



Meaning Depends On Context



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There will inevitably be a philosophical polarization in the discussion of this page between those who believe absolutely that there are no absolutes and those who believe absolutely that there are absolutes! Of course, meaning really does depend upon context (as opposed to *definitions*, facts, and truth) then it depends upon whether your context requires things to be logical and non-contradictory.

So many debates recently hinge on the meaning of the Bible, [Robert Heinlein](#)'s pot-stirring, or on the intent of a voter ... in interpretation. Yet it's plain from the work of Jacques Derrida, deconstructionists that any text can be interpreted to mean anything; one need only change context.

It's also plain from the work of [Karl Popper](#) that no text can be taken to mean anything. But if you follow Derrida I guess you can't tell me what he's saying, because you can read anything into my words. Oh well, you've got it, how's the weather in there?

So it seems silly for folk to get up in arms about what some text means to a capital-M. What matters is what the text means to you. If you change context someone else brings to the interpretation of a text, it's their responsibility to relate their context to your own, not to just impose it on the other.

After all, do you want dialog or do you want dominance?

*I am curious as to which meaning of the word **dialog** you wish readers to interpret from the question you use here. Since you assert that it could be interpreted to mean **anything** there is no point in asking such a meaningless question!*

*The question assumes that the words have a particular meaning to everyone, therefore **Meaning Does Not Depend Upon Context**
Meaning Depends Upon Definition and **Meaning Depends Upon Truth**.*

How about, meaning depends on commonality? We can understand the same things in the same way because we have agreed to see them out of the same context. The "it can mean anything bit" are usually arrived at when the common context we agreed on (implicitly agreed on) forces us to accept something that we do not like.

So in my opinion saying that that something means everything or nothing is true, but it is also cheap and dishonest. -- Lourens Coetzer

So the voters don't have an intent until you interpret it? And you can interpret it to mean anything? And that is what matters? It seems that by changing context, you don't get new meaning, you lose what meaning you had and make stuff up as you go.

Not at all. Voters have an intent. You have an intent in your interpretation. Are these the same? Let's hope that, most of the time, they are. But plainly sometimes they're not. Like when someone *forgets* to empty the chad compartment regularly, for example. Or when someone sets up roadblocks preventing a voter from reaching a polling station. Or ... well, you know where this goes.

[DouglasHofstadter](#) takes this to its logical conclusion in his discussion of cleverly warped record players in GEB. He posits a record with no signal on it at all - but a record player with a number of distortions in its reproduction adequate to reproduce any song you like.

Sit down right now and let's talk about it.

Let's try a small experiment. First, I will unilaterally decide to interpret every word on this page as "baa", and we will measure how much it matters to the Wiki readership. When we have an answer, then you can rewrite the page so that all the words on it actually are "baa", and then we can measure how much *that* matters.

OK, I'm interpreting. Wow, sheep!

[WikiWeightedVote](#): how much does this response matter? [baa]

-- [DanBarlow](#)

any text can be interpreted to mean anything - you need only change context

This is way too extreme: not [MeaningDependsOnContext](#), but [MeaningIsDeterminedEntirelyByContext](#).

One quick counter-argument would be: well, why bother producing different texts, then? If any text can literally be interpreted to mean anything, why not just distribute blank bound sheets of paper?

A slower counter-argument might mention phone books, which I still haven't found more than one interpretation for. Their *intelligibility* and *usefulness*, of course, depend very heavily on context. (*I can't resist... from [TomLehrer's](#) song about plagiarism among mathematicians: "...Every chapter he stole from somewhere else... for the index he used the telephone directory... MetroGoldwynMoscow bought the movie rights for 5M Rubles, starring Greta Garbo ... "* (as the Bessel function maybe?))

[MeaningDependsOnContext](#) is a weaker statement, which is has the benefit of being true:

The same text can often be interpreted in different ways, depending on context.

Usually, we can get away with neglecting context, but sometimes it becomes very important. And when you look at a quotation used in an argument, checking up on its original context is usually a good idea.

Deriving value out of varying the context of some message greatly is something that a lot of creative people have experience with. Maybe not deliberately, but I am sure that most of us had inspiration come to us from really strange sources before. Like [ArchimedesOfSyracuse](#) and the bathtub.

