

Ogden and Richards' *The Meaning of Meaning* and early analytic philosophy.

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This is the green open access copy of my paper in *Language Sciences* (2014, 41.212-221).

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.langsci.2013.10.001>

This version silently corrects a few small errors in the published paper.

Abstract

C.K. Ogden (1889–1957) and I.A. Richards' (1893–1979) *The Meaning of Meaning* is widely recognised as a classic text of early twentieth-century linguistic semantics and semiotics, but less well known are its links to the 'logical atomism' of Bertrand Russell (1872–1970), one of the foundational doctrines of analytic philosophy. In this paper a detailed comparison of *The Meaning of Meaning* and logical atomism is made, in which several key similarities between the two theories in subject matter and approach are identified: both attempt to describe meaning in terms of the latest psychological doctrines and both pursue a normative program aimed at rectifying the perceived deficiencies of language. But there are also a number of differences between the theories. Ogden and Richards – most probably inspired by Victoria Lady Welby (1837–1912) – offered a pragmatically oriented account of ordinary language, while Russell sought a 'logically perfect language' beyond interpretation, and rejected the work of Welby and her allies. These differences contributed significantly to Russell's largely negative opinion of *The Meaning of Meaning*. Despite this, several ideas pioneered in *The Meaning of Meaning* re-appear in Russell's later writings. *The Meaning of Meaning*, it would seem, not only drew inspiration from Russell's philosophy but may have also contributed to its further development.

1. Introduction

Frequently counted among the classic texts of twentieth-century linguistic semantics and semiotics is the 1923 *The Meaning of Meaning*, co-authored by Charles Kay Ogden (1889–1957) and Ivor Armstrong Richards (1893–1979). Key reasons for the status this book has achieved are no doubt the broad range of themes it addresses and the eclectic mix of sources it draws on. Although it receives very little explicit mention in the book, one major influence is the ‘logical atomism’ of Bertrand Russell (1872–1970), a foundational doctrine of early analytic philosophy. As we see below, the links between *The Meaning of Meaning* and logical atomism have not gone unnoticed, but as yet there has been no detailed examination of what themes, ideas and methods characteristic of logical atomism are reflected in *The Meaning of Meaning*. Neither has there yet been an assessment of how the innovations presented in *The Meaning of Meaning* may have influenced the development of that doctrine. These are the two issues that this paper seeks to address.

That there should be discernible links between logical atomism and *The Meaning of Meaning* is not surprising: both are products of the Cambridge of the opening decades of the twentieth century. It was here that Russell made the breakthroughs on which his reputation as a philosopher was built, and it was here that Ogden and Richards undertook their studies as impressionable undergraduates and began their careers as young scholars. They were all part of a common scholarly community, drawn together by many threads: Ogden and Russell, in particular, were active in many of the same intellectual and political circles (see, e.g., Gordon 1990b:5-8; Monk 1990:38-39).

Logical atomism emerged from the beginning of the century, as Russell combined the latest technical advances in logic with a new radical realist approach to philosophy. The result was a theory – which received its classical formulation around the time *The Meaning of Meaning* was published – that offered positions in metaphysics, epistemology and what is now known as philosophy of language. Russell used the tools of logic to construct a framework for his realist philosophy: he postulated ‘logical atoms’, the smallest elements of experience, corresponding to ‘sense-data’, which are combined by the rules of logic to create ‘logical constructions’, the representations we make of the familiar entities assumed to populate the world (see Simons 2003 and Klement 2011 for introductory accounts of the theory; Russell 1988[1924] presents a concise summary). In its earliest stages Russell’s doctrines acquired a linguistic aspect through the ‘theory of descriptions’, a critique of the expressions we use in ordinary language, which seeks to replace them, for the purposes of philosophy, with more precise and valid descriptions in a ‘logically perfect language’.

The Meaning of Meaning is built around a similar critique of ordinary language: Ogden and

Richards' quarry was 'word-magic', a term they use to describe a superstitious subservience to language that leads us, among other undesirable consequences, into philosophical confusion. This ancient and deeply rooted superstition, they claimed, continues to plague modern philosophers, logicians and grammarians (see, in particular Ogden and Richards 1989[1923]:44-45). The aim of their project was to supply the tools required to overcome this superstition and achieve clarity in language (see further Gordon 2006; Hotopf 1994[1965]:10-32; chapter 7 of Russo 1989). As we see below, the method they proposed to reach this end, which they called 'definition', shows unmistakable similarities to Russell's descriptions, as does the epistemological foundation they sought to establish for their theory.

