collingwood believed that the meaning of an action
was the thought of the agent, and since history is the knowledge of the mean-
ings of actions, history would be, as Collingwood says, the history of
thought.²

We seem to have our connection between meaning and re-enactment, but it
is a troublesome one. First of all, the ideational theory of linguistic meaning is
a bad one, and its extension to action is no improvement. The basic problem is
that we have no independent access to the ideas of our fellows. If in order to
understand their words or actions we must know what their ideas are, how are
we to ascertain the latter? Since we have no direct access to their ideas, we can
only come to know them through words or actions. Therefore, coming to
know others' ideas presupposes understanding their words or actions. In
general, using ideas to explain meanings is unprofitable because we cannot pry
the two far enough apart: we can only pick out ideas by (sometimes surrep-
titiously) mentioning meanings.³

³. For further discussion of the ideational theory of linguistic meaning, see the works by
Alston, Palmer, and Fodor above cited.
Second, although the interpretationists say a good deal that sounds as if they adopt an ideational theory, other things they say discourage such an interpretation. In the standard theory of ideas, ideas are independent entities in the mind which play a causal role in action and verbal behavior. Each person has direct knowledge of his or her own ideas but must infer the existence of ideas in other people. But Collingwood, for instance, would deny that we know someone else's ideas by a process of inductive inference. Collingwood did not take thought to be independent of action, connected with action by a causal link; rather, he held that thought and overt action were related as inside and outside. The inner-outer relation is much closer than a causal relation—it is a relation of expression.

But Collingwood himself did not fully escape the spell of the ideational theory either. By blurring the distinction between a particular act of thought and the content it can share with other acts of thought, and then requiring that the historian recreate the very act of thought in question, Collingwood still took understanding another person to be a matter of possessing the same idea. This inclination toward a poor theory of meaning may account for many of the objections that have been leveled at the interpretationists and also accounts for the seeming implausibility of their re-enactment methodology. If the ideational theory of meaning were the sole theory of meaning which could support or motivate a re-enactment epistemology, there would be good reason for thinking that re-enactment is at best a heuristic device in historical or sociological explanation. But it is clear that there are some latter-day interpretationists, such as Peter Winch, who would disavow the ideational theory of meaning. These thinkers take as their model our last theory of meaning, the translationist theory of linguistic meaning. How does this theory afford motivation or support for a re-enactment methodology of history?

II

The translationist theory of meaning takes as primitive our ability to recognize synonymy relations between linguistic episodes, whether within one and the

4. Dilthey, on the other hand, explicitly calls the process of understanding inductive. See Wilhelm Dilthey, *Gesammelte Schriften* (Leipzig and Berlin, 1927), VII, 210–213.

5. For some interpretations of Collingwood that take him to be talking about direct insight into or intuition of the minds of others, see W. H. Walsh, "R. G. Collingwood's Philosophy of History," *Philosophy* 22 (1947), 154–158; and P. L. Gardiner, "The Objects of Historical Knowledge," *Philosophy* 27 (1952), 211–220. But for an overview of the question of Collingwood's notion of re-enactment, an attack on intuitionist readings of it, and a defense of it as a serious methodology, see Margit Hurup Nielsen, "Re-enactment and Reconstruction in Collingwood's Philosophy of History," *History and Theory* 20 (1981), 1–31.

same language or across languages. To understand the meaning of something is to be able to give or recognize a synonymous expression in one's background language.

Proponents of the other theories we have looked at tried to eliminate entirely the notion of meaning in favor of some other—and, they hoped—better understood, notion. The translationists abandon such reductionist tendencies and recognize the autonomy of meaning. Meaningfulness, whether in words or actions, is an irreducible property of items in certain highly complex, rule-governed systems of activities. Since items in such systems are meaningful only through their participation (potential or actual) in a system, their meanings cannot be specified apart from specifying their roles in the system. Because of the extreme complexity of the systems involved it is often extremely difficult, perhaps impossible, to describe an item's role in a system; however, it is possible, and often easy, to point to another item with a more or less equivalent role either in the same system or a different, but familiar system. Thus we specify the meaning of “brother” either by giving another string in English, for example “male sibling,” or, if our audience is more familiar with another language, such as German, an equivalent string in that language, “bruder.”

