

# UNDERSTANDING THE MEANING<sup>1</sup>

Eugene Albert Nida

The American Bible Society

## Abstract

This article provides an overview of the nature of meaning, emphasizing the associative character of lexical meanings. The essay also comments on the meaning-related difficulties the translator must often overcome in order to reach a coherent interpretation due to the dubious quality of many original texts. The author illustrates this point through texts from the European Union. He also discusses some exceptional situations, especially regarding religious and traditional texts such as the Lord's Prayer, whose formal power, including the magical ring of words, seems to outshine the alleged universal need for coherence and signification. Thus, any attempt to promote an alternative translation is systematically rejected because although the new version might be more meaningful, it would also go against the symbolic power of the coined formula. [Javier Franco Aixelá]

## Resumen

En este artículo se realiza un repaso de la naturaleza del significado, con énfasis en el carácter asociativo de los significados léxicos. Igualmente, se comentan las dificultades semánticas que el traductor debe superar en múltiples ocasiones, ilustrándolas a través de textos de la Unión Europea, para poder alcanzar una interpretación coherente debido a la discutible calidad de muchos textos originales. También se comentan situaciones excepcionales, especialmente en textos de carácter religioso y de gran tradición como el "Padre Nuestro", donde el poder formal, incluso la magia de las palabras parece eclipsar la supuesta necesidad universal de coherencia y significación, de tal manera que se rechaza cualquier intento de traducción alternativa porque aunque pueda resultar más significativa también quebraría el poder simbólico de la fórmula acuñada.

---

1. Note from the editors: We wish to express our most sincere thanks to Eugene A. Nida for this special off-topic article, which in spite of his delicate health he has written as a token of support to this new translation journal. We consider it a great honour and privilege to include Dr. Nida's contribution in our first issue.

**Keywords:** Meaning. Bible translation. European Union. Coherence.

**Palabras clave:** Significado. Traducción bíblica. Unión Europea. Coherencia.

Poorly written texts are the most serious obstacle to effective translating. Agencies and clients continually give to translators texts in which the terminology is strange and the grammar is obscure. Furthermore, there is often no indication as to the type of audience that is to receive the corresponding translation. Recently such a document scheduled to be translated into the eleven languages of the European Union contained the following opening statement: “The purpose of this publication is to improve the knowledge among the general public in EU countries of the identity of the applicant countries, indirectly generating understanding for the enlargement process. Format folding 10.5 x 25 cm. Contains a map of Europe and text presenting geography/history and other non-EU-political information of each candidate country. Print run in 11 language versions: 1250 000 copies.”

The text does not make clear whether this initial statement is merely in-house information. But it appears to be something that should at least accompany in some way the short descriptions of the new countries applying for membership in the European Union. The string of four prepositional phrases “among the general public in EU countries of the identity of the applicant countries” is grammatically awkward and certainly not readily understandable. The phrase “of the identity” is dependent on the prior term “knowledge”, while the phrase “of the applicant countries” relates to “identity”. But the elaborate gerundive phrase “indirectly generating understanding for the enlargement process” is a strange participial extension expressing either purpose or result. The proper calculation of copies should be written correctly, and specify whether this is the total number for the eleven languages combined or the total for each language.

This initial paragraph does not specify precisely how the content of this paragraph is to be treated in the publications for each language. But it does contain information that is at least indirectly relevant for readers of the proposed booklets. Unfortunately, however, the verb “contains” occurs without a subject (presumably the booklets) and the compound “geography/history” is orthographically and stylistically strange. Also the reference to “non-EU-political information” is highly ambiguous, since the negative “non” can apply to the “EU”, “EU-political” or to “EU-political information”. The expression “information of each candidate country” should be “information about each candidate country”.

This stylistically poor initial statement is, however, matched by a number of other inadequacies in the texts that describe each country. For example, one text speaks about “reuniting the European continent”, but when in his-

tory was the continent of Europe ever united? Surely not by the Romans or Charlemagne or Napoleon.

### 1. The volume of translating

Well informed sources indicate that the increase in interlingual verbal communication in our electronic world is at least 14% a year. More than 400 languages have orthographic systems for electronic transmission, and a university program in Beijing teaches interlingual communication in some twenty different languages. In Hong Kong there are 6,000 translators, and the Professional Translators Society of China has 40,000 members. The European Union has more than 4,000 staff and freelance translators. And when one adds the number of translators associated with international organizations such as the United Nations, World Health Organization, and NATO, as well as numerous embassies, international banks and investment houses, and worldwide business enterprises, there must be more than 300,000 people giving a considerable amount of their time to interlingual communication.