The context of the phonebook can be changed and another meaning can be derived from it: Ask a hard life related question of it and start reading. Inspiration can then be found in the names numbers and addresses. Try it, it is called the phonebook oracle.

-- LourensCoetzer

MeaningIsaRelationship, not a thing. Trying to locate meaning in one place is doomed to fail, for the same reason that trying to locate "shorter" in one thing is. This is closely related to the fact that InformationIsaRelationship. Try thinking this way for a while; it clears a lot of things up.

Trying to locate meaning in one place is doomed to fail Surely you are telling me that there is only one definite outcome of anyone trying to locate meaning in one place and that is absolutely definitely failure! The meaning of the statement appears quite clear to me, but the statement actually contradicts itself!

Let's go back to "shorter": if you stand me next to my friend Ersk, it's obvious that I'm shorter than he is. Now take away Ersk: where did the shorter go? Maybe it was in Ersk. So put him back, and take me away. Nope, still no shorter. It wasn't located in either one of us, or a property of either one of us. It was a relationship between us.

Moving on to "meaning": write some simple statement on a piece of paper; let's use "2+2=4" for simplicity's sake. Look at it; it has a pretty clear meaning. Go away and have a friend look at it; it still has a pretty clear meaning, so the meaning isn't in you. Now put it in an envelope, put an awful lot of stamps on it, and send it to the nearest planet full of intelligent alien life. They open the envelope, stare at what you wrote, and can't find any meaning at all. Where did the meaning go?

Same answer: it wasn't located in the paper any more than it was located in you. The meaning was a relationship between you and the paper.

The reason we can talk about "meaning" being in the paper without (usually) getting in trouble is roughly the same reason we can talk about someone being "short". If someone is shorter than most other people in a given context,

we say they're short. If the meaning of some piece of paper is the same for most people in a given context, we say the paper has that meaning.

It seems convenient to talk about meaning as a thing or property, but when we do, we're just suppressing its relationship-like nature. And where that becomes important, such talk breaks down and confuses us.

This is not the best introduction to the idea of meaning being a relationship; thinking about information is a better place to start.

I have a theory of information as the amount of rearranging in the receiver's prediction model... information is therefore transitory (it characterizes the transition between states) and receiver-state-specific. Sending the same message twice in a row won't carry the same information twice in a row. Meaning is similarly relative, in that it is an index into the receiver's prediction model, and is therefore time-dependent, but it is not a delta value. - [AlistairCockburn](#)

Yeah, classical information theory (if you can call anything that dates from the forties "classical") approaches it in terms of predictions. There are a couple of very interesting insights I got from the mathematical approach:

First, predictions work both ways. If I send a bit through a noisy channel to you, then your ability to predict what I sent is exactly the same as my ability to predict what you received.

Second, the mathematical theory always talks about *mutual information* - there don't seem to be any "information monopoles" in the math.

Third, messages really do have a minimum size, and channels really do have a maximum transmission rate. These probably seem obvious now, because we're used to compressing files and complaining about the 56Kbps speed limit.

I object to the classical treatment because they omit too much about the receiver. I just bought Shannon's book to check. They define information as the choice set at the sender. What happens at the receiver they call "meaning" and leave out of the equation :-((. Correctly for them but bad for people who don't read closely. Shannon & co. did correctly analyze that fewer transmission bits are needed with larger units of meaning, and thus shifts the bandwidth limitation boundary of any channel. So, No, predictions don't work both ways... but then I am interesting in transmitted meaning, not transmitted voltages. In other words, [MeaningDependsOnContext](#). -- [AlistairCockburn](#)

[JorgeLuisBorges](#) makes the point with characteristic elegance in *Pierre Menard, Author of Don Quixote*.

"The text of Cervantes and that of Menard are verbally identical, but the second is almost infinitely richer. [...] The archaic style of Menard - in the last analysis, a foreigner - suffers from a certain affectation. Not so that of his precursor, who handles easily the ordinary Spanish of his time."

In relating this thread to software requirements analysis, Dr. J. M. Juran relates the gulf between sender and receiver as a language translation. He speaks of translating the language of business into the language of engineering and *vice versa*.