We can extend the translationist theory to the meanings of actions by saying that understanding the meaning of an action is a matter of being able to recognize the appropriately “synonymous” or relevantly similar action in one's background society. (This is obviously a more problematic notion than that of the already problematic ability to recognize linguistic synonymies.)

The translationist theory of meaning provides motivation for something like a re-enactment epistemology. It looks to the standard usage of words and phrases, which usage is governed by a complex system of rules. One of the major problems in the translationist approach is the specification of which of the many rules governing the uses of words are germane to their linguistic meaning. Indeed, in the translation of a complex linguistic object (like, say, Crime and Punishment) it is not clear that there is any specific limit to the sets of rules governing word usage which are relevant to the task. In order to translate such a work even competently, the translator must possess an incredibly large stock of general background knowledge about the culture within which the book was formed and about the culture for which the translation is intended. 7 Without a wide-ranging knowledge of standard greetings, rules of address, and so on, for instance, the translator will probably mislead some of his readers by making a greeting too strong or too cool.

Translators must employ considerable social and historical knowledge if they are to do their job well. The translator, however, is not concerned with imparting that knowledge to the reader in any explicit form. Historians, on the

7. For discussions of the breadth of possibly relevant factors, see John Haugeland, “Understanding Natural Language,” Journal of Philosophy 76 (1979), 619–632. Douglas R. Hofstadter's brief discussion in Godel, Escher, Bach (New York, 1979), 372–380, very clearly points out some of the difficulties in translation. Palmer, Semantics, also emphasizes that there can be no clear boundary drawn between our knowledge of meanings and our knowledge of the world.
other hand, are concerned not only with making the historical action under consideration intelligible to their readers, but also imparting the general social knowledge which they employ in rendering the action intelligible. Historians need to justify their interpretations much more thoroughly than translators usually do. Reading history can be like reading a fairly heavily annotated translation in which the translator wants to inform the reader of the principles of the translation as well as the principles upon which the book is constructed. Translation, we may say, is methodologically opaque, whereas history or sociological interpretation is (or should be) methodologically transparent.8

When considering the methodology of translation, there is often talk of the re-creation of the original work by the translator. One of the reasons for such talk is immediately clear: translation is a rule-governed activity, yet there is no codified set of rules which, when conscientiously applied, will guarantee a good translation as a result. If the translation is to live up to the original work, the translator must work creatively, refusing any standard recipe for translation. The best instructions we can come up with are that the translator is to recreate the work at hand; almost any other instruction runs the risk of being too definite and thus stifling the translator. Good translators must be sensitive and resourceful speakers of the language into which they are translating. Since we cannot give a usable set of instructions which anyone could employ to come up with a good translation, we can only admonish translators to be as painstaking as authors, writing in the new language as they imagine the original authors would have. This form of hineinleben is rather unobjectionable, for it simply acknowledges the limitations on the explicitness of the methodology of translation.

III

The historian, if one adopts the translation theory of meaning, is in a similar situation. In a confrontation with historical evidence there is no specific limitation on the kind of knowledge that may be relevant to understanding it. And there is also no specific set of rules to follow in order to interpret an historical event successfully. As in natural language translation, there is no algorithm for historical interpretation at present, nor does it seem that there will be. Confronted with an historical event or document the historian must be alert to all the possible significances it may possess. In deciding which of the possible meanings to assign to the event or document historians can follow little better advice than to insert themselves imaginatively into the situation and let their ability to understand their contemporary events and other historical events

8. If interpretation in history is basically of a kind with translation, then if Quine and other philosophers of language are right, there is an interesting corollary: the basic unit of historical investigation is not the individual event, but must be a much larger chunk, perhaps something like a period. For just as we have access to the meaning of an individual sentence only through our access to a fairly large fragment of the language of which it is an instance, so we could discern the meaning of a particular event only by developing an interpretation of the period in which it occurs.
come to bear upon the events of the past. This would surely be something like re-enactment.