The problems faced by terminologists are almost overwhelming because the classification and defining of verbal meaning is seemingly endless. In fact, terminologists in the European Union no longer attempt to define the various meanings of words and phrases. Instead, they provide sets of related contexts for the relevant semantic areas – a far more useful source of vital semantic information than definitions, because contexts, whether verbal or cultural, contribute more to the meaning of a text than do the head-words of phrases.

### 2. Sources of help in determining meaning

Sources for help in the analysis of lexical meaning are of two principal types: (1) the grammatical structures, which often provide important clues to the meanings of the combinations of words, and (2) contextual features (both linguistic and cultural), which are especially valuable in determining the semantic reference of words, phrases, sentences, paragraphs, and complete texts.

On the purely syntactic level the contextual clues for the various meanings of “up” may occur in such phrases as “stand up”, “sit up”, “fly up”, “fill up”, in which relative height is involved, but in “tie up traffic”, “turn up”, “follow up the lead” there are no such features of height.

“Up” may also occur in other syntactic combinations, for example, “to up the price” (as a verb), “the upper shelf” (as a comparative adjective, with the old-fashioned superlative formation “upmost”), and “the ups and downs of life” (as a noun).

Expressions such as “hit the dog”, “he hit the tree” do not require any radical shifts in the range of meaning of “hit”, because there are thousands of objects that can be hit. But in the case of such phrases as “hit a run”, “hit 200 miles an hour”, “the show was a hit”, “hit-and-run driver”, “the news hit him like a lightning bolt”, each expression is highly idiomatic and the meaning of the combination cannot be determined simply from the meaning of the constituent parts. Instead of viewing lexical meaning as a series of atomic units, it is much more relevant to think in terms of molecular meanings, consisting of a series of tightly bound lexical units.

Various occurrences of the verb “turn” may highlight in an even more significant manner the issues of specialization of meaning. In the statement “he turned around” there is an obvious change in spatial orientation. But there is also considerable ambiguity, because “turn around” can refer to a 180 degree turn or to a 360 degree turn. But in order to specify a 360 degree turn, it is often necessary to use the phrase “turn completely around”.

Spatial orientation may also combine with movement, as in “he turned the corner”. But it is also possible to say “the road turns east just beyond the bridge”. There is no real turning of the road, but rather a difference in the shape or form of the road. Such a meaning is not far from a number of statements indicating a change of state, for example, “turn sick”, “turn Socialist”, “the leaves turned”, “the economy is turning the corner”, “he just turned sixty”. But “turn” may also occur with a number of adverbial elements “he turned up late”, “turned over the document”, “turned on the light”, “it turned out well”, “turn a phrase well”, “turn down an offer”, “turn in his papers”. But “turn” can also occur as a noun with a meaning that seems unrelated to its uses as a verb, for example, “it is my turn”, “we do it by turns”, implying a sequence of activities.

### 3. Meaning by context

Terminologists are confronted with thousands of phrases containing combinations of words having highly specialized sets of meanings. But our difficulties with such seemingly illogical structures seem to reflect in considerable measure our backgrounds in Western philosophy and logic. We like to find neat categories and want our classifications to imitate the pigeon-hole patterns of post-offices, which are really not as neat as they appear to be.

We are generally taught to expect natural phenomena to be scientifically structured in easily recognizable sets. Perhaps this happens because we are simply too dominated by our Aristotelian heritage of the divided middle. But language is a behavioral activity and accordingly subject to all the

unsystematic features of human experience and interpretation. One Canadian scholar made a valiant effort over a period of years to classify all the various types of texts in one huge structure, but found that it was impossible to avoid overlapping and contradictory criteria. We cannot even provide universal criteria for distinguishing poetry from prose, history from biography, and stories from parables. Text-types constantly overlap.

Instead of symbolizing our difficulties of classification by dividing a circle with a solid line (symbolizing no exceptions) or by a dotted line (symbolizing some leakage), we should perhaps start thinking in terms of an oriental yin-yang circle with a semicircular line that doubles back on itself – a symbolic design that challenges our traditional logic of neat distinctions. Oriental and occidental systems for distinguishing and naming clusters of stars differ greatly. Why should not this same principle be applied to all types and levels of behavior, including both language and general behavior?

Terminologists working in well-known literary languages with a number of dictionaries and encyclopedias at their disposal have a tremendous advantage over those who try to determine the meanings of words in a very different part of the world. For example, in Anuak, a Nilotic language of the Sudan, the word “theeri” is a special force associated with birth and is directly related to the period of time in which a baby’s navel heals.

When a mother gives birth, eight or ten thorn branches are stuck into the ground surrounding the entire household, and no member of the family can come near the baby until the navel has healed. Even servants in a nearby household may suffer severe pain if someone happens to come near a house where a baby’s navel has not healed.

