

Form and Meaning in Contextualization

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In recent years in missions, there has been much debate over the nature of Bible translation, the meaning of rituals such as birth and funeral rites, and the limits of contextualization. Behind these disparate agendas lies a common set of questions: **what is the nature of signs and sign systems**, such as human languages, art, music, rituals and festivals; and **how can we as Christians use these systems to proclaim the Gospel meaningfully and accurately?**

A discussion on the nature of **signs and symbols** may appear to be an esoteric topic for us in missions, but it is urgently needed because our views of the nature of signs determines our positions on the translation and interpretation of the Bible, on the nature of cross-cultural communication, on contextualization and on local theologizing.

Unfortunately we are often unaware of our views on signs. We pick them up implicitly in our reading, and do not stop to examine them. It is the unexamined nature of our views that is so damaging. I would like to examine some of these deep assumptions so that we can examine them and their effects on missions.

THEORIES OF SIGNS IN MODERN MISSION HISTORY

The history of the modern mission movement coincides with the history of Western science. It should not surprise us, therefore, that Western missions in the past was deeply influenced by its philosophical underpinnings. We need, therefore, to examine how scientists, especially linguists, looked at signs.

By signs, we mean things which, in some sense, signify or stand for other things. For example, words such as "tree" stand for realities in nature. Bells may mark the beginning of church. There are several types of signs, such as symbols, icons and indices, but our discussion is of a general nature, and we need not differentiate between them. By semiotics we mean the study of how signs convey meanings.

Era of Scientific Positivism

The nineteenth century was characterized by the emergence of science, and of positivism as the dominant epistemology underlying science. In positivism, human knowledge -- particularly scientific knowledge -- was seen as true in a direct, literal sense. By means of careful observation the scientist could see reality as it really is. There was a direct, one-to-one correspondence between scientific statements and reality.

This meant that sign systems had to encode knowledge accurately, and without loss of meaning. The model here was mathematics. Following the 16th century when modern mathematics developed out of Babylonian and Indian origins, scientists were astonished at their ability to predict natural phenomena in mathematical terms. The two seemed to be one. One could, for example, make a simple equation -- namely $a = 1/2 gt^2$ -- to measure exactly how fast any object accelerates in a vacuum on earth. Similarly, $E = MC^2$ gives us the amount of energy is produced when any matter is converted in energy. The experimental results fit mathematical equations so closely that many scientists thought of order in the world was a mathematical order.

But mathematics was a limited sign system, and scientists needed a precise language to describe the world. Ordinary languages are too ambiguous, sloppy and changing. Consequently, scientists such as Carnap from the Vienna Circle, and Braithwaite sought to create an exact

spoken language that could accurately capture the nature of reality.

Scientific words, carefully defined, were thought to have correspond directly to empirical realities. There are, for example, there are real "cows" and "horses" and they are really different from each other. Similarly, there are different categories of colors in nature; namely "red," "yellow," "blue" and so on.

In science, this search for an exact language corresponding to nature led positivists to reject all discussion of morals, metaphysics, and supernatural realities as nonsense because these cannot be seen or measured.

One characteristic of this view of signs is its strong affirmation of **truth**. Scientists were looking for universal truth about nature, and meaning and truth lay in the real, external world itself. Our minds only reflect that truth through scientific discovery.

A second characteristic is that communication is measured by what is said or transmitted. It is **sender oriented** communication.

This positivistic view of signs influenced Christianity in the west. Theologians sought precise terms to convey the truths of Scripture, and many in the church measured orthodoxy by the use of the right words.

Missions, too, was influenced by this view of signs. Bible translation was seen as the accurate translation of words from one language to another. The assumption was that there are words in all languages that correspond closely with one another. For example, the word "tree" had its correspondence in Telugu, "chetu". Because words were thought to have meaning in themselves, literal word-by-word translations were thought to communicate the biblical message accurately to readers in other cultures.

In evangelism and teaching, an emphasis was placed on accurate, rationally developed argument. Communication was measured by what was transmitted: by number of sermons preached, hours of radio broadcast, and quantity of tracts and Bibles distributed.