We must not forget either that the classical interpretationists all called for re-enactment in imagination. While there are groups who every year conscientiously re-enact, for example, Washington's crossing the Delaware, doing this sort of re-enactment is not doing history. The point is not simply to have the same sorts of experiences the historical figures had. The call for re-enactment in imagination shows, I think, that our cognitive powers, not our sensory powers, are being called upon. Just as we do not actually have to hear a sentence to understand it, we need not experience a certain situation to understand it. But just as some otherwise strange sentences can be made perfectly intelligible by imagining an appropriate context for them, the activities of historical subjects can be made intelligible by "imagining" (but an imagining now constrained by other evidence) the appropriate context.

We could get rid of the call for re-enactment if there were well-understood rules governing the understanding of one's contemporaries, just as we could forego the invocation of re-creation in translation if we could substitute well-codified systems of rules which capture the abilities to understand the two natural languages. There may be such rules, though we have every good reason for thinking that the particular rules must be in steady flux as the language and the contemporary scene change. But in any case we have no such rules, and little hope of obtaining them. The general instruction to re-create may be the only thing we can say once the more particular precepts have been exhausted. And we need to say more than those particular methodological precepts. They are only precepts and do not exhaust the field nor guarantee a good product.

An old objection to the interpretationists is that their methodology requires some mysterious faculty of insight through re-enactment in order to explain our ability to do history. If an interpretationist holds an ideational theory of meaning, perhaps "insight" is necessary, since we have no Cartesian "direct access" into the minds of others. But on the translationist theory the only sense in which insight is demanded is the sense in which we have an ability of which we do not have a reflective understanding, an ability to recognize "synonymous" actions. This is no more occult than our ability to recognize synonymous linguistic expressions without using explicit rules. Thus it might be held that re-enactment is not in principle essential to the translationist, for if we had a complete codification of the set of rules and practices which bestow meaning upon an action, we should only have to apply them in a straightforward manner. In such a situation, re-enactment would be no more essential to the historian than it is to the engineer or mathematician. If such a codification of social rules and practices is possible in principle, then re-enactment is dispensable in principle.

A translationist theory of meaning, then, motivates a re-enactment epistemology. But it does so without also supporting a re-enactment metaphysics. It is surely one of the less plausible implications of Croce's position, for instance, that history exists only in someone's present re-enactment of and concern with the past. Such a re-enactment metaphysics of history seems to point again
toward the ideational theory of meaning, for then the doing of history is the
having of certain thoughts or ideas, and the written history text could be
nothing more than an occasion or incitement to re-enact the history.

In the translationist theory the written history text is the translation of the
historical action into contemporary terms and remains accomplished history as
long as the contemporary situation itself hasn't appreciably changed. Written
history is not itself a re-enactment of the historical action, but is the product of
a process in which, owing to the complexity of considerations that could be
relevant, the best general instruction is to pretend to live through the event and
bring to bear upon it all the uncodifiable resources used in everyday life as well
as all the knowledge of the period produced by long study to make sense of it.
Just as one learns a language best by immersing oneself in it, the historian ac­
quires the best understanding of a period by immersing himself in his evidence.

