**Intentionality**

Did the New Testament writers speak in symbolic language? Was there a reality to their writings? Does symbolism take us deeper or leave us wanting more?

Normally, when New Testament Greek is studied, the approach is etymological (word study), syntatical (/phrase/sentence structure), or idiomatic (cultural/contextual). While these avenues give us insight and meaning, they do not always help us understand the intent of the writer. Unless the speaker/context reveals the intention, it is left to subjective reasoning ‘why’ the speaker communicated as they did.

H. P. Grice, a philosoper of language introduced “the concept of *someone’s nonnaturall*y[[1]](#footnote-1) *meaning something by an utterence*”[[2]](#footnote-2) in an article on *Meaning (Philosophical Review, LXVII, 1957).* “It will be convenient to refer to that by which someone, S, nonnatureally means something as S’s *utterence.*” [[3]](#footnote-3) The explanation of the introduced concept is given in terms of the concept of intention. To illustrate this using Paul’s writing to the Romans, Grice could state,

Paul nonnaturally means something by an utterance regarding baptism (Romans 6) if he (Paul) intends (*i*1) to produce by uttering the teaching of baptism a certain response (*r*), i.e., understanding the meaning of the initiation into Christ Jesus for the Romans and intends (*i*2) that the Romans shall recognize his (Paul’s) intention (*i*1) and (Paul) intends (*i*3) that this recognition on the part of the Romans of Paul’s intention (*i*1) shall function as the Romans’s reason, or a part of their reason, for their response (r).[[4]](#footnote-4)

From this argument, three intentions are realized.

(*i*1)—Paul’s intention in writing to the Romans regarding baptism.

(*i*2)—The Apostle hopes the Roman church realizes his intentions after hearing the teaching on baptism.

(*i*3)—Paul’s hope that the Romans’ recognition of Paul’s original intention will be the reason/part of the reason for responding to the teaching the way Paul hoped.

P. F. Strawson suggest yet another intention (*i*4). After illustrating Grice’s formula, Strawson suggests that if both *S* and *A* (Paul and the Romans in our illustration) were well aware of *S*’s (Paul’s) first two intentions (*i*1) and (*i*2), then the fourth intention (*i*4) is that Paul desired that the Romans understood both that he intended to communicate the teaching and that he intended that the teaching would produce the desired result.

Using Romans as an illustration, we could ask, “What was Paul’s intention in writing to the Romans regarding baptism?” Guthrie’s Introduction to the Book of Romans reveals that “The purpose of the Epistle arises naturally out of the occasion[[5]](#footnote-5), but is not easy to define with any precision.”[[6]](#footnote-6) If Paul does not state his intentions, how then can we know why he wrote and does this intention affect his message?

If speech acts (language communications that expect response) are indeed intended and this has always been human nature, then it is expected that the humans writing revelation would write with intention.[[7]](#footnote-7) For this, we would look at the writing and determine any/all intended messages possible in order to understand fully what the writer wanted us to know. We would depend on language for the meaning to be clear, concise, and understandable. We would expect meaning. This is the purpose of language.

Believing that God created man to communicate[[8]](#footnote-8), we must understand the place of language in the communication of man to God (worship, adoration, obedient lifestyle) and revelation (God’s communication of His will to humanity). In this sense, language is a covenant between God and man.[[9]](#footnote-9) It is the way God has determined that we know and understand His thinking. If this is true, then it is also true that man, who is created in God’s image, will honor a covenant of language within its culture/society. We do this by accepting the same understanding of the words used. From these words, thoughts and ideas are communicated. If language difference are encountered (French to Spanish; English to Russian), parallels are found that communicate the idea expressed. Even in difficult to understand idioms, enough communication will eventually resolve the problem and allow comprehension.[[10]](#footnote-10) If we can agree on this, then we will understand the following:

Language is purposive “in that there is nearly always in human speech a definite intention of getting something over to somebody else, altering his behaviour, his thoughts, or his general attitude toward a situation.” Human language is “Syntactic” in that an utterance is a performance with an internal organisation, with structure and coherence. It is “propositional” in that it transmits information.[[11]](#footnote-11)

Chomsky indicates that language expresses its purpose with organization (syntactic) and content (propositional). If an English-speaking person listens to a conversation between two Koreans, the sounds of the language seem like the chatter of animals. To the Koreans, communication is happening because their language has structure, content, and expresses the individual thoughts of the speakers.

