THE MEANING OF MEANING AND THE MEANING OF REVELATION

1. It is being increasingly acknowledged that before beginning to discuss the special problems of what it means to explain the meaning of statements which purport to convey the Word of God, it is necessary to consider the general problems of what it means to explain the meaning of statements which do not purport to be anything more than human language.

The recent history of Western culture has indeed made it next to impossible for anyone except the most ostrich-headed among those who care about the methods of interpreting the Word of God not to care about the methods of interpreting the word of man.

After Bultmann, no exponent of the Bible could ignore the Heideggerian account of Truth (as self-evidentitation) as the foundation of the concept of Meaning. After such works as Louis Marin's *Semiotique de la Passion* (1971), it has become impossible to ignore the Structuralist account of the concept of Meaning as capable of formulation without presuppositions about the concept of Truth.

But I think it is unfortunate that it does not yet seem to be adequately realised that there is a different account of Meaning, and of its relationship to Truth, to be found in the work of Wittgenstein, which is not only more plausible in itself as an account of the working of language but also more in line with the concept of language which is implied in the Bible itself. The purpose of this brief article is to sketch out a summary justification of this thesis.

2. 'Realist' theories of language have usually held that:

   (a) The meaning of a linguistic unit is supplied when the conditions required for what it says to be true are set out; the concept of the meaning of a statement was explained in terms of the concept of its truth.

   (b) The truth of a statement was usually understood to be the existence of some likeness (or 'correspondence') between the units-in-combination of the statement and some combination-of-objects in the world.
This kind of theory may today be counted as largely abandoned because it is widely believed that it is impossible to give any general description of the relation between language and reality. It follows that no general criterion of meaningfulness, whether the Logical Positivists' 'verifiability' or the Existentialist 'self-evidentiation', is possible. The reason for this impossibility is the great variety of the uses of language.

Language is not used only to state facts, but also to give orders, ask questions, perform actions, make things, and so on. Not all the uses of languages lend themselves to classification in one of the two categories, True or False; but the classification into the two categories of the meaningful and the meaningless has to be applicable to all. It follows that an account of the meaning of meaning should be given without its presupposing the truth of the account of the concept of 'truth' given in the Correspondence Theory in anyone of its versions.

Although the almost general withdrawal from the 'Realist' position was greatly influenced by Wittgenstein's work, he himself still believed that the meaningfulness of language could never be accounted for unless there were 'essential connexions' (however complex to describe) between language and the world. But it is precisely consideration of these connexions that Structuralism proposes to do without in its account of meaning, which it aims to give without presuppositions about the structure of the world.

3. 'Structuralism' is here taken to be the theory according to which meaning is the result of the relationship between the signs used within a system. Certain structuralists, like Claude Levi-Strauss have sought to dissociate themselves from the so-called Formalists (such as the Russian Vladimir Propp). There is a structuralist 'semantics' (or study of the signified) as well as a structuralist 'semiology' (or study of signs). But, as Greimas has written, the conjunction of the two is 'dissolved' as soon as analysis is pushed a little ahead on either front. The analysis of the meaning of a statement is dissociated from the analysis of its truth.

Yet it is one of the most striking features of the Structuralists' theory that their analysis brings out the essential similarity of the structures of languages apparently very remote from each other and independent in their origin. This similarity is, of course, the foundation of the inter-translatability of languages.
Realism had explained this surprising fact by the simple observation that since it was the naturally given structure of the world that was reflected in the structure of all languages, these structures had to be similar. The Structuralists, however, in general, tend to explain the emergence of universal features of language by reference to the universal structure of the 'unconscious' human mind.

By this resort to psychology, rather than to the language-world relationship, Structuralism takes its place fairly and squarely in the tradition of the Subjective Idealist manner of explaining the possibility of the communication of meaning. The foundation of the 'structured whole' which constitutes a language is not established on the ground that the objective world is itself a 'structured whole'; it is established by the Mind's having a structure. The difference from Kant is that the mental activity in question is thought of as not limited to the conscious level, but is conceived as a complex operational whole in which the unconscious is the more important factor.

4. The most interesting aspect of Structuralism is its application of the general account given of language not merely to particular verbal languages, but to any systematic ensemble of elements which function as signs; i.e. not only to Chinese, Sanskrit, Siberian dialects, Esperanto, Pidgin English, the Morse Code, Hebrew, etc., but also to any sector of the social behaviour of mankind insofar as it manifests a certain systematicity. Analyses based on the model of structuralist linguistics have been carried out for instance, in the areas of myth and ritual, the rules of marriage based on kinship, cooking and eating (Levi-Strauss), fashions in clothes and literary forms (Barthes), the cinema (Metz) and architecture (Eco), economic organisation (Althusser), the history of ideas (Foucault), the dreams of neurotics (Lacan).