In the following sections we draw out these points of contact between logical atomism and the ideas elaborated in *The Meaning of Meaning*. We begin in section 2 by comparing the models of meaning and language presented within the two theories, their similarities and differences. In section 3 we then examine the inherently normative nature of both *The Meaning of Meaning* and logical atomism: we observe how they both saw ordinary language as deficient and in need of correction, and how they sought a method of correction through descriptions and definition, both forms of paraphrase. Here we see also a fundamental difference between these approaches, in the status they accorded to their paraphrases. Russell was content to let ordinary language be and intended his 'logically perfect language' only for the purposes of philosophy. Ogden and Richards, by contrast, targeted ordinary language itself, although they were more circumspect in their claims for the possible perfection of any kind of language. For them the validity of expressions was relative to their discourse context. This more pragmatic conception of language, we argue, betrays the enduring, although unacknowledged, influence of the 'significs' of Victoria Lady Welby (1837–1912), a theory that occupied Ogden in his student days. In section 4, we turn to Russell's rather negative assessment of *The Meaning of Meaning* and argue that his main reason for rejecting the work lies in Ogden and Richards' concessions to pragmatic considerations. Despite this, we see, in section 5, how aspects of *The Meaning of Meaning* are reflected in Russell's later writings.

2. Reference and other functions of language

Perhaps the strongest thread binding *The Meaning of Meaning* and logical atomism is their shared preoccupation with reference. Reference serves as the centrepiece of the accounts of meaning in both doctrines, and in both it is anchored in the same psychological theories. But while reference exhausts Russell's interest in meaning, for Ogden and Richards it is subordinated to a broader multifunctional model in which it is just one among many uses of significant symbols. They see

reference as the most important function in modern, scientific discourse, but not as the limit of their theory, as it was for Russell.

Ogden and Richards' account of the referential function is introduced in the opening pages of their book with the 'Triangle of Reference', a diagram, shown in Figure 1 below, that has gone on to achieve iconic status in twentieth-century semiotics. Each of the points in the triangle represents an entity assumed to be involved in an act of reference; the sides in turn illustrate the relations between these entities. A 'symbol', a word or any other type of sign, evokes a 'thought or reference', an idea in the mind of the hearer or perceiver of the sign, which is then directed to a 'referent', some entity or object in the world.

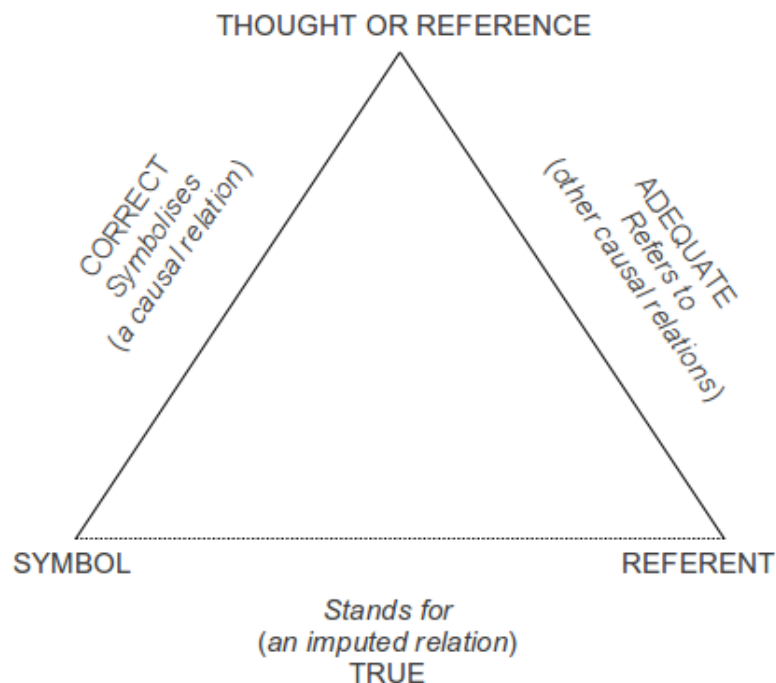


Figure 1. The Triangle of Reference (Ogden and Richards 1989[1923]:11)

The moral Ogden and Richards intend to be taken away from their account is that there is no direct connection between the symbol and its referent. The relation between them is rather 'imputed', as the dotted base of the triangle and its caption tell us. For any act of reference to succeed, it must first pass through the intermediate step of 'thought or reference' (Ogden and Richards 1989[1923]:9-12).

While one of the most recognisable features of the book, the invocation of thoughts or concepts

to mediate the relation between verbal signs and their referents in *The Meaning of Meaning* is no radical innovation. This approach has a long pedigree in Western theorising on language, extending back to Aristotle and summed up in the medieval Scholastic slogan: “‘vox significat mediantibus conceptibus’ (the word signifies through the medium of concepts)’ (Ullman 1962:56; see also Lyons 1963:1- 2, Padley 1976:162; Gordon 2006:2581). Although in his private correspondence with Ogden in 1930, Richards claimed that he was unaware of this Scholastic precedent for their model (see volume 3 of Gordon 1994:xxii, note 16), it is so fundamental to traditional European conceptions of meaning that it has become embedded in our folk-theory of language. It would therefore not be unreasonable to suppose that Richards, despite his professed ignorance, had subconsciously absorbed a version of it during his schooling. This is even more likely in the case of the trained classicist Ogden, whose undergraduate specialisation was in the influence of Greek language on Ancient Greek thought (see Gordon 1990b:5). In any case, there were contemporary exponents of these ideas that Ogden and Richards knew and cited in *The Meaning of Meaning*. The German logician Gottlob Frege (1848–1925), a major inspiration to Russell (see Russell 1959), famously introduced a distinction between *Sinn* and *Bedeutung* for every signifying expression, where *Sinn* is the abstract sense attached to the expression and *Bedeutung* the actual reference (Frege 1984[1892]). His theory is summarised in a survey of existing theories of meaning in Appendix D of *The Meaning of Meaning* (Ogden and Richards 1989[1923]:273-274). The specific geometry of Ogden and Richards’ model is also not original to them: triangles with similar labels can be found in the work of the Austrian philosopher Heinrich Gomperz (1873–1943; see Stern 1931:37; Gordon 1982:59; Nerlich 1992:250-251; Seiler 1991:102-103; 1994:41; Gomperz 1908:77). Gomperz’ model is also included in Ogden and Richards (1989[1923]:274-277) survey of theories of meaning, but they claim to have it second hand from Dittrich (1913) and make no mention of Gomperz’ triangle diagrams.

