

THE POTENTIAL MEANING OF LANGUAGE
AND ITS DEVELOPMENT

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Seven years ago a paper (McDavid 1981) presented at the Second International Conference on English Historical Linguistics, which was overtly critical of sociolinguistics and distinctly in favour of historical linguistics, pointed out a helpful turn which could develop provided linguists tried "to observe present-day language variety in the light of historical knowledge" (McDavid 1981: 58). Indeed, works in historical linguistics, irrespective of whether they are general studies (Vendryes 1937; Sturtevant 1962; Будагов 1971) or concrete investigations (cf.: Arndt et al 1967; Milroy 1981; Sørensen 1981; Birnbaum 1981; are always illuminating because of their explanatory capacity¹. Historical data of linguistic material may be explanatory of several matters, for example, of verbal processes and laws as well as of theoretical concepts and conceptions. A resort to historical knowledge often becomes useful to an author studying verbal processes within any theoretical framework in an explanation of the meaning of concrete linguistic units and general concepts. The present paper is an attempt to explain how meaning develops and accumulates in major linguistic units to form a body of meaning in a language which exercises an influence in its own right and determines the idiomatic character of that language.

Whatever their concrete aims and pursuits, major linguistic studies and research projects usually propose a conception of language. The functional linguistics of the seventies (Halliday 1973, 1976) introduced the concept of language as meaning potential, (and this concept was sufficient to develop a theory of systemic linguistics. More than that, it corresponded with other conceptions of language too. It is this concept of language with which comply those authors who claim that meaning is not inherent in the word and equivalent linguistic units and that the word means entirely in its ultimate context.

¹ It is true that historical material may be plainly descriptive (cf.: Malmberg 1976: 179) but it provides explanations more readily than purely synchronic material.

(Otherwise stated, the idea is that "words do not mean, people mean". (McAuley 1968: 127)).

The concept of language as meaning potential is found to be insufficient for a philological conception of language in functional linguistics focusing on the use of language, i.e. on language in process, rather than on the system of language. A study of the phatic use of English, for instance, testifies to the existence of the potential meaning² of this language which is rendered primarily by fixed global units³ of meaning that include formulas, stereotypes, forms of address, response utterances and clichés. With the exception of clichés and stereotypes, these units of meaning have very inconspicuous contents so that some of them are defined as meaningless in dictionaries of usage. Their meaning is specific in the sense that it is not a single concept or notion but usually a set of constituents of the context of situation in which the naming constituent is very minor indeed. Most of this contents is accumulated historically, has socio-cultural and socio-linguistic character and is latent as long as the unit is correctly used. That is why their meaning is essentially potential only and cumulatively makes up the potential meaning of a language. To realize how the meaning of these units develops to form the potential meaning of language it is necessary to consider them in separate groups.

Formulas are fixed idiomatic units of meaning characterized by a definite intonation contour and functioning as units of verbal etiquette. Formulas include letter closing phrases (Yours sincerely, Yours (very) truly, Yours faithfully, etc), greetings (Hallo! Good morning! Good evening! etc), partings (Good bye! Bye! Adieu! Farewell! Good morning! Good day! etc.) and other formulas of verbal etiquette (Thank you (very much), I am (really) much obliged to you, I beg your pardon, After you, How do you do, etc.).

In more than a few dictionaries (Chamber's *Twentieth Century Dictionary*, for example) some letter closing formulas have been defined as meaningless words used in concluding a letter. Other dictionaries (Longman *Dictionary of Contemporary English*) define some of these formulas as polite phrases used at the end of the letter. Still other dictionaries (*The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary*, *Concise Oxford Dictionary*, *Oxford Advanced Learner's*

¹ The potential meaning of language may be defined as historically and socioculturally inherited meaning, latent in fixed lexico-grammatical units (including the word), which becomes activated in usage even when concrete fixed units of meaning are *not* used in contexts in which they customarily occur. Although the term 'the potential meaning of language' is an original term, the term 'potential' and 'semantic potentialities', in particular, are ascribed to the French linguist Martinet (see: Pei, 1969: 242–243. Cf. also Mathesius, 1983).