Written history usually strives to be methodologically transparent; that is, it
seeks to describe expressly all the factors held to be important for understand­
ing the subject matter. This is clearly overstated. The historian could no
more state all the relevant factors than he could expressly formulate the rules
he employs in interpreting them. However, the historian can and must rely on
the fact that his readers also possess the skills of interpreting meaningful ac­
tion. Where the rules generating the meaning of an action have not changed
over time, a relatively simple description of the action will suffice for the reader
to understand it; but the historian must have a keen sense of what his readers
will understand without further ado and what must be spelled out in more
detail because “the rules have changed.” The methodological transparency of
historical writing is therefore limited to those aspects of the historical event
which would otherwise escape or be falsified by the (methodologically opaque)
interpretative skills of the reader.

There is one more quick and easy advantage in holding the translationist
theory of meaning to be fundamental to interpretation in history. If meanings
are specified by comparison with the background language or social practices
of the investigator, it is easily understandable that history would need to be
rewritten every so often. For as the background conditions which historians
use as their foils change, a particular version of an historical event loses some
of its relevance and begins to seem more disjointed or unhelpful than it had.
This is not to say that great pieces of the art of historical writing are necessarily
doomed to obsolescence, any more than the fact that we now read Chaucer in

9. There is an obvious complication: historians do not translate actions in the sense of produc­
ing something of the same kind. Historians produce descriptions of actions, not the actions
themselves. I return to this briefly below.

10. If, for instance, a set of events were crucially influenced by a now little-known debate in
Christian theology, the historian would have to bring this fact expressly before his readers. A
translator of literature influenced by such a debate would not have to mention the debate, though
he would have to take it into account. If the literary translator mentions the debate, it will be out­
side the framework of the translation proper, in a footnote, an introduction, or a separate piece of
literary criticism. At that point, however, the translator is doing literary history.
translation or Shakespeare in more or less heavily annotated editions has con­demned them to the literary scrap heap. Gibbon and Motley are still worth reading—but today we learn almost as much about the times in which they wrote as about the times of which they wrote. The power of their explanations and interpretations has begun to fade, or at least their explanations and interpre­tations need supplementation by making explicit some of the assumptions common to their social environments; but this is precisely what we should ex­pect, given the translationist theory. Chapman's translation of Homer is still powerful, but not the final word in Homeric translation. So it is also with Gib­bon. And the point is that there never will be a final word.

IV

I would like to conclude by pointing out the traps into which this approach to understanding historical understanding may fall. I have counted on an analogy between the notion of a linguistic meaning and that of the meaning of an ac­tion, but there are definite limitations to how far we can take this analogy. Charles Taylor defends this analogy in his paper "Interpretation and the Sciences of Man," but he notes that there is at least the difference between the two notions that linguistic entities often refer to a world beyond themselves, while there seems nothing comparable to the notion of reference that applies to actions per se. Linguistic meaning may not be reducible to reference, but reference is clearly an important aspect of the semantics of language.

I think we can go even further than this in pointing to the disanalogies. First, the basic elements of language, words, constitute a fairly well-defined (though changing) set of fairly well-individuated items. For example, we know well enough what is involved in talking about the German vocabulary, and good dictionaries which specify it are not hard to find. I do not believe that there is a similarly well-defined set of basic and meaningful actions out of which, by some compositional principles, larger units of meaningful action can be built.

11. Charles Taylor, "Interpretation and the Science of Man."

12. This is a crude oversimplification. Everyone agrees that the basic units of linguistic meaning are called "morphemes," but just how to identify the morphemes of a language is an unsolved puzzle. It is clear that they cannot be straightforwardly identified with the words of the language. The situation in linguistics is therefore less rosy than I have painted it here. For more discussion see the books by Fodor and Palmer cited in footnote 1.