The triangle of reference and the theory that stands behind it are therefore no innovations *ex nihilo*; neither do they have a single source. But if we delve deeper into Ogden and Richards’ description of their model, and look in particular at the psychological justification they offer for it, we find specific and unmistakable parallels to Russell’s logical atomism. In the elaborations Russell made to the epistemological foundations of logical atomism around the time *The Meaning of Meaning* appeared (as presented in Schiller, Russell and Joachim 1920; Russell 1921), Russell posited ‘images’ in the mind as the internalised symbols of conscious thought. They act, argued Russell, through the process of ‘mnemic causation’, a term derived from the work of the Lamarckian evolutionary biologist Richard Semon (1859–1918; Russell in Schiller, Russell and

Joachim 1920:403; Russell 1921:145 cites Semon 1904; 1909). Mnemic causation is the connection between a stimulus and a response. After repeated occurrences of a stimulus, an organism becomes conditioned to respond in a particular way. In the case of language, a word is repeated in the presence of the object it denotes and, as a result, it becomes associated with the object. Over time this relationship becomes so deeply engrained that the word alone can bring forth the same mnemic response that the object itself would. This is an instance of what Russell calls the simple ‘demonstrative’ use of language, as when a speaker calls the hearer’s attention to an oncoming car: the mnemic effect of both seeing the car and hearing the warning uttered is the same, to jump out of the way (see Russell 1921:166-167). He admits images into his scheme to account for cases where the referent is not immediately present, as in historical or fictional accounts, what Russell calls ‘narrative and imaginative’ uses of language. Instead of causing an immediate bodily reaction, the mnemic effect of words can be to summon images in the mind of the hearer (*ibid.*:168-170). Words and images can act in a reciprocal relationship, as when an image in a speaker’s mind causes them to use the associated word in order to cause the related image in the mind of a hearer:

When we understand a word, there is a reciprocal association between it and the images of what it “means”. Images may cause us to use words which mean them, and these words, heard or read, may in turn cause the appropriate images. Thus speech is a means of producing in our hearers the images which are in us.

(Russell 1921:173)

Ogden and Richards similarly draw on Semon’s work to ground their model. They use his notion of ‘engram’ as the foundation of their psychological theory (Ogden and Richards 1989[1923]:52 acknowledge the source of this term in Semon 1921[1904]), although they take some ironic distance from the term, commenting: ‘Attempts to provide this account [of the process of Interpretation] have been given in many different vocabularies. [...] The most recent form in which the account appears is that adopted by Semon, the novelty of whose vocabulary seems to have attracted attention once more to considerations which were no doubt too familiar to be thought of any importance’ (Ogden and Richards 1989[1923]:51). An engram is a mental impression of the relation between two entities in the world formed after repeatedly observing their co-occurrence. This can be any stimulus-response pairing in any organism, such as a person’s expectation of seeing a flame after striking a match, a chicken’s avoidance of yellow striped caterpillars after eating one and discovering it tastes bad, and a dog’s prompt arrival at the dining table on hearing the dinner bell (Ogden and Richards 1989[1923]:52-53, 55-56). In the same way, repeated occurrences of a word in the presence of its referent lead to the development of a link, the ‘thought or reference’, that

connects them.¹ Ogden and Richards continue to casually use the vocabulary of ‘engrams’ and ‘mnemic causation’ throughout the book when describing their theory.

In terms of the function they serve, ‘thoughts or references’ in *The Meaning of Meaning* are close equivalents of Russell’s ‘images’, despite the obvious difference that Ogden and Richards saw thoughts as necessary intermediaries between words and the world, while Russell recognised in his ‘demonstrative’ use of language contexts in which words could act directly, without intermediate images, to elicit responses (a point Russell 1988[1923]a:136 himself highlighted; cf. Russell 1988[1926]:142). However, Ogden and Richards actually saw their conception of thoughts as a key point of difference between Russell and themselves (Ogden and Richards 1989[1923]:62): they were criticising the notion implicit in Russell’s exposition that images are ‘revivals or copies of sensory experience’ (*ibid.*:60). Their ‘thoughts or references’, by contrast, need not replicate sensory experience, but merely direct, in some non-specific way, the interpreter’s attention to a referent (see further chapter 3 of *ibid.*; this is a claim that Russell 1988[1923]a:136-137 thought to be too indefinite and underspecified). But this is a minor difference: ‘thoughts or references’ and ‘images’ are still fundamentally comparable in both being some sort of acquired mental reflex of an organism generated as a response to external stimuli. Russell even extended his images to stimulus-response pairings outside language and outside strictly human mental activity. A bear made to stand on a hot floor while music is played, he argued, will learn to dance whenever it hears the music, even in the absence of the heat: for the bear, the music has become the sign of the hot floor, it ‘means’ the hot floor (Russell in Schiller, Russell and Joachim 1920:398).