² Fixed global units of meaning are predominantly non-idiomatic word combinations comprising from one to four variable components (qualifying and intensifying words, personal nominal and pronominal reference, modality and intonation) and varying in length from a two word combination to a sentence.

Dictionary of Current English and Modern English Usage by H. W. Fowler) indicate the degree of formality implied by such formulas and the kind of a letter to which they apply. Letter writing guide-books stress the equivalence of the letter closing formula and the salutation in a letter. Judging by dictionary definitions, the denotative meaning of these formulas is nil.

It is obvious that at present letter closing formulas are not used in their literal sense, i.e. meaning, for example, 'without falsification or perversion' (=sincerely), 'honestly, sincerely' (=truly), 'keeping faith, being loyal and true' (=faithfully) and so on. Historically, however, they may have been used so (cf.: Your truly faithful and loving brother. *Oliver Cromwell to Valentine Walton — Letters Written in War Time*, p. 25) and 'affectionately' seems still to retain its literal sense. But letter closing formulas are not meaningless because they do not function interchangeably.

Letter closing formulas may be said to denote conventionally social relations. At present separate units, they have developed from dependent attributive parts of the concluding sentence or signature⁴, which is amply testified by the *Paston Letters* and numerous other miscellaneous letters of the 15th and 16th centuries. For example: (1) Written at Walsingham, in haste, the second day of May. By your true and faithful friends, B. T. and W. (*Paston Letters*, p. 53) Yours truly/faithfully, B. T. and W. (2) In haste this Monday 1578, your assured and loving mistress and friend, M. S. (Saintsbury, p. 124) > Yours sincerely, M. S. (3) Written at Norwich, the Tuesday next after Sabat Austin... By our servant J. O. (*Paston Letters*, p. 56) > Your obedient servant J. O.

As in their original (dependent) form so in their present (independent) form these formulas indicate in what relations the writer of a letter assumes himself to be with the addressee. This is a very conventional indication or only an implication of the kind of relations, especially in contemporary standard formulas. That is why, in some dictionaries, their meaning is interpreted merely as polite ('Yours truly' in Longman *Dictionary of Contemporary English*) or expressing distant tone ('Yours faithfully' in *Concise Oxford Dictionary*). Though this says very little about their meaning, still what it says is essential about the use of these forms. Thus, 'Yours affectionately' may be said to mean intimacy, 'Yours' and 'Yours ever' familiarity, 'Yours sincerely' friendliness, 'Yours truly' and 'Yours faithfully' distant courtesy. It is this meaning of the formulas that in practice guides the user and determines the equivalence of the salutation in the letter.

⁴ It is only 'Yours' that has a standardized conventional currency in the *Paston Letters*. Some loan phrases also function as individual closing formulas in English letters of that period. For example: Ainsi Signé J. M. N. (*Paston Letters*, p. 77). Per le Vostre J. P. (*Paston Letters*, p. 47). Latin phrases when they occur, are contextually motivated.

Apart from the meaning so concisely defined, the formula accumulates in itself additional meaning which develops historically. First of all it is its detailed principal meaning, then politeness as a component of meaning, correctness and precision⁵. What is meant by their detailed meaning are the concrete social relations implied by the formula. 'Yours affectionately', for instance, implies family relations and kinship in general. 'Yours' and 'Yours ever' imply closeness of relations as among friends. 'Yours sincerely' implies either direct acquaintance or indirect familiarity with the person's name. 'Yours truly' and 'Yours faithfully' imply relations among strangers. This meaning is sociocultural in character, accumulated historically and is latent in the formula as long as it is correctly used. That is why it is the potential meaning. When the formula is wrongly used it is in these categories that the reaction to it is formulated.