In contextualization, it was assumed that the signs in other cultures, such as drama, drums, bowing and music, were inherently tied to their pagan meanings, and therefore could not be used by Christians. This led to a widespread rejection of local signs, and the importation of western Christian ones. The result was a **non-contextualized approach** to missions.

The Era of Instrumentalism [Or Pragmatism].

In the mid-nineteenth century, the methods of science were turned to the examination of languages, and the discipline of linguistics was born.

One of the 'fathers' was **Wilhelm von Humboldt**, a German scholar. In his study of languages, Humboldt made a distinction between their "inner" and "outer" dimensions. The former was mental concepts, and the latter the signal--such as the spoken or written word, an arrow and a bell--used to communicate the concepts.

Humboldt's leading student was **Ferdinand de Saussure**, a Swiss linguist. He took Humboldt's distinction of inner and outer and transformed them into the "form" and "meaning" of a sign. This led to a diadic view of signs: they had two parts - one exterior and experienceable, and the other interior and subjective.

Saussure raised the question, what is the relationship between forms and meanings, and came to the conclusion that it was 'arbitrary'. In other words, there are no links between them other than the conventionality of human culture. We in English could just as easily call a "tree" a "bork." Meanings are therefore wholly subjective ideas in the heads of individual

persons.

If this is true, than an accurate literal translation from one culture to another does not guarantee the preservation of the meaning. Consequently, we must measure communication not by what is sent by the speaker, but what is understood by the listener. In other words, we must stress 'receptor oriented' communication.

The further study of languages and their relationship to the cultures in which they are embedded led linguists such as Benjamin Whorf and Edward Sapir to conclude that languages are largely products of worldviews, and that they are largely incommensurable. In other words, speakers of one language can never really understand speakers of another.

This led in anthropology to the field of ethnoscience: and such areas as ethnosemantics, ethnomethodology, ethnophilosophy, and ethnotheology. In these knowledge and truth are measured largely in **emic** terms--in terms of what the people think and believe. There is little room for outside **etic** or scientific analyses. These are branded as colonial and ethnocentric.

Distinguishing between form and meaning in symbols was an important corrective to the positivist view of signs. First, it showed us that there is an important subjective dimension to human knowledge. People are not just passive mirrors of the world around them. Moreover, sender oriented communication does not guarantee that the people understand the message accurately. We cannot take the communication of meaning for granted. We must examine what people hear, and how they understand the message.

Second, the distinction made us aware of how deeply culture shapes languages. They are not simply make denotative statements about reality. They are full of feelings, value judgments,

illusions to other things, and other connotative information. Language, in other words, is not surface and flat like mathematics. It is multivocal and rich, and it is this that makes language so powerful. It can never be reduced to mathematical simplicity.

Third, the separation of form from meaning enabled us to think of giving new meanings to old forms when we seek to change cultures.

The impact of Saussurian linguistics on Bible translation was profound. It introduced the theory of 'Dynamic Equivalent' translations in which forms are changed to preserve meanings in crossing cultural boundaries. In societies where there is no 'snow,' we are justified in translating it as 'milk'. Similarly, the statement that "a man who has put his hand to the plow should not look back" can be translated among the Wanana of Panama, who have no agriculture, as "a man who has put his hand to the pole [to canoe up river] should not look back [for it will cause him to overturn the boat]."

In the area of contextualization the separation of form and meaning has led to radical contextualization. It is believed that old forms can be preserved so long as they are given new meanings. And new meanings here is changes in the mind of the actor - not necessary in the minds of the others in his/her community, or changes in his/her life. In its extreme forms, this means a Muslim convert can continue to go to the Mosque and bow towards Mecca so long as he worships "Jesus" instead of "Muhammed."

In terms of Christian growth, the division led to a stress on an individual, inner spirituality. The Christian life has to do with what goes on inside people, not with what they do, or what they do in community.

This separation of form and meaning has some serious consequences. First, it reduces all meaning to subjective mental images. There is no meaning in the media of communication, whether this be words, behavior, music, art or drama. Nor is there an objective reference against which we can test our ideas. Consequently, there is no way to know what the receptors think, or to test whether they have understood the message as we intended them to. In short, accurate communication is almost impossible.