This point of contact between logical atomism and *The Meaning of Meaning* has already been observed by Wolf (1988:86-89), but he errs in identifying the behaviourism of John B. Watson (1878–1958) as the source of their common psychological theorising (cf. Gordon 2006:2584-2585; Green 2007:20). Russell (e.g., 1921:26) did indeed favourably cite Watson (1914), but he was at the same time critical of him because he allowed no place for images (see chapter 8 of Russell 1921; 1986[1919]:287-288; cf. Russell 1914). Watson’s behaviourism permitted stimuli and conditioned responses, but considered talk of images and any other phenomena that defied direct observation as unscientific. In later works, Russell (e.g. 1988[1926]) moved closer to orthodox behaviourism and

¹In fact, Ogden and Richards (1989[1923]:63) argue that all cognition is a matter of recursive inferences and interpretations that start with the impressions formed from direct sensations. Ogden and Richards are perhaps influenced here by Peirce’s notion of ‘interpretant’. Ogden was made familiar with Peirce’s work through his contact with Victoria Lady Welby (see Gordon 1990a, Petrilli 2009:731-747, 767-782, and Schmitz 1985:clxxviii-clxxxiv for further discussion; Welby herself is introduced in section 3 below). For many years, the most widely available account of Peirce’s semiotic thought was the summary given in *The Meaning of Meaning* (Ogden and Richards 1989[1923]:279-290).

retreated from images as necessary methodological posits in explaining non-demonstrative meaning, although he remained agnostic about whether or not they do in fact exist in some form. But his images were never wholly incompatible with behaviourism, in that under his doctrine of ‘neutral monism’ they did not inhabit a separate mental realm.² Ogden and Richards adopted precisely the same attitude to behaviourism: while respecting the empirical, scientific spirit of behaviourism, they rejected the behaviourists’ zealous enforcement of this spirit to the point of denying consciousness (see, e.g., chapter 10 of Ogden 1926; Richards 1926[1924]; Ogden 1927a; Richards 1973[1938]:283). This position finds expression again in Richards’ later good-natured poem ‘against’ the book *Verbal Behavior* (1957), a book written by his friend, the leading behaviourist Burrhus Frederic Skinner (1904–1990; see Russo 1989:175). While Russell, Ogden and Richards recognised behaviourism as a leading modern psychological theory compatible in spirit with their own views, they preferred to talk in terms of mental operations and grounded their own models in adaptations of Semon’s ‘mnemic causation’ and ‘engrams’.

Ogden and Richards located their main theoretical differences from Russell in their underlying psychological conceptions, but the true divergence between them comes with the wider context in which *The Meaning of Meaning* treats reference. While Ogden and Richards considered reference as just one function among many in language, Russell always insisted that the core elements of his semantic theory, those relevant to his logical doctrines, were concerned with reference alone. From the very outset of *The Meaning of Meaning*, Ogden and Richards postulate a multifunctional model of language, with a primary division between the ‘symbolic’, or referential, function, and the ‘emotive’ functions, a collection of what would now be considered various pragmatic and attitudinal aspects of meaning. But even though it is subordinated to broader concerns, the referential function has priority in *The Meaning of Meaning*: it is not only the first function to be explicated – and the only one to receive a truly comprehensive exposition – but it is also considered crucial for the ‘reflective, intellectual use of language’ (Ogden and Richards 1989[1923]:10), the key to modern discourse. The emotive functions receive comparatively brief and discursive treatment (in chapter 10 of *ibid.*). Reference may not exhaust meaning, and in non-intellectual contexts or in more ‘primitive’ societies it may find very little use, but for the modern thinkers of the civilised world, for whose benefit *The Meaning of Meaning* was chiefly conceived, it is of utmost importance

²Under Russell’s metaphysical doctrine of ‘neutral monism’, ‘mind and matter alike are [...] constructed out of a neutral stuff’ (Russell 1921:244). There is therefore no separate plane of mental existence, independent of the material world: we can use the same explanations that we apply to directly observable physical phenomena to account for mental goings-on (see chapter 15 of Russell 1921; cf. Russell 1914; see also Tully 2003).

(*ibid.*:233).³

A focus on reference and appeal to the latest psychological theories bind logical atomism and the views elaborated in *The Meaning of Meaning* together. Further parallels between the two approaches emerge as we see that their projects were thoroughly normative: their common aim was to overcome ordinary language and offer a better means of communication.