In the Western World people who work for domineering and inconsiderate bosses have an unusually high incidence of mental and physical ailments, even though we have a protective saying, “Sticks and stones can hurt my bones, but words cannot touch me”. But words do hurt, and evidently we have our own kind of theeri.

#### 4. From ritual to mantras

What seems particularly unfortunate is the rapidity with which verbal rituals become mantras. I have met devout Muslims in the Philippines who can recite large sections of the Koran without being able to construct a single sentence in Koranic or correct Arabic. For such persons their holy book is more of a mantra than a communication. This same phenomenon occurs in all religions, as well as in the rituals of secret societies, the speeches of politicians, and the advertising of products.

For several centuries priests of the Roman Catholic Church addressed worshippers only in Latin, a language completely unknown to most people, and the Russian Orthodox Church employs a form of Old Church Slavonic that even Slavic linguists cannot understand. In religion there seems to be a tremendous power in language that cannot be understood by lay participants.

In the Greek text of the New Testament the Lord's Prayer (Gospel of Matthew 6.9-13) is a literary jewel consisting of ten lines. The first five lines have nine syllables each, based on normal types of vowel coalescence, and lines 2, 3, and 4 have identical syntactic structures. The second set of five lines has a syllabic pattern of 15, 12, 15, 12, 12. Such a system of line measurement is ideal for changing and was evidently adapted into Greek from the Hebrew Scriptures.

Unfortunately, however, the force of tradition through the centuries has been so powerful that most English-speaking churches have a form of the Lord's Prayer that is largely unintelligible or entirely misleading. For example, I have never met a layman who could tell me the meaning of the word "hallowed" in the statement "hallowed be thy name". The phrase "thy name" is really a reference to God himself, based on the Hebrew avoidance of using God's name Yahweh. And the Greek term translated "hallowed" is an emphatic passive form of the Greek verb meaning "to make holy." But the actual meaning is a plea for God to reveal himself as the one true God.

The statement "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors" has nothing to do with financial matters, but is a plea for forgiveness as the result of having already forgiven others.

The English word "debts" is merely a borrowing of "debitum" from the Latin Vulgate Bible. Other Christian worshippers use "trespasses" but such a word refers only to being on the property of other persons without permission, and as such constitutes an entirely inadequate rendering of the Greek. In fact, the parallel passage in the Gospel of Luke uses a Greek word meaning simply "sins".

The plea "lead us not into temptation" should, of course, be rendered as "do not expose us to the trial of our faith", because all who professed faith in Jesus were automatically guilty of treason against the Roman state and could be arrested, imprisoned, and executed after sham hearings. And the final line "deliver us from evil" should be rendered as "deliver us from the evil one", namely, Satan. The doxology "for thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory for ever, Amen" occurs only in late manuscripts and therefore is not considered to be a valid ending and accordingly it was not included in the Latin Vulgate Bible.

What is amazing is that most theologians and many well educated laymen recognize the need for a more adequate revision of the Lord's Prayer in English, but there is such a widespread opposition to any serious revisions, even to changing "thy name" to "your name." In the minds of most worshippers, what is holy must be left holy, even if it is wrong. This means that the text has become essentially a mantra, something normally immune to change and at the same time almost meaningless or misleading.

On one occasion in East Africa I had the opportunity to speak with a leading priest, who was also a professor in a seminary. After a very informative conversation about the use of the Scriptures in the local language, I asked my friend to explain to me the meaning of a number of words in the letter of Saint Paul to the Romans. He was able to explain in an excellent manner the meanings of the various words, and so I asked him to read a sentence and then to give me the essence of the meaning in English. But he immediately told me that he could not do that. This surprised me, but he explained that although he knew the meanings of the words, he could not put them together in a meaningful way. And so I asked him how he managed to prepare sermons or lectures on biblical texts, and he replied, "I always read the Bible first in English so I will know what the text is supposed to mean". The words were apparently well chosen, but the grammar was so artificial that the text did not make sense.

Some mistakes by translators produce tragic mistakes. For example, after World War I a number of leaders in Europe and America wanted to establish a League of Nations, the purpose of which was to try to avoid another tragic war. French leaders simply asked for certain guarantees, but the phrase in an important document was literally "demander des garanties", meaning "to ask for guarantees." But some American politicians who opposed such an international organization rendered the meaning literally as "demanded guarantees," and they caused such uproar that President Wilson of the United States was helpless to change the public reactions and perhaps to have prevented a World War II.

Some wise translators, however, readily recognize texts that seem seriously wrong. For example, one text from Romania appeared to demand special concessions by the European Union. But the translator of the document into French realized that there must be a mistake in the submitted text, and his careful inquiry confirmed his suspicions, namely, that this document contained a statement about what Romania was ready to do in order to become a member of the European Union. Good translators need to be both suspicious and wise.