The potential meaning of letters closing formulas also incorporates in itself a sociolinguistic component of meaning, again historically developed. It is their capacity to be textually marked. Thus, 'Yours truly' may be used to mean 'I' and because it is the 'I who signs' this meaning of the formula may be humorous. In 'Yours sincerely' its textual meaning is so strong that, even in its abbreviated form 'Sincerely', it renders in a text all the associations that the letter form implies both retrospectively (as in Leonard Cohen's song 'It's Four in the Morning') and prospectively (as in a collection of essays by Monica Dickens and Beverley Nichols entitled 'Yours sincerely').

Out of formulas of verbal etiquette, greetings and partings have been treated by distinguished scholars (Ogden and Richards, 1960: 234) as mere signs which have to answer only the condition of appropriateness. Indeed, formulas of verbal etiquette may be defined as verbal signs of civility used in typical contexts of situation. But they are not meaningless even literally. First of all nearly all the formulas of greeting and parting in English literally correspond with the time of the day at which they are used. As phrases in their typical intonation contours, however, greetings and partings contain far less of their literal sense (cf.: Good' morning. Good' day). But intonation is essential in their use⁶ and may bring forth their literal meaning (as in the fictional use: He said 'Good morning!' And a good morning it was). Otherwise the meaning of these formulas is limited to the conventional expression of civil attitude. Since, however, etymologically they go back to 'God give you good morrow/day/even/night' (The

⁵ It must have been precision that decided the choice of loan formulas in English letters of the 15th century (cf.: p. 75, above).

⁶ "While it is important that the student should master all the individual phonemes in 'Good morning', it is also extremely important that he should master the intonation. A beautifully articulated 'Good morning' said with the intonation characteristic of anger may have more disastrous results than saying nothing at all" (Cook, 1969: ix). Cf.: O'Connor and Arnold, 1966: 1; Prodromou, 1979: 44.

Compact Edition of the OED) or to a 'welfare-wish'-'may you have a good morning' — (Ferguson, 1981: 25), the expression of kind disposition is essential in their use. This is rendered solely by intonation. As is known, 'Good morning' sounds friendly and cheerful when pronounced with the high head and the falling nucleus tone (cf.: O'Connor and Arnold, 1966: 56). Partings sound friendly and sincere pronounced with the fall rise (Good'bye! Good'night!). They become perfunctory when pronounced only with the low rise on the nucleus (Good night! Good bye! Good morning!) (cf.: Kingdon, 1958: 238). But as formulas are complete idiomatic units of meaning any intonation contour may be applied in their use so that these formulas may express appreciation, welcoming, irony, sarcasm, disgust and countless other attitudes. This may be partly illustrated by the meaning of formulas in Shakespeare's tragedies (cf., for example: Macbeth's 'Farewell' to Banquo in Act III. 1 and Ross's 'Farewell' to the Old Man in Act II.4. Cf. also Macbeth's 'God be with you!' to Lords and Lady Macbeth in Act III.1). The potential meaning of formulas contained in intonation is a historical component of meaning because intonation may be so expressive only in a language which has a developed set of more or less permanent intonation contours associated with definite attitudes.

Intonation, however, does not exhaust the potential meaning of greetings and partings. This meaning incorporates such historically developed associations as the finality inherent in 'Good bye!' which may be strengthened by intonation. It also incorporates a certain familiarity inherent in 'Hallo!' and formality in 'Good afternoon' (also in 'Good 'morning' and even in 'Good morning' — cf.: Ferguson, 1981: 25), a regretful feeling in 'Farewell' which at present qualifies this formula mainly as poetic and rhetorical and similar other aspects of meaning. When formulas are correctly used in their neutral intonation contours, their potential meaning is latent and not obvious. When the formula is used incorrectly, its potential meaning comes to the surface. Cf., for example, 'Good afternoon' from a host of a reception and from a casually met person in passing. A better example still may be 'Hallo!' and 'Good afternoon' from a lecturer entering a classroom.