3. The normative program

‘We ought to regard communication as a difficult matter,’ write Ogden and Richards (1989[1923]:123), ‘and close correspondence of reference for different thinkers as a comparatively rare event.’ The overarching aim of *The Meaning of Meaning* is to remedy this situation: to provide the intellectual tools required to overcome ‘word-magic’. Russell’s (1994[1905]) ‘theory of descriptions’, originally an outgrowth of his logical work and later integrated into logical atomism (see Russell 1992[1911]; 1986[1918]; chapter 3 of Whitehead and Russell 1910-1913), is similarly aimed at achieving clarity in language.⁴ *The Meaning of Meaning* and logical atomism therefore both stand on a language-critical pillar. In practice, too, the techniques they employ to correct language take a common approach, even though the ends they seek are radically different: while Ogden and Richards sought to reform ordinary language, Russell wanted to avoid it altogether.

In both logical atomism and *The Meaning of Meaning* paraphrase is adopted as the technique for eliminating the confusions and deceptions of ordinary language. In *The Meaning of Meaning* paraphrase takes the form of the ‘method of definition’ (outlined in chapter 6 of the book), a means for ‘expanding’ a symbol so that it reflects the ‘thought or reference’ it stands for more clearly. To ensure a successful definition it is necessary to have a shared starting point and a clear route to reach the reference: ‘It is never safe to assume that it [correspondence of reference for different thinkers] has been secured unless both the starting-points and the routes of definition, whereby the referent of at least a majority of the symbols employed have been reached, are known’ (Ogden and Richards 1989[1923]:123). These starting points are best sought ‘outside the speech situation’; they should be ‘things, that is, which we can point to or experience’ (*ibid.*:115).

³It should be mentioned that multifunctional models of this sort were a commonplace in contemporary theorising among linguists, anthropologists and some psychologists. For an overview of this context, see Nerlich (1992).

⁴Russell (1959:145) later claimed that he only became explicitly interested in meaning in 1918 and that before this date he had ‘regarded language as “transparent”’ (cf. Monk 1997:39). However, the 1905 theory of descriptions was one of the stepping stones on his way to an appreciation of the complexities of language and became, without major modification, an integral part of his linguistic theory when he turned to such problems in 1918.

In Russell's theory of descriptions as later incorporated into logical atomism (see chapter 3 of Russell 1926[1914]), paraphrases in a logical notation are offered for expressions in ordinary language. The paraphrase represents what the proposition *really* means in terms of Russell's psychologically grounded semantic theory. The atomic elements of the notation correspond to the 'sense-data' we receive directly through experience, and the relations of these sense-data to one another are expressed through the logical operators. We recognise that the entities we perceive in the world – tables, chairs, and so on – are simply 'logical constructions' built up from our sense-data. Russell's paraphrases are intended represent the true underlying structure of these constructions.

As with the details of their models of reference, this use of paraphrase, conceived of in various ways, was original to neither Ogden and Richards nor Russell. Among contemporary projects, Frege's *Begriffsschrift* ('conceptual notation') was a similarly designed logical notation intended to lay bare the underlying structure of ideas, which may be concealed by the language in which they are habitually expressed (see Frege 1972[1879]:106). There is a long tradition of such efforts in the empirically rooted philosophy of the English-speaking world, with the English Enlightenment philosopher John Locke (1632–1704) standing out as an early and influential figure (see Book III of Locke 1975[1690]). The formulation of correct names concerned also many of Locke's contemporaries who, although they may not have agreed with his assumptions and methods, pursued a similar course. Chief among these are John Wilkins (1614–1672) and Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646–1716), whose constructed language projects aimed in part at creating philosophically sound linguistic expressions (see chapters 7 and 8 of Knowlson 1975 for a wider context). As we have observed, Russell drew a great deal of inspiration from Frege (see section 2). He had also devoted much study to Leibniz' work (Russell 1937[1900] is a monograph-length exposition of Leibniz' *œuvre*). All these figures, including Locke, also receive not unfavourable mention at various points in *The Meaning of Meaning* (e.g., Ogden and Richards 1989[1923]:43-44, 137, 273-274 *et passim*).

There is, however, a fundamental difference in the status accorded to paraphrase in logical atomism and *The Meaning of Meaning*. Whereas Russell's descriptions are intended to be absolutely valid, Ogden and Richards claimed no ontological priority for their definitions. Ogden and Richards (1989[1923]:253-255) were in fact highly critical of the suggestion that there could be ultimate descriptions that somehow directly correspond to facts in the world, a position explicitly taken in the early work of Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951; see props. 2.1-2.225 of Wittgenstein 1922), whose views Russell acknowledged as informing the development of his logical atomism

(Russell 1986[1918]:160). Their definitions were intended to be better than existing expressions, it is true, but only because they are more effective in the particular communicative context in which they appear. They devote considerable effort to formulating the ‘Canons of Symbolism’, a set of rules that participants in discourse should follow to ensure their words match their referents (Ogden and Richards 1989[1923]:88-106). Russell never concerned himself with such pragmatic aspects of language: he in fact insisted that such concerns were irrelevant to his work.