A second consequence is relativism. If truth is subjective and there is no way to test its objectively, and if accurate communication is impossible, we are left in our own mental prisons. Everyone is right for themselves in their interpretation of messages, and of the external world. There is no basis for judging them or their cultures. All cultures are equally good.

A third result is overcontextualization. Conversion involves simply changing the mental images associated with external behaviors. There is no radical call challenging societies and cultures to be transformed. Sin is seen in individual acts, not in human social and cultural systems.

This view takes a too simple view of culture. To confine meaning to mental images is to overlook the fact that in most societies meaning is seen in behavior, particularly corporate behavior. As Mary Douglas points out, most tribals see deep meaning in corporate dances and rituals that express deep meanings which transcend ordinary words.

This view is also asocial and ahistorical in nature. It studies signs as these are used by individuals in the present moment. It overlooks the fact that signs are created by communities and that these communities, not the individuals, ultimately define their meanings. It also overlooks the fact that signs have histories. What starts as a social convention today, becomes tradition

tomorrow, and cannot easily be reinterpreted. Without such historical continuity, it would be impossible for people to pass on their culture from one generation to the next, or to preserve the gospel over time.

Finally, we should note that the divorce between form and meaning is a part of the modern, individualistic worldview. As Mary Douglas points out, people in traditional societies link meaning with behavior. The tribal Christian does not say, "I got to church in order to worship." Rather he/she says, "In going to church I am worshipping. The very fact that I get up early to go to church, that I wash and dress in my best to come into God's presence, and that I bow and kneel before him are themselves worship. If for no other reason, we need to reexamine our separation of signs into forms and meanings in order to communicate to people who make no such division.

Era of Critical Realism

It was Charles Peirce, an American mathematician and linguist, who proposed a third way of looking at signs. He rejected the dualism of form and meaning introduced by Humboldt and Saussure, and introduced a triadic view of signs. Each sign, he said, had 1) an exterior form (the signifier; eg. the spoken or written word, the sound of a bell, an arrow); 2) a mental concept or image (the signified), and 3) the reality the sign refers to (the significatum). A sign is the linking of these three elements together. For example, the word 'tree' invokes a mental image of a tree, and refers to real trees in the forest. In other words, a sign is the linking of mental images to realities by means of words, gestures, sounds and images.

Let us examine this triadic nature of signs more closely. A photograph is a picture of a

real person, and it evokes images and memories of that person in our mind when we see the picture, even though that person is not present. The picture thus links our mental image to a real person. Similarly, we can manipulate words tied to realities to imagine new realities. For instance, we have seen the color purple and we have seen cows. We can combine the two symbols in our mind and imagine purple cows. We can then spray paint a cow purple if we wish.

Signs link our mental images to the external world. They have, therefore, both a subjective dimension to them (the image in our mind) and an objective dimension to them (the real trees to which we are referring). It is possible in many cases, therefore, to test whether our signs 'fit' or 'do not fit' the real world. This objective dimension of signs keeps them from becoming purely arbitrary, and totally subjective. It also provides a fixed frame of reference that enables us to test what we think with what others think. Thus, in communication, we can check whether the receptor has understood our message with the meanings we intended.

A triadic view of signs sees meaning not in objective realities, or in our subjective, mental images. Rather meaning is found in the correspondence between our ideas and reality. It is easy for us to create mental categories, but if these do not correspond to anything in reality, they are useless. Because signs do refer to realities, we can test our categories against these realities to determine their truthfulness.

Similarly, in communication meaning is not what the sender sends, nor in what the receiver understands, but in the correlation between the two. We might call this a correspondence view of communication. Accurate communication occurs when what the receptor understands what the sender thinks.

The fact that Peircean signs have an objective dimension to them keeps them from being

totally subjective and in human minds. Moreover, it keeps human ideas from being totally relative. People must constantly test their ideas against the real world. On the other hand, signs point out the fact that human knowledge is always limited and approximate. Given our human finiteness, we cannot totally grasp everything. We must, therefore, reduce the bewildering and infinite array of human experiences to a limited number of categories in order deal with them. In biblical terms, by means of signs we see the world through a glass darkly, **but we do see** enough to live. We understand God's word in part, but we do understand enough to follow him and be saved.