13. In action theory the notion of a basic action seems to have stemmed from the desire to draw some final boundary between those movements explainable solely in the terms of the physical sciences and those (meaningful actions) which must be explained through the use of some form of explanation not available to the physical sciences (rational explanation). See Readings in the Theory of Action, ed. Norman Care and Charles Landesman (Bloomington, Ind., 1968); The Nature of Human Action, ed. Myles Brand (Glencov, Ill., 1970); and Alvin Goldman, A Theory of Human Action (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1970). The problem was not, then, originally construed in terms of the epistemology of meanings. But it turns out to be devilishly hard, if not impossible, to isolate such basic actions; see Annette Baier, "The Search for Basic Actions," American Philosophical Quarterly 8 (1971), 161-170.
There are two problems here: what would count as a basic action is less clear than what counts as a basic unit of linguistic meaning. And what might be the principles of composition whereby larger items of meaningful action can be constructed out of simpler, more basic elements, is even less clear. It would seem that there must be something like such a set of principles in order to explain our ability to recognize the meanings of actions which we have never before encountered. Linguistic principles must indeed be a subset of these principles, since language is one form of meaningful action, but there must be other, less specific principles, for we can often easily discern the meaning of actions performed by people who speak a different language. As we increase the distance from our background culture, however, it becomes more and more difficult to recognize the meanings of even some of the more common actions.

Another obvious disanalogy between actions and linguistic items is that the relation which I have taken here to be fundamental to the notion of linguistic meaning, translation, obtains between linguistic items. One linguistic item is the translation of another. While we could construct a relation between actions such that one is something like a translation of the other, this is not what the historian tries to do, for the historian does not want to construct a set of actions, but write a text. Therefore, the historian is necessarily concerned with the description of actions, and a full and proper treatment of the historian’s task would have to treat the relation between action and description—a complex topic I have simply ignored.

An expanded treatment taking the relation between action and description into account would have to distinguish more clearly between the original action, a later re-staging of it, its re-enactment in imagination, and a written historical description of it. Perhaps the historian aims at telling us under what description a certain action was performed, in which case he or she need only figure out what the agent had in mind and translate that description for us. But I doubt that this is all historians aim to do; sometimes they want to tell us that the action performed did not satisfy the description the agent had in mind. Sometimes, as in the case of a revolution, there may not be any agents who understood what they were doing in the broader context.

Despite these disanalogies, linguistic meaning is still a special case of the meaning of actions. It may be a special enough case that there are some signifi-

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When the question turns to the notion of understanding the meaning of actions, basic actions return to haunt us, for it has been an axiom of contemporary linguistics and philosophy that in order to account for the potential infinity of meaningful expressions, meanings must be generated by recursive rules operating on a finite set of primitive elements. This can be easily generalized to include the meaning of actions as well. This point of view is taken to heart most strictly in work on artificial intelligence. See, for example, Roger C. Schank and Robert P. Abelson, *Scripts, Plans, Goals, and Understanding: An Inquiry into Human Knowledge Structures* (Hillsdale, N.J., 1977).

I do not see that it will be any easier to come up with a clear set of basic or primitive actions than it was for the original basic action theorists. Exactly what conclusion we should draw from this is hard to say. I would suppose that the notion of basicness must be relativized to contexts; but how the story then continues is up for grabs.
cant differences in appropriate methodology or resulting theory; but it is crucial to a consistent naturalism to understand language as a special form of human activity. Nothing in these disanalogies mandates construing the relation otherwise.

In the search for meanings the historian is often worse off than the jungle anthropologist confronting an unfamiliar culture, since he or she often cannot, in the very nature of things, interact with the agents in question (except in special cases), pose them questions, and evaluate their responses; but I take it that this is merely a methodological disadvantage, not fodder for the skeptic. History is open to all the indeterminacy that translation is—but it seems that any form of inquiry may be open to such indeterminacy, so nothing particular seems to follow for historians, except that their task is difficult. But if my argument here is right, they at least do not need some mysterious ability to intuit the past through an occult reliving of it.

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14. For an influential set of reflections on the plight of the anthropologist confronting an entirely new language and culture, see W. V. Quine, *Word and Object* (Cambridge, Mass., 1964); and the voluminous literature that developed in response, for example *Words and Objections*, ed. D. Davidson and J. Hintikka (Dordrecht, 1969).