Other formulas (apologies and thanks) have more overt meanings than greetings and partings because in most cases they are either complete (I'm sorry; I apologize; Forgive me; Excuse me; I beg your pardon, etc.) or elliptical (Sorry; Thank you; Thanks, etc.) sentences. Their meaning more or less literally corresponds with the meaning of their constituent components. 'I'm sorry' means regret at one's fault, 'Forgive me' means a request to be pardoned, 'I apologize' means sorrow for a fault, 'Thank you' means personal gratitude and so on. Such is at least an explanation of their meaning in dictionaries of usage. Of the formulas mentioned above only 'Excuse me' and 'I beg your pardon' are more or less idiomatic in some senses, unless the second is shortened to one word,

intoned and enunciated appropriately so that it becomes an equivalent of the French apology.

Again, judging by their common currency and their meaning as defined above, these formulas also tend to be signs of civility. Unlike greetings and partings they do not lend themselves as easily to the expression of any attitude by means of intonation because their meaning resists it⁷. Their meaning, however, is not limited to the senses mentioned above. They have a significant potential meaning which is related to their etymology. Etymologically going back to the Anglo-saxon *sār* and *sātig*, 'I'm sorry' still retains a weakened sense of 'grievous' which may be activated by intonation. It is curious that emphatic adverbs taking the stress in this formula (so, very, really very, awfully and indeed) do not strengthen significantly its potential sense. They rather emphasize civility and become historical testimony of social relations⁸. This partly depends on the grammatical structure of the formula which, owing to the category of its predicate, has fairly insignificant contents, analogous to that of a statement.

It is not so with the formula 'I apologize'. Apart from its overt meaning of 'sorrow for a fault' this formula has the potential meaning of a regretful acknowledgement of an offence (given in some dictionaries — *COD* — as its primary meaning) which is in accord with its etymological meaning (<Gr. *ᾠολογία*=a spoken or written defence) and with its structure that of a statement. It must be the potential meaning of this formula that limits its use and keeps it apart from other commonly current formulas of apology.

'Excuse me' and 'Forgive me', unless it is 'Please forgive me', structurally are both imperatives and so precise in their meaning that their potential meaning is limited to fairly insignificant emotive attitudes depending on intonation. Because of its structure and the lexical meaning of the verb and, especially, of the noun 'pardon' (reflecting its etymological sense: OG — MF *pardoner* <LL *perdonare*=through making a gift of), the potential meaning of 'I beg your pardon' comprises a certain sophistication in the expression of apology and therefore politeness. It is again intonation that can make it more or less obvious.

Etymologically going back to OE *thenc(e) an* (=to think) and *thanc*, *thonc* (=a thought) and meaning a grateful thought and its expression, in its meaning 'Thank you' approximates the status of a verbal sign of civility like greetings and partings. Emphatic words (very much, so much, ever so, etc.)

⁷ Appreciation and irony, though, can always be expressed by means of intonation in English.

⁸ Formulas themselves and, especially, words of emphasis reflect social relations in the sense that they testify to their existing verbal expression, irrespective of the true feelings behind them. Thus language may be said to be a significant and, in a sense, the only material testimony of social relations.

are not merely degree words in this formula but also potential expressive means of attitude. The potential meaning of this formula is limited to the expression of attitude which significantly depends on intonation.

The potential meaning of apologies and thanks thus is sociocultural in character and very subtle in its manifestation. Mainly because formulas in English have a rich potential meaning of sociocultural character, they can actively expose a non-native speaker even through minor variations of tone (such as pitch, range (cf.: Bald, 1980), the stability of intonation contour, especially of its low level tones and even enunciation).

Stereotypes are fixed non-idiomatic units of meaning which have from one to four variable components (qualifying and intensifying words, nominal and pronominal reference, modality and intonation), are between the phrase and the sentence in length, highly recurrent and express an extended or contracted statement. For example: It's very kind of you. How are you? I've never seen/heard anything more (beautiful). That's quite a (sounds like a very) good idea. It must be months/years/ages since... Thank you (very much) for your letter of... We/I are/am grateful/much obliged/indebted to... for... (Special) thanks are due to... The aim of... is/is not to... That is to say... The/My point is (merely) that... I must say that... It should be noted that... etc. etc. The meaning of stereotypes is the literal meaning of their components. The potential meaning of stereotypes is their feature to be textually marked, which is sociolinguistic in character. It is the potential meaning of the stereotype that decides its acceptability and appropriateness and even its desirability when it is not used in contexts in which it customarily occurs (cf., for example, 'creative' openings in English letters). Although the use of stereotypes is less subtle than that of formulas because of the sociolinguistic character of their potential meaning, stereotypes add significantly to the total potential meaning of a language.