To add to the [MeaningDependsOnContext](#) (or [ReadTheWholeThing to GetMyMeaning](#))

Meaning depends on:

- internal consistency
- Audience
- inference (honest or otherwise)
- understanding
- Acceptance
- frame of reference
- time of utterance
- place of utterance
- tone of voice (or inflection)

In short, meaning is dependent on many factors, not just one. Any other that the original participants are likely to arrive at different understandings due to different circumstances and surroundings.

Depends is a qualifying word to set up an alternative and to set the stage for other interpretations of what might be understood using only the viewers perspective. As in the famous "It depends on what is "is" statement made a few years ago. What does that mean?

There are no empirically identifiable absolutes. All phenomena exist dependently under scrutiny. So to assume absolutes is to assume irrationality. Naagaarjuna exhaustively demonstrated this a few thousand years ago. This phenomenon (shunyata) is the root of Madhiyamaka (Middle Way) Buddhist philosophy. Meaning is a matter of convention.

What we have here is a failure to communicate - This page as I see it is not about meaning of life or philosophy, the page has a goal of allowing one to understand how the the words someone utters or someone writes can be understood with relation to identifiable absolutes (as in code or instructions or documentation, etc.) meant to determine how a man-made machine called a computer will operate. ([SoftwareDevelopment](#)). While some abstractions and theories are introduced, the idea is that meaning of a communication is to be understood not only by the words in the neighborhood, (a sentence), but also by the words surrounding the neighborhood (the paragraph, and entire presentation). Story Illustration: George Orwell's radio program about a fictional invasion from mars was taken out of context by listener's who did not tune in from the very start (and did not hear the disclaimer) as something that was really happening. The context was not included in the listener's mind set.

Yes. It is relevant to the meaning of life, however, by definition :). Specifically the meaning of any communication depends on the decoder. The decoder attempts to model the encoder such that the original concept may be derived. Any attempt to attach absolute meaning to words is futile. Instead it is more correct to establish meaning as a relative concept, a conventional concept. Thus 'life' has no independent meaning. Neither do any word or collection of words. We can identify the context of words as being the author or authors of those words. Computers have similar arrangements. They understand each other by convention. Code is meaningless in itself.

We are getting on the same wavelength. What I (the decoder?) gather from your paragraph (the original concept), is that it is futile for me to attempt to attach "absolute" meaning to what you have said. I should establish a relative concept with regard to the words you used in the paragraph and understand them by convention. This I have done. Are you saying more than this?

Correct. My words have no absolute value, they only have relative utility. You may find them useless or redundant and discard them. You probably cannot discard the model of me you have built, however. Nor can you change yourself back into the person who didn't hear my words. Each word thus has an independent action on the listener. We tend to assume some sort of stability to words and their meanings because they are written down, taking on the paper and ink's properties of physicality, which are relatively stable. This is, however, incorrect. Permanence of meaning cannot be guaranteed by making the words static, only by making both the words and the people who use them static. This is not possible.

As an aside, Derrida fails to communicate the physical locus of meaning as someone's head. In this respect, he fails. He doesn't discount it, but by not asserting the fact he remains, arguably, within the field of logocentrist denial. He should have read Nietzsche a little more closely IMO. And Nietzsche might have gone beyond the (Hindu) Advaita Vedanta to the Madhyamika way of Gautama Buddha. Then I wouldn't be saying this at all :). --

[RichardHenderson](#)

More a quip than a serious contribution to the discussion, but an illustration concerning radio that can be found above actually has more meaning in the narrow context of this discussion than in a broader context, as it is factually inaccurate. I just thought that it was rather humorous to note that the context of this discussion (the subjective vs the objective) had caused the decoders to ignore the fact that they could not think of any specific radio programs by George Orwell and skip over to a better known, and therefore more meaningful, radio program featuring Orson Welles, perhaps without even realizing it.

Related

- [NearestFittingContext](#)
- [BikeShed](#)
- [InformationTheory](#)
 - <http://masi.cscs.lsa.umich.edu/~crshalizi/notebooks/information->

CategoryComparisons

Last edit November 9, 2014, See [github](#) about remodeling.