This difference between *The Meaning of Meaning* and Russell’s account perhaps reveals the enduring, but covert, influence of Victoria Lady Welby, whose protégé Ogden became during his undergraduate days (see Gordon 1990a; Petrilli 2009:731-747). At the centre of her doctrine of ‘significs’ stands the act of interpretation, which consists in an interpreter assimilating what is said to their own understanding of the world, built up through previous experience and informed by the present context (Welby 1893:512-513). Her project was also normative: she hoped to improve communication between people by making them conscious of this process through the method of ‘translation’, which she also called ‘definition’ (see Welby 1983[1903]:83; Petrilli 2009:560). Ogden and Richards’ method of definition could be seen as a practical implementation of Welby’s approach. It aimed to sharpen interlocutors’ understanding of each other’s terms by making them negotiate their meanings; there is no single ideal definition, as there is a single ‘description’ for Russell: correspondence may be desirable and achievable in ‘scientific symbol systems’, but it is not found in ordinary language, which ‘los[es] in accuracy but gain[s] in plasticity, facility and convenience’, as Ogden and Richards (1989[1923]:254-255) say. The prototype of this approach is discernible in Ogden’s (1994[1911]) ‘Progress of Significs’, a manuscript he originally wrote within the framework of Welby’s theory. In terms similar to those in *The Meaning of Meaning*, the manuscript presents a critique of word-magic *avant la lettre* and proposes similar remedies (Ogden 1994[1911]:21-22). Although not described in the kind of detail found in *The Meaning of Meaning*, one of these is a form of definition (Gordon, in his notes to Ogden 1994[1911], indicates further parallels).

The theories of meaning set out in logical atomism and *The Meaning of Meaning* are both thoroughly normative: their shared goal is to rectify linguistic expressions to match their referents. The methods employed are also similar: both replace the given forms of ordinary language with more precise paraphrases. But while Russell’s paraphrases, his ‘descriptions’, were intended to correspond absolutely to their referents, the validity of Ogden and Richards’ ‘definitions’ depended on the context of the discourse in which they were used. This is an insurmountable incompatibility between the two theories and, as we will now see, probably the main reason for Russell’s rejection

of *The Meaning of Meaning*.

4. Russell's reception of *The Meaning of Meaning*

Russell wrote two reviews of *The Meaning of Meaning*, but in neither did he really endorse the book. In his first review he described it as 'undoubtedly important and valuable' (Russell 1988[1923]a:137) – and in his second as 'of considerable importance' (Russell 1988[1926]:138) – but he still concluded:

Whether it achieves all it professes to achieve, I have found it impossible to decide. If it does so, it is of first-class philosophical importance. The authors, however, seem a trifle too prone to believe that every question would be easy if the wilful obscurities of metaphysicians were swept aside, and this makes their discussion sometimes seem a little perfunctory. It is to be hoped that future elaborations of the theory will enable us to judge whether this is a defect in their thought or only an impatience in their manner of exposition.

(Russell 1988[1923]a:137)⁵

Russell's assessment of the book should perhaps be understood in the context of his wider struggle to establish his own views within the philosophical community. His place as a leading philosopher had only been won by overturning the idealism that dominated British philosophy during his student years and early career (see chapters 4-6 of Russell 1959). In *The Meaning of Meaning*, he may have recognised traces of the kind of doctrines he had fought so hard against, particularly those inspired by Welby.

Welby and Russell were known to each other and were well aware of the apparent incompatibility of many of their ideas. Shortly after Russell published his first version of the theory of descriptions in 1905, Welby began a correspondence with him about this and other aspects of his work (the correspondence is reproduced with commentary in Petrilli 2009:294-301, 310-325; see also Schmitz 1995; 1985:clix-clx for commentary). Welby's central critique of the theory of descriptions is that it neglects 'awareness'; it deals only with the 'sense' of an utterance. In her theory of signification, Welby argued that meaning can be divided into three parts: 'sense', 'meaning' and 'interpretation'. In short, 'sense' is the immediate reaction an interpreter has to an utterance or other significant stimulus, 'meaning' is the intention that the creator of the utterance had in making it, and 'interpretation' is the ultimate effect the utterance has in the world (Welby 1911:103; Petrilli 2009:264-271). The crucial aspect of an utterance like 'The present King of France is bald' – a

⁵Russell's assessment of *The Meaning of Meaning* applied also to the person of Ogden, it would seem. Five years after Ogden's death, Russell commented in 1962 that he was 'the cleverest man that had been at Magdalene since Pepys,' but added: 'To be the cleverest man at Magdalene since Pepys is no very great praise, because it was not a college that went in for intellect, particularly – it was a sporting college' (see Anderson 1977:235).

sentence Russell (1994[1905]) famously used to illustrate the workings of his theory of descriptions – is the speaker’s intention to show that it is nonsense; this is its ‘meaning’, says Welby:

I do not here raise the question of whether we should not gain by always using “meaning” in its immediate or central sense of intention: in which speaking of the “present King of France” as bald, we intend to convey what is sheer mistake or sheer nonsense. That is, it is not meaningless (or purposeless) *but senseless*.