Using language, all of communicating humanity attempts to express meaning with its statements. Few speak without meaning. Only a baby utters indistinguishable sounds, which are accepted as normal. The parents understand that the baby’s “expressions” are intended to communicate an attitude (I’m happy) or inquisitive nature (Look at the shiny objects). When people learn that language can convey ideas, meanings are introduced into the sounds.

Grice's conception of speaker's meaning rests ultimately on a conception of conventional meaning or, in Grice's terminology, timeless meaning. That a certain form of words has a timeless meaning is normally necessary if a speaker is to reasonably expect that an utterance of that form of words will produce the intended effect. Grice's view was that that timeless meaning could in turn be explained in terms of speakers' intentions.[[12]](#footnote-12)

From this covenant of language with structure and meaning[[13]](#footnote-13), we encourage the believer to realize that the biblical writers’ and church fathers’ intentions would have been equally clear in their communications. Even with the influence of Greek (Platonic) thinking, as late as the second century, the language regarding the Eucharist was concise, matching the canonical writings accepted by the church. This will be demonstrated later. The fact that for two centuries, the language was exact, not shrouded, provides a reason for moving from a symbolic meaning to a more literal understanding of the sacrament. In other words, the writers assumed that their audience would accept the teaching at face value without the need to mystify it. There is enough myster in how God has extended salvation to us without the worshipper adding mystery with symbolic language.

1. Non-natural, for Grice, is the concept of meaning outside the obvious. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Searle, J. R., ed, *The Philosophy of* *Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), 28 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The actual argument reads, “*S* nonnaturally means something by an utterance *x* if *S* intends (*i*1) to produce by uttering *x* a certain response (r) in an audience *A* and intends (*i*2) that *A* shall recognize *S’s* intention (*i*1) and intends (*i*3) that this recoginition on the part of *A* of *S*’s intention (*i*1) shall function as *A*’s reason or a part of his reason, for his response *r*.” (Searle, *The Philosophy of* *Language)* [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Paul states that he intended on coming to see them (1:11-13) to impart spiritual gifts and give them the opportunity to support him in his mission to Spain (15:22). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Guthrie, Donald, *New Testament Introduction* (Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter-Varsity Press), 397 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. i.e., To teach—Romans 15:4; To remind—Romans 15:15; A directive—1 Corinthians 5:9; Encouragement—1 Peter 5:12; to stimulate—2 Peter 3:1; Blessings—Revelation 1:3 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. After creating man, God blessed them and then spoke to them (Genesis 1:28) [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. I was first introduced to this idea in an exposition of the Book of Ephesians at the National Missionary Convention held in Knoxville, Tennessee in 1979. Dr. Mont Smith from Pacific Christian College used this as a basis for the communication of revelation, esp. in the concept of covenant. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. My wife uses the example of a doctor from India who expressed that he was ‘down to ground.’ A literal translation of the English ‘down to earth’ expressed the same idea but the meaning was not immediately perceived. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Noam Chomsky, “Language and Mind; Linguistic contributions to the study of mind (future),” n.p. [February, 2005]. Online:http://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/us/chomsky.htm [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Quoted in *Philosophy of Mind*, “Grice, Herbert Paul, online at: http://www.artsci.wustl.edu/~philos/MindDict/grice.html [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. The Greek and Latin of the New Testament and Church Fathers can be scientifically analyzed based on extant writings. These writings outside the early church documents convey the common usage of words, the syntax of the language, and idiomatic usages. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)