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Source: *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, Vol. 18, No. 2 (Spring, 1988), pp. 153-158
Published by: Taylor & Francis, Ltd.
Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/3885867
Accessed: 14-05-2020 11:26 UTC

Panel on I. A. Richards
Speech Communication Association
Boston, November 1987

I. A. Richards' "Context" Theorem of Meaning

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> Whatever we may be studying we do so only through the growth of our meanings.
> I. A. R.

This seemed like an easy assignment. After all, I had been at least around the edges of I. A. Richards since writing an M.A. thesis on "I. A. Richards' Theory of Metaphor as Applied to the Speeches of Adlai E. Stevenson." A flood of Richardsian terms and phrases came back: context theorem of meaning, speculative instruments, interpretation, translation, multiple definitions and the like. Moreover, the titles of books read and reread during the course of a career, some of it spent teaching contemporary rhetorical theory, were resummoned: Mencius on the Mind, Coleridge on the Imagination, Practical Criticism, Philosophy of Rhetoric, the later Complementarities and the like. I "cluttered" my desk with miscellaneous quotable quotes from one work or another--quotes about the four aspects of language (sense, feeling, intention, tone), (1) about criticism as the "endeavor to discriminate between experiences and to evaluate them," (2) about a comprehending as "an instance of a nexus established through past occurrences of partially similar utterances in partially similar situations--utterances and situations partially co-varying," (3) and, about picturing "the mind as a system of very delicately poised balances, a system which so long as we are in health is constantly growing." (4)

Sooner or later I began to realize that I would settle on the sentence, "We shall do better to think of a meaning as though it were a plant that has grown--not a can that has been filled or a lump of clay that has been moulded" from Philosophy of Rhetoric (5) and I will return to it shortly. But I was not ready then, nor am I now, to

relegate to the file folder Richards' observation that the "most valuable states of mind . . . are those which involve the widest and most comprehensive coordination of activities and the least curtailment, conflict, starvation and restriction." (6)

The difficulty in selecting one passage, or, at least a difficulty in selecting one Richards' passage is that in an age so accustomed to "specialized deafness," Richards, from a dizzying array of vantage points--literary critic, semanticist, educational theorist, poet, translator, sometime metaphysician, etc., keeps reminding us of "systems" and, typically, of "open systems" at that. As if that were not enough, the likes of an I. A. Richards pulls us invariably back to the term "basic" in an age bedazzled by theory-building. The "Basic" preoccupation has been long lived for Richards--from Basic Rules of Reason and his abridged editing of Plato's The Republic largely in Basic to Basic English and Its Uses, and Nations and Peace, a proposal to eventually eliminate war by establishing a world government and Basic English.

Open systems and Basic reminded me vividly that, whatever else I. A. Richards was, he was a "translator"--a builder of bridges. And it is into this "context" that I want to put the I. A. Richards' passage I have selected as the one most important for rhetorical theory.

In his mid-eighties, Richards returned to China and to teaching Chinese students. For Richards, this constituted a returning to China where he went in the 30's to study the Chinese language, the Confuscian philosopher, Mencius, and to sell the Chinese government a method of teaching English. (He was more successful at the first two, than the latter.) Richards published Mencius on the Mind: Experiments in Multiple Definition in 1932, nine years after the Meaning of Meaning. In Mencius he aims at "translation" not merely narrowly meant but translation from "modes of meaning." Among the "modes" sought were East with West and old with new.

No Richards' bridge-building was more palpable than the one between illiteracy and literacy. Here, of course, we can clearly include his analyses of texts in and out of the classroom and his efforts to suggest alternative readings so as not to let "stock responses" harden the arteries, but we also need to include his efforts to present in accessible language, some of the basic cultural documents of the West--Homer, Plato, Job. For example, some 40 years after Basic English and Its Uses, in Beyond, he, again, extended his "readings" to a collection of Mediterranean Western man's fundamental concern with the problem of evil.

From teaching poetry, Richards turned to writing poetry, enjoyed the tactility of language, and reminded us of the bridges between seeing and hearing, of pre-McLuhan notions that language could be regarded as an instrument and like other instruments can usefully be thought of as an extension of our sense organs. Moreover, in Speculative Instruments he told us that language is "an instrument for controlling our becoming." (7) The "becoming" for Richards was extraordinarily active, broad gauged and long lived.

Long a college professor of literature, upon his return from one of his trips to China, he shifted his interest to primary education believing as the song goes that we should "teach the children well." Richards, the bridge builder between the ages of education.

Always his work continued examining the "shaping spirit of imagination." (8) Among the problems of translation he tackled was that of bridging the territory between internal and external nature. Richards, the mountain climber, and Richards, the sometime metaphysician, could appreciate their final union.