Forms of address are fixed idiomatic units of meaning comprising from one to three variable components (nominal and pronominal reference and suprasegmental features). For example: Ladies and gentlemen, Dear Mr/Mrs X, Gentlemen, Madam, Your Excellency, Your Grace, etc etc. All the forms of address generally mean a more or less individualized literal application of a prefixed name or honorific⁹ to a person(s) and of a praiseworthy superlative or dignified reference to people of rank and position. All the forms of address in English have a significant potential meaning partly dependent on the meaning of their constituent components. For example, the form of address 'Ladies and gentlemen' is a regular public address in English to an audience of both sexes. But it is also the most courtenous public address to people below

⁹ The principal forms of address in American English are assumed to vary between the first name and a prefixed family name (cf.: Brown and Ford, 1964: 234) and thus are simpler in their meaning and use.

the titled and the high-positioned. Although this form of address does not literally mean women and men of noble birth, historically and by this association it was an honouring form of address. At least it originated in the society which had the nobility so referred to. Even at present this makes it a purely English form of address. This association is the potential meaning of 'Ladies and gentlemen' and, in a sense, limits its use among foreigners.

The meaning of courtesy titles (Your Excellency, Your Grace, etc) like that of their equivalents in medieval Latin (Excellentia Vestra, Gratissimus, etc) is not limited to the praiseworthy superlative. It also presupposes the category of people to whom it applies. Thus, 'Your Excellency', formerly used addressing royal personages, at present is limited to ambassadors, ministers plenipotentiary, governors and other high officers. Similarly, 'Your Grace' no longer applies to a king or a queen and is given only to a duke, a duchess and an archbishop. Through this designation of a concrete category of noblemen or of high-positioned persons, forms of address potentially make reference to the background social structure of the respective person. Consequently, the potential meaning of courtesy titles in English reflects the social structure of the whole society. What restricts the use of 'Your Grace', for example, to a high officer, although knighted, is namely the potential meaning of this form of address which differentiates between bearers of inherited and conferred titles. Forms of address in English have a very extensive (*cf.*, for example, Miss Janet and Miss Robinson) and subtle potential meaning which is active both as a restricting and, especially, as an exposing factor in usage.

Similarly the potential meaning of response utterances in English may be revealed. But clichés deserve a special mentioning because of their significance. *Cliché* may be defined as a fixed idiomatic word combination, originally a quotation, an idiom or a metaphor, which has become trite owing to its frequent fossilized use (*cf.*: Partridge, 1980: 1—2). What makes a cliché a usually objectionable unit of meaning is its fossilized character which, in the first place, fixes its evaluative meaning that is so obtrusive. This is not so with stereotypes because qualifying words are variable components in the stereotype (*cf.* p.79, above). That is to say, what degrades the cliché saves the stereotype. But the point here is that clichés are objectionable only when used mechanically which means borrowing the fossilized phrase together with the evaluation fixed in it (as in 'blissful ignorance', 'a new broom', 'mirabile dictu', 'the shadow and the dust', 'a snake in the grass' etc.). This happens to careless and mediocre users. The cliché, however, has a rich resource of potential meaning (intonation, possible structural alternation and association with its original context) which can renovate it. Prosodic emphasis (as in Margaret Drabble's 'a blessing in disguise') is the simplest means of making use of its potential meaning and renovating it. Structural alternation is no less powerful means of activating its potential meaning (as in the case of Maugham's "Fortune favours the

Duke and I can't blame you for hitching your wagon to his star"). But the most powerful means of the potential meaning of the cliché is its contextual associations. Judging by the Dictionary of Clichés (Partridge, 1980), the majority of clichés in English are quotations from English literature (far from the madding crowd, an aching void, a thing of beauty is a joy forever, etc) or the classical languages (wise after the event, war impends, etc) and some still functioning in their original language (Deo volente, Nec plus ultra, arbiter elegantiarum, Arcades ambo, sub rosa, to be all things to all men, etc). To make use of the potential meaning of the cliché through associations the user has to know the complete original context. In this way clichés become renovated by the best speakers, statesmen and politicians.

