

INTERPRETING A SIGN

According to Bertrand Russell, “no one can understand the word ‘cheese’ unless he has a non-linguistic acquaintance with cheese.” If, however, we follow Russell’s fundamental precept and place our “emphasis upon the linguistic aspects of traditional philosophical problems,” then we are obliged to state that no one can understand the word “cheese” unless he has an acquaintance with the meaning assigned to this word in the lexical code of English. Any representative of a cheese-less culinary culture will understand the English word “cheese” if he is aware that in this language it means “food made of pressed curds” and if he has at least a linguistic acquaintance with “curds.” We never consumed ambrosia or nectar and have only a linguistic acquaintance with the words “ambrosia,” “nectar,” and “gods”—the name of their mythical users; nonetheless, we understand these words and know in what contexts each of them may be used.

The meaning of the words “cheese,” “apple,” “nectar,” “acquaintance,” “but,” “mere,” and of any word or phrase whatsoever is definitely a linguistic—or to be more precise and less narrow—a semiotic fact. Against those who assign meaning (signatum) not to the sign, but to the thing itself, the simplest and truest argument would be that nobody has ever smelled or tasted the meaning of “cheese” or of “apple.” There is no signatum without signum. The meaning of the word “cheese” cannot be inferred from a nonlinguistic acquaintance with cheddar or with camembert without the assistance of the verbal code. An array of linguistic signs is needed to introduce an unfamiliar word. Mere pointing will not teach us whether “cheese” is the name of the given specimen, or of any box of camembert, or of camembert in general or of any cheese, any milk product, any food, any refreshment, or perhaps any box irrespective of contents. Finally, does a word simply name the thing in question, or does it imply a meaning such as offering, sale, prohibition, or malediction? (Pointing actually may mean malediction; in some cultures, particularly in Africa, it is an ominous gesture.)

For us, both as linguists and as ordinary word-users, the meaning of any linguistic sign is its translation into some further, alternative sign, especially a sign “in which it is more fully developed,” as Peirce, the deepest inquirer into the essence of signs, insistently stated. The term “bachelor” may be converted into a more explicit designation, “unmarried man,” whenever higher explicitness is required. We distinguish three ways of interpreting a verbal sign: it may be translated into other signs of the same language, into another language, or into another, nonverbal system of symbols.

- Venuti Lawrence. *The Translation Studies Reader*. 2nd ed. Routledge 2004. pp 114.

1. What does Peirce suggest about the translation of a verbal sign?

- A) It should be translated into signs of the same language only
- B) It should be translated into nonverbal symbols
- C) It should be translated into signs that provide higher explicitness
- D) It should be translated into signs of another language exclusively

2. According to the essay, what does linguistic acquaintance with a word imply?

- A) Familiarity with the thing itself
- B) Understanding of its meaning in the verbal code
- C) Knowledge of its etymology
- D) Ability to translate it into nonverbal symbols

3. What does the essay suggest about the act of pointing in some cultures?

- A) It is a form of greeting or salutation
- B) It indicates a sale or offering
- C) It is an expression of approval or praise
- D) It signifies a malediction or curse

4. What does the essay claim about the term "bachelor"?

- A) It cannot be translated into other signs of the same language
- B) It is more fully developed when translated into nonverbal symbols
- C) It may require higher explicitness in its translation
- D) It is best understood in its original language without translation

5. According to the essay, what is necessary to understand the word "cheese"?

- A) Non-linguistic acquaintance with cheese
- B) Understanding its meaning in the lexical code of English
- C) Consuming ambrosia or nectar
- D) Knowing its association with mythical gods

Answer 1: C) It should be translated into signs that provide higher explicitness

Answer 2: B) Understanding of its meaning in the verbal code

Answer 3: D) It signifies a malediction or curse

Answer 4: C) It may require higher explicitness in its translation

Answer 5: B) Understanding its meaning in the lexical code of English