

Martin Staude: Meaning in Communication, Cognition, and Reality: Outline of a Theory from Semiotics, Philosophy, and Sociology

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Dietrich Busse¹

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This book (based on a sociological doctoral thesis at the Free University of Berlin, Germany) is—without any caveats—in any case worth to be read and discussed. And this is one of the best things that can be said about a book to be reviewed. Nevertheless, for the reviewer (a scholar of linguistics and philosophy, specialized in legal semantics) was it at a first glance very astonishing to see a book—written by a sociologist—that claims to develop an own, completely new theory of meaning besides and across disciplines like linguistics, philosophy of language, semiotics and cognitive science(s). However, since this book is intended to be a contribution to *social semantics* (partly in terms of a system theoretic approach like Luhmann's) this aim is not as strange as it may look like for many linguists and language-philosophers. For those scholars a first touchstone might be the author's handling of current theories of meaning in linguistics, semiotics and philosophy of language. But they will find that—in spite of an impressionable list of references to a lot of classics in these disciplines and an apparently profound knowledge in a lot of its topics and approaches—the book contains nearly no thorough examination or discussion of older approaches to the theory of meaning. So the theory of meaning developed in this book has to be viewed as a self-contained approach with only few parallels to existing theories—an approach, that defines its own terms and that follows an autonomous line of argumentation and theoretical “architecture”. But nevertheless—although for many readers its lecture may be seen as a cumbersome endeavor (granted to the semi-formalized, terminology- and definition-driven style of writing)—it is worth this effort anyhow, because one has to learn an

✉ Dietrich Busse
d.busse@uni-duesseldorf.de

¹ Lehrstuhl für germanistische Sprachwissenschaft/Chair of German Language and Linguistics, Institut für Germanistik/German Department, Heinrich-Heine-Universität Düsseldorf, Universitätsstrasse 1, 40225 Düsseldorf, Germany

impressible list of details about meaning, language, communication, and knowledge that have been missed by the most (if not all) standard approaches of meaning, language or signs. So every scholar of semiotics, linguistics, or philosophy of language may learn new things about their subjects being worth to be accounted for in their own theoretical and empirical efforts.

The book contains (besides an introduction and an “extroduction”) six chapters headed “Meaning as Category”, “Non-Dualistic Meaning”, “Meaning in the Semiotic Triangle”, “Meaning as Prototypical Category”, “Meaning as Field”, and “Activation of Meanings and Meaning Fields”. The author’s objective, exposed in the introduction, is to present “a theory or approach that proposes a definition of meaning which is so elementary, abstract, and general that it is connectable to, or even partially incorporates, other theories of meaning and which therefore lays the common foundation for these other theories of meaning” (p. 2)—no more and no less. His approach is intended to fill the leak “that there are hardly any systematically interdisciplinary and inter-theoretical approaches to meaning”(p.4). Perceived by its author as a completely new approach “The theory of meaning presented in this book does not only intend to answer unanswered questions, but also to ask unasked questions” (p. 5).

The first chapter defines meaning in a very abstract manner as “a distinction-based category”:

A meaning denotes » something particular « , which is marked or indicated, so that it is automatically distinguished from » something different « or from » all the rest « , which remains unmarked or ignored. (p. 8).