As has been evident from the material considered above, the meaning of fixed global units is quite inconspicuous whilst their historically-developed potential meaning is very extensive and significant when activated. Similarly, the potential meaning also develops in the word (*cf.*, for example, the meaning of 'fare', 'clever', 'cunning', 'gentle', 'gentleman' etc), but in the word it remains of a different character and capacity. Unlike the meaning of the fixed global unit, the basic meaning of the word is significant and essential. More than that, the potential meaning of the word is so integrated in its structure that it usually does not transgress the boundaries of the context of its use even when it is an evaluative word. This explains the principal difference between the potential meaning of the word and the fixed global unit and their respective significance.

Deciding on his choice of the word the speaker may be right or wrong. But when he is wrong (unless it is a case of heavy evaluative words like 'a fanatic' or 'a fool' which violate propriety directly), he can suffer it on his own. For example, he may happen to say 'at a reception' when he means a tea party, 'in my office' when he means a classroom or 'incredible' when he means ridiculous and so on. He may even happen to say 'fabulous' when he means 'repulsive' and let it pass as long as the object is not deliberately exposed for argument. He can go on missing his words if he can unconditionally stand the loss of his meaning. All speakers do that to an extent when speaking a foreign and even a native language. But they keep quiet and go on without a hitch, thinking, if they happen to, that they simply do not know the word.

This is not so with the fixed global unit of meaning. When deciding on his choice of a fixed global unit of meaning the speaker may also be right or wrong. But when he is wrong he cannot let it pass and suffer on his own. To use a fixed global unit of meaning the speaker has to respond to the requirements of the context of situation. But it is not the situation that decides the speaker's active choice. It is the speaker himself. He does it matching the context of situation with the meaning of the fixed global unit.

Overtly quite limited in its meaning, the fixed global unit has several ac-

tual and potential dimensions which are autonomous in a sense. In missing one point with respect to its dimensions, the speaker misses the whole unit. For instance, 'Yours ever' which applies in letters to close friends would be a miss in a business letter even to an acquaintance to whom one is writing for the first time. Specifically, 'Your Grace' would be a miss to a minister or a governor if he is not a duke, but, even if he is, 'Your Excellence' would be the right choice on an official occasion irrespective of his inherited or academic titles.

When using a fixed global unit and missing one point in its referential meaning, the speaker cannot conceal it or let it pass, as in the case of the word because it is not he who finally considers and evaluates the choice. It is the addressee and other participants. Familiar with sociocultural and sociolinguistic dimensions of the fixed global unit, the addressee and the participants naturally react and evaluate the speaker's choice and judge him and his judgement because the meaning of the fixed global unit permits it: the meaning of the fixed global unit is an overtly shared property of all (or of a certain part) of society. The potential meaning of the fixed global unit is even more powerful: it tests and exposes how authentic the speaker's choice is. That is why the society which shares a rich heritage of meaning through fixed global units possesses a developed language in the use of which all verbal blunders become glaring. This is how a language can exercise its power over the speaker in its own right. In scholarly terms, this collectively shared meaning is the potential meaning of language.

The potential meaning of language is a cumulative continuum. It exists as the collective meaning of the fixed global units of a language. The more fixed global units a language possesses, the higher its potential meaning. All fixed global units of meaning, including standard layouts of official papers, exercise their potential meaning by shielding or exposing the speaker, a stranger in the first place. This might be called the exposing power of language which a language with a developed potential meaning exercises in its own right.

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