In How to Read a Page, Richards commented that we "are so intimately interrelated [with the world] that it is impossible to say where we stop and it begins; or whether we are more its work than it is ours." (9) And, in that book with THE word in its title, The Philosophy of Rhetoric, he adds an "s" to world and relates those "worlds" to meaning when he writes: ". . . it is no exaggeration to say that the fabrics of all our various worlds are the fabrics of our meanings." (10)

What Richards once wrote of Samuel Taylor Coleridge I will write of him: He was "aware as few have been, that to ask about the meanings of words is to ask about everything." (11)

Having placed his "Context Theorem" in the fuller Richardsian meaning, we can settle down, now, to a passage in The Philosophy of Rhetoric and to his search for a root metaphor for the way meaning develops:

> To account for understanding and misunderstanding, to study the efficiency of language and its conditions, we have to renounce for a while, the view that words just have their meanings and that what a discourse does is to be explained as a composition of these meanings--as a wall can be represented as a composition of its bricks. We have to shift the focus of our analysis and attempt a deeper and more minute grasp and try to take account

of the structures of the smallest discussable units of meaning and the ways in which these vary as they are put with other units. Bricks, for all practical purposes, hardly mind what other things they are put with. Meanings mind intensely--more indeed than any other sorts of things. It is the peculiarity of meanings that they do so mind their company; that is in part what we mean by calling them meanings!

Most words, as they pass from context to context, change their meanings; and in many different ways. It is their duty and their service to us to do so. Ordinary discourse would suffer anchloysis if they did not, and so far we have no ground for complaint. We are extraordinarily skillful in some fields with these shifts of sense--especially when they are of the kind we recognize officially as metaphor. But our skill fails; it is patchy and fluctuant; and, when it fails, misunderstanding of others and of ourselves comes in.

A chief cause of misunderstanding, I shall argue later, is the Proper Meaning Superstition. That is, the common belief--encouraged officially by what lingers on in the school manuals as Rhetoric--that a word has a meaning of its own (ideally, only one) independent of and controlling its use and the purpose for which it should be uttered. This superstition is a recognition of a certain kind of stability in the meanings of certain words. It is only a superstition when it forgets (as it commonly does) that the stability of the meaning of a word comes from the constancy of the contexts that give it its meaning. Stability in a word's meaning is not something to be assumed, but always something to be explained. And as we try out explanations, we discover, of course, that--as there are many sorts of constant contexts--there are many sorts of stabilities.

I have been suggesting--with my talk of macroscopic and microscopic inquiries--that the theory of language may have something to learn, not much but a little, from the ways in which the physicist envisions stabilities. But much closer analogies are possible with some of the patterns of biology. The theory of interpretation is obviously a branch of biology--a branch that has not grown very far or very healthily yet. To remember this may help us to avoid some traditional mistakes--among them the use of bad analogies which tie us up if we take them too seriously. Some of these are notorious; for example,

> the opposition between form and content, and the almost equivalent opposition between matter and form. These are wretchedly inconvenient metaphors. So is that other which makes language a dress which thought puts on. We shall do better to think of a meaning as though it were a plant that has grown--not a can that has been filled or a lump of clay that has been moulded. (12)

It should come as no surprise that I. A. Richards, the teacher, would from time to time admonish his students to "Think of the planet." I cannot judge how well we, Richards' students, have followed that admonishment but Ivor Armstrong Richards did, indeed, "Think of the planet!" And it is in that "global" context that we may want to place, at least briefly, his "rhetorical works" and his "context theorem of meaning."

Notes

(1) I. A. Richards, Practical Criticism (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1966), pp. 175-176. Original publication, 1929.

(2) I. A. Richards, Principles of Literary Criticism (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1965), p. 2. Original publication, 1924.

(3) I. A. Richards, Speculative Instruments (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955), p. 23.

(4) I. A. Richards, Science and Poetry (London: Kegan, Trench, Trubner and Co., Ltd., 1935), p. 20. Original publication, 1926.

(5) I. A. Richards, The Philosophy of Rhetoric (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 12. Original publication, 1936.

(6) I. A. Richards, Principles of Literary Criticism, p. 59.

(7) I. A. Richards, Speculative Instruments, p. 9.

(8) See, for example, I. A. Richards, Coleridge on Imagination (London: Kegan, Paul, Trench, Trubner, 1934).

(9) I. A. Richards, How to Read a Page (New York: Norton and Co., Inc., 1942), p. 184.

(10) I. A. Richards, Philosophy of Rhetoric, p. 19.

(11) I. A. Richards, Coleridge on Imagination, p. 19.

(12) I. A. Richards, Philosophy of Rhetoric, pp. 9-12.