(Welby to Russell, 14 November 1905, in Petrilli 2009:321, also in Schmitz 1985:clxii; emphasis original)

Russell’s response to Welby’s critique was dismissive. He felt that she had missed the point: his concern was simply with logical language and what can be referred to in it; all other features of natural language are simply irrelevant. The theory of descriptions is not about ‘[...] *intention*, but something logical; I do not know quite how to explain what it is that I intend, & I think perhaps I could excise the word *meaning* with advantage, as I do not intend what you intend when you use the word, & your use seems more correct than mine’ (Russell to Welby, 25 November 1905, in Petrilli 2009:322, also in Schmitz 1985:clxii; emphasis original). Their correspondence on this topic continued in a similar fashion until the end of the year: Welby raised further considerations and Russell dismissed them as irrelevant to his interests.

Russell’s curtness in responding to Welby may have been due to his seeing her as part of the hostile British philosophical establishment. In trying to propagate his theory of descriptions, Russell had already faced objections from her supporters. In connection with the publication of his original 1905 paper on the theory of descriptions, Russell (1959:83) tells us: ‘This doctrine [the theory of descriptions] struck the then editor [of *Mind*] as so preposterous that he begged me to reconsider it and not to demand its publication as it stood.’ This editor was George Frederick Stout (1860–1944), who in preceding years had encouraged Welby to publish in *Mind* and even co-authored a paper with her (Welby, Stout and Baldwin 1902). Russell does not tell us why the doctrine struck Stout as ‘preposterous’ but it is possible that his reasons were related to Welby’s. Almost a decade after Welby passed away, but while Stout was still editor of *Mind*, Russell participated in a ‘symposium’ on the ‘meaning of *meaning*’ published in the journal, which also involved the pragmatist philosopher and Welby supporter Ferdinand Canning Scott Schiller (1864–1937), and Harold Henry Joachim (1868–1938), an idealist philosopher (Schiller, Russell and Joachim 1920). Schiller charged, in terms reminiscent of Welby, that there must be some interpretive force that creates meaning, for which Russell gave no account. Meaning, says Schiller (1920:389), is ‘essentially an *activity* or *attitude* taken up towards objects by a subject or energetically projected into them like an α particle, until they, too, grow active and begin to radiate with “meaning”’. Russell (*ibid.*:398)

countered that he never claimed that meaning is ‘an intrinsic property inherent in objects’ but rather the ‘causal efficacy of that which has meaning’, by which he meant the response that a particular stimulus brings forth. Here he introduced his pseudo-behaviourist model, which still left a place for ‘images’ (see section 2).

But Russell’s ‘causal efficacy’ may not necessary be incompatible with significs and allied doctrines. As the direct response of an organism to its environment, it is essentially equivalent to Welby’s ‘sense’. Ogden and Richards’ use of ‘engrams’ as the psychological element creating references (see section 2) can similarly be assimilated to this group of ideas. The irreconcilable difference between Russell’s approach and Welby’s, and the extension of the latter in *The Meaning of Meaning*, is that Russell’s descriptions seek to be unique and unambiguous, to eschew interpretation.

Russell’s search for direct, uninterpreted forms rests on a belief in Cratylan linguistic naturalism (cf. Schmitz 1995). He not only thought that it is possible to create unambiguous forms, he also believed that words originally matched what they name and have become obscured over time:

If we trace any Indo-European language back far enough, we arrive hypothetically (at any rate according to some authorities) at the stage when language consisted only of the roots out of which subsequent words have grown. How these roots acquired their meanings is not known, but a conventional origin is clearly just as mythical as the social contract by which Hobbes and Rousseau supposed civil government to have been established. We can hardly suppose a parliament of hitherto speechless elders meeting together and agreeing to call a cow a cow and a wolf a wolf. The association of words with their meaning must have grown up by some natural process, though at present the nature of the process is unknown.

(Russell 1921:189-90)

Despite his linguistic naturalism, Russell recognised the ambiguity of ordinary language and the obfuscation of senses that it inevitably leads to as essential properties which make communication possible:

When one person uses a word, he does not mean by it the same thing as another person means by it. I have often heard it said that this is a misfortune. That is a mistake. It would be absolutely fatal if people meant the same things by their words. It would make all intercourse impossible, and language the most hopeless and useless thing imaginable [...] We should have to talk only about logic – a not wholly undesirable result.

(Russell 1986[1918]:174; see also *ibid.*:176; 1988[1923]b)

The difference between Russell and Welby – and, by extension, Ogden and Richards – is that Russell envisaged the possibility of a ‘logically perfect language’ distinct from ordinary natural language (cf. Green 2007:68-72). The words of the logically perfect language Russell strove for could only describe each individual’s sense-data; it would be an entirely private language through which we could communicate nothing to other people (Russell 1986[1918]:176; cf. Russell 1988[1923]b). This is a complex stance on language and meaning. Although he believed in a naturalistic origin of language, Russell saw the historical departure of language from this naturalism as an inevitable result of how it functions. In his logical work he hoped to restore this naturalism by establishing isomorphy of form and meaning, but his logically perfect language was intended only for scientific and philosophical purposes; the ambiguity of ordinary language is an essential property. In the theory of descriptions Russell was concerned, as he insisted in his correspondence with Welby, specifically with ‘something logical’, not with language altogether. ‘Logicians,’ pointed out Russell (1986[1919]:282), ‘so far as I know, have done very little towards explaining the nature of this relation called “meaning,” nor are they to blame in this, since the problem is essentially one for psychology’.