The implications of a triadic view of signs for Bible translation and contextualization are far reaching. First, we cannot divorce forms from meanings. We must look at the relationship between forms, mental images and reality of the sign, and do so in its cultural and historical contexts. Words are not isolated signs. They are part of larger sign systems. For instance, when I say 'red', I am also saying 'not green', 'not blue,' and so on. In this sense signs are culture bound, and their meaning is not easily changed. Signs also belong to communities of people. Consequently, we as individuals cannot change them by ourselves. Even if we do, the community will continue to understand the signs in their own way. Changing the meaning of signs ultimately is a community matter. Signs also have histories and these histories cannot readily be changed.

Second, we must understand that the relationship between form, concept and reality is different in different signs. In some the linkage is loose. For example, we in the west give names to our children in more or less an arbitrary form. These names are simply labels by which we address or refer to the person. Ordinary language, too, is largely a matter of social

convention. We might just as well have called "trees" "boras" as "trees."

In some signs concepts, forms and reality are more tightly linked. For example, expressive symbols such as crying, laughing, and groans of pain are culturally shaped or masked, but the basic patterns are widely distributed. The ties in ritual signs are even stronger. In ordinary discursive signs we talk about things. In nondiscursive symbols such as rituals and poetry we communicate meanings that transcend mere words, such as the transcendence of God, the depth of love, and the commitment of marriage. We do so by 'ritualizing them'. In other words, we take ordinary signs and put them in ritual contexts, in the enactment of the rituals we communicate corporate and transcendent meanings.

Finally, in some signs the forms, concepts and reality are one. This is true, for example, in historical facts tied to specific times and places. We cannot say that Christ was born in Washington D.C. in order to give meaning to the New Testament to Americans. He was called Jesus and we as Christians are called to name that name (2 Tim. 2:19; 1 Jn 4:2).

It is helpful here to note the difference between art and history. The religious artist seeks to communicate a deeper spiritual message, not a historically accurate picture of events. Thus a noted Korean artist painted a series of pictures on the life of Christ in which Christ is depicted as a Korean teacher with a black hat (in traditional Korea all teachers wore such hats). The houses and clothes are Korean in style. If the artist were to claim this as historical fact, his drawings would be false. But he has tried to depict the deep truth that Christ identified with all humanity, including the Koreans, in his life and death.

Another type of signs in which forms, concepts and reality are equated are performative signs. These not only communicate information, they perform change. For example, when a

judge says to a defendant, "I find you guilty," is not just communicating information. By his pronouncement he transforms a person innocent before the law into a criminal. In other words, he changes the person's status in the society. Similarly, when a minister says, "I pronounce you husband and wife," he or she changes the bride and groom into a married couple. A minute before he says this, either of them can call the wedding off with no legal consequences. After he says it, they must go through a divorce to call it off.

Eugene Nida and William Reyburn have traced some of the consequences of this view of symbols on Bible translation in Meaning Across Cultures (198#).

A triadic view of signs also has implications for contextualization. First, it is clear that contextualization is more complicated than we thought. We cannot in all cases simply change meanings while retaining old forms. We need to examine carefully the nature of signs in the gospel - in Scripture, rituals and Christian life - in order to determine the extent to which they can be changed to fit another culture. We need also to examine the nature of signs in the culture in which we want to communicate the gospel to see if they can be used or changed to convey the message of the gospel. In all cultures, some signs cannot be used because they are too closely tied to old religious beliefs. Others may not be used because their meaning is controlled by the dominant nonChristian community around the church. Others may be used because they are not too closely tied to unChristian meanings, and because they convey with reasonable accuracy the message of the Gospel.

Contextualization is a continuing process in the life of the church. It must learn to communicate the gospel in ways the people understand, without losing its uniqueness. To

understand this process, it is essential that we examine our views of signs for these profoundly shape how we do missions.

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