These analyses may be very complicated and practically impossible to execute without computers and considerable workspace, but they are held not only to confirm, despite the nonexhaustive character of the work done so far, the view of language as the prototype of all significant systems, but also to provide a basis for the expectation that if the Bible were similarly analysed, it would yield similar results. The book by Marin is put forward as an example, as also the analysis of Acts, XI by Barthes (Cfr: Recherches de Science Religieuse, 58, 1, Jan-Mars 1970).

A reflection of the Structuralist approach may also be seen in the
study of the Old Testament carried out by the British anthropologist Edmund Leach, *The legitimacy of Solomon* (in *Archives Europeennes de Sociologie*, 1966, No 7), which is centred on the need for the Jews in Palestine to claim endogamy for the purposes of religious unity, while practising exogamy for the purposes of political alliances, with this contradiction resulting in a multitude of binary oppositions and a 'myth' as their imaginary resolution, — an analysis similar to Levi-Strauss’s interpretation of the Oedipus Myth as an imaginary resolution of the conflict between the received belief in an autochthonic genesis of man and the experiential knowledge of human birth from a male and female couple.

5. It would be out-of-place to stress here that the methods of Structuralist analysis contain many insights of value to Biblical Exegetes — such as the basic distinctions by de Saussure instituted between language (langue) and speech (parole), which focusses attention on the rigorous need to interpret each particular speech-performance (comparable to a move in a game) in the light of the language as a whole (the rules of the game); or that between synchronic (the linguistic system at a particular date) and diachronic (the changes in the system from time to time) analysis; the careful observance of this distinction would, for instance, have made Kittel a far more useful reference work than it is as a result of the frequent neglect of it.

The usefulness of these insights does not alter the fact that if the Structuralist theory is absolutely right, then the traditional Biblical Exegetes should go out of business as certainly as if the Logical Positivist theory were right; because they all assume, at least, that the Bible contains a message concerning the world and addressed to men, while Structuralism implies a basic subjectlessness in its analysis of the nature of meaning. In this respect, it does not differ essentially from Formalism. Hence, the importance of seeing that the rejection of naive Realism need not imply falling into the arms of a form of Idealism.

6. Although it is generally known that the later Wittgenstein put forward the view that an account of the use of a linguistic statement was the general form of the explanation of meaning in all realms of discourse, it does not seem that the full import of this view has been equally generally grasped.

In particular, it should be at once recognised that Wittgenstein did
not believe, as some of the so-called Linguistic Analysts do, that a proper account of a concept has been given when the usage of a word in a particular language has been described. The account must also explain the point of a concept or what the word is used for, its function not only in terms of the system of signs of which it is an element, but in the context of the 'form of life' of which the language is an expression. The implications of this view, that to explain the meaning of a statement is to give an account of its use, are exclusive both of naive realism as of all forms of idealism as accounts of the world-language-mind relationship.

A summary picture of this relationship correlative to Wittgenstein's theory of meaning has been formulated by Michael Dummett as follows: 'Objects spring into being in response to our probing'. The world does not exist, prior to linguistic activity, already structured into facts which are combinations of objects for our statements to be true or false of. It is linguistic activity itself which brings the structures into being and it is thus constitutive of meaning. But this does not imply that we make the structures or that they are the product solely of the working, conscious or unconscious, of our minds. That the structures come into existence is the result of our probing of reality; but what these structures are is determined by reality itself.

7. Wittgenstein's account of the meaning of meaning can be seen to be close to the idea of language implicit in the Bible itself. It has often been noted by Biblical scholars (e.g. Boman, Hebrew Thought Compared with Greek, S.C.M.) that 'dabar' could mean word-action-thing in English; in other words, that the concept of 'saying' is used to indicate not only the expression of a thought in speech or writing, but also the performance of an action or the making of a thing. The meaning of a 'word' may be ascertained by observing what it does or what it produces, in certain contexts. A linguistic utterance may not be at all a matter of stating facts, true or false; it may have a quite different function in the 'stream of life'.

This view of language is necessary for it to be possible to understand the Biblical analogies of the Creation and the Incarnation as speech-acts by God. God speaks, and the world is made; His saying of the word is His making of the world. God speaks, and the 'new creation' takes place; the Word of God becomes a thing of flesh-and-blood, without ceasing to be what it is, viz. the Word of God. The Eternal Word is
that by which the world was first made: its 'life' (that by which it exists in a particular way) and its 'light' (that by which it becomes aware of its mode of existence), in St. John's words. The Incarnate Word 'probes' the old world and it is re-structured; not, of course, in a manner which negates the original structure (as happens when men pretend to make things in an unconditioned manner, which is sin); but, enlarging the zone of the linguistically expressible; or, in other words, easing the conditioning framework within which things may happen. That is the process of Revelation, the object of Theology which transcends Philosophy.

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