5. Adoption of ideas

Despite his largely negative assessment of *The Meaning of Meaning*, there are echoes of Ogden and Richards’ rhetoric and arguments in some of Russell’s later works, suggesting the possible covert influence of the book on Russell’s thinking. Most saliently, Russell’s rhetoric about the power of words came ever more to resemble Ogden and Richards’ description of word-magic. Russell, in his first monograph-length treatment of semantic issues, comments:

Words, from the earliest times of which we have historical records, have been objects of superstitious awe. The man who knew his enemy’s name could, by means of it, acquire magic powers over him. We still use such phrases as ‘in the name of the Law’. It is easy to assent to the statement ‘in the beginning was the Word’.

(Russell 1940:23)

In chapter 2 of *The Meaning of Meaning*, essentially a catalogue of instances of word-magic, we find examples comparable to those Russell raises (see in particular Ogden and Richards 1989[1923]:26-30). Russell’s words above recall the opening lines of this chapter:

From the earliest time the Symbols which men have used to aid the process of thinking and to record their achievements have been a continuous source of wonder and illusion. The whole human race has been impressed by the properties of words as instruments for the control of objects, that in every age it has attributed to them occult powers [...]

(Ogden and Richards 1989[1923]:24)

Russell's absorption of the approach Ogden and Richards cultivated extended to accepting a multifunctional model of ordinary language. Russell (1940:204; cf. *ibid*:53-55; 1988[1926]:139-140) endorsed a model with three purposes: '(1) to *indicate* facts, (2) to *express* the state of the speaker, (3) to *alter* the state of the hearer' (emphasis original), each of which may be more or less present in sentences of different types. But ordinary language was never allowed to encroach on Russell's logical formalisms and his central concern always remained 'something logical': 'The question of truth and falsehood,' insisted Russell (1940:212), 'has to do with what words and sentences indicate, not with what they express.' He maintained his hard line in searching for the uninterpreted 'logically perfect language', commenting that 'it is not impossible to whittle away the element of interpretation, or to invent an artificial language involving a minimum of theory. By these methods we can approach asymptotically to the pure datum' (Russell 1940:124).

Russell's continued maintenance of a putative perfect language beyond interpretation later drew fire from the rival analytic camp of the Oxford 'ordinary language' philosophers. With arguments reminiscent of those Welby used half a century before (a similarity noticed also by Schmitz 1995:301-303), Peter F. Strawson (1919–2006; 1950), in addressing Russell's theory of descriptions, insisted that it is necessary to consider how an expression is used to make a reference rather than the formal properties of the expression itself. Russell's (1959[1957]) rebuttal recalls his reply to Welby. He contended that Strawson had confused the problem of descriptions with 'egocentricity', that is, the variation in basic ostension through language because of differences in experience. Russell believed that the two problems are separate and that in fact descriptions provide us with a way to overcome the variation due to egocentricity by giving us, through logical constructions, access to data beyond our immediate senses. He reiterated, a final time, his goal for a language divorced from the ambiguity and vagueness of ordinary language, two features indispensable in 'daily life' but not suitable to the purposes of science:

This brings me to a fundamental divergence between myself and many philosophers with whom Mr Strawson appears to be in general agreement. They are persuaded that common speech is good enough, not only for daily life, but also for philosophy. I, on the contrary, am persuaded that common speech is full of vagueness and inaccuracy, and that any attempt to be precise and accurate requires modification as regards vocabulary and as regards syntax. Everybody admits that physics and chemistry and medicine each require a language which is not that of everyday life. I fail to see why philosophy, alone, should be forbidden to make a similar approach towards precision and accuracy.

(Russell 1959[1957]:241-242)

Even though he always maintained a thoroughgoing commitment to a ‘logically perfect language’ beyond all pragmatic concerns, the statements Russell made in his later works about the superstitious power of words and the multifunctional nature of ordinary language are highly reminiscent of characteristic passages in *The Meaning of Meaning*. The book would seem to have exercised a covert influence on Russell and his conception of language.

6. Conclusion

From its preoccupation with reference, its appeal to the latest scientific doctrines, and its language-critical normative program, it can be seen that *The Meaning of Meaning* was intended at least in part as a contribution to the kind of new philosophy being developed in Russell’s logical atomism, one of the core theories of the incipient stages of analytic philosophy. But the book attempted to place reference within a broader semiotic framework, drawing on principles from a range of other sources. The contextualisation, or perhaps even relativisation, that Ogden and Richards pursued did not win them the support they hoped for from Russell. This may be both because of the perceived inadequacy of Ogden and Richards’ formulations and because they drew, even if without explicit acknowledgement, on doctrines associated with the enemies Russell had had to overcome to establish his own views, in particular the signification of Wittgenstein. Even though no endorsement was forthcoming from Russell, we see reflected in Russell’s later works concessions to the multifunctional nature of ordinary language and a conception of the superstitious power accorded to words that are uncannily similar to those put forward by Ogden and Richards. *The Meaning of Meaning* was therefore a book oriented towards Russell’s logical atomism, and may have exercised a covert influence on its development.

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