This definition brings into mind Saussure’s conception of “difference” as the functional basis of all language signs (an idea later developed by the post-structuralist philosopher Derrida to an entire philosophy), but we have to miss any discussion of these sources. Even though meaning is not seen as a solely linguistic category, the author emphasizes the linguistic character or origin of all meanings (p. 16). The author’s definition of meaning is intended to cover all related and neighbor-concepts as “>concept<, >sign<, >word<, >symbol, >description<, >indication<, >label<, >representation<, >idea<, >sentence<, >interpretation<, etc.” This list gives the correct impression that the core of the authors interests lies more in the field of a general theory of (communicatively relevant, influenced, or used) knowledge than in the field of linguistics or semiotics proper. In the second chapter the author outlines a concept of “Non-Dualism” by criticizing the usual dualistic approaches for the relation of meaning vs. world. In Dualism there is a sharp distinction between two completely separated spheres called “world” (or “things”, or “reality”, “the real”) and “meaning” (“ideas”, “perception”, “recognition”, “knowledge”, etc.). In contrast, non-dualism denies the possibility of an unfiltered access to “the real” and postulates a unique sphere of cognitive or epistemic phenomena. But, not enough: “Non-Dualism is opposed to both Realism and Constructivism.” (p. 25) The author points out that “Non-Dualism’s core arguments primarily do not concern epistemological questions, but ontological questions.” (p.26) In the following he discusses objections to his position at length and in detail—an interesting discussion with more profit for philosophy and epistemology than for linguistics and semiotics.

In a constructivist and auto-poetic manner all meanings are seen as “descriptions”—may they be called “world”, “thing”, “the real”, or “sign”, “word”, “meaning” “idea”, “concept” etc. That is: “The existence or non-existence of objects is dependent on the existence or non-existence of particular descriptions.” Consequently, this position results in a core function of language for all recognition, perception and knowledge:

Since a world is composed of particular descriptions and since descriptions partially depend on the lexicon and grammar, the world partially depends on the lexicon and grammar too. The structure of the world depends on the structure of language. Thus the world can only be structured dependent on what the lexicon and grammar allows or requires, i.e. dependent on what language renders impossible, improbable, possible, probable, or necessary. (p. 54).

Linguists may read this with pleasure.

By all this, dualism is not completely abandoned, but is re-introduced by what Staude calls “dualism’s re-entry in non-dualism” (p. 59 ff), based on the meaning-form-dichotomy. This “new dualism” appears as a distinction (introduced by Mitterer 1992, 56–62) that is new and important for every theory of language: “Meanings up to now and from now on”:

Previous chapters have shown that objects are rudimentary descriptions MW and this chapter has shown that objects are descriptions up to now \dashv MW \dashv that are shared and accepted by the participating actors. Consequently, Mitterer argues that the world or reality is the sum of all descriptions up to now \dashv MW \dashv that are shared and accepted by the participating actors, i.e. the latest narrative state of affairs, the attained discourse positions, the knowledge accumulated up to now, the shared interpretations so far. (p. 71).

The “meanings up to now” and the “meaning from now on” sum up to a new “meaning up to now”. This idea is important because it conforms to the most convincing theory of linguistic conventions as proposed by Lewis 1969 (a convention of meaning is based on the sum of all situationally and contextually comparable precedent cases of uses of a word).

In the third chapter the author relates his approach of “meaning” as developed so far to the well-known semiotic triangle. Consequently, he sees all three angles as representations of different kinds or aspects of “meaning” (M_S , M_R , M_M). In the author’s terminology, the “signifier” represents as well a “meaning” (M_S) as the “referent” or “extension” (M_R) and as the third angle, traditionally called “meaning” or “content” or “idea” (M_M). This idea is similar to Saussure’s approach that both sides of the linguistic sign (signifier and signified) are equally “psychic”, i.e. only mentally present and relevant, but the author does not discuss this predecessor (as he generally does not). The Author uses a broad concept of “signifier”, including all artifacts that can be interpreted as signs (“e.g. written words, material objects, acoustic sounds, images, etc.”). He discusses, then, various phenomena related to meaning issues, as onomasiology, intension, meaning composition, semasiology (polysemy and homonymy), and meaning divergence. Some of his statements are—

contrary to the “radical” and “innovative” attitude of his book—very “traditional”, following the line of old-school compositional “checklist-semantics” (without any reflections of the problems of such approaches). This changes only a little bit in chapter 4 where he discusses “meaning as a prototypical category” in addition to the before-mentioned checklist approaches of meaning (not, as in linguistics and cognitive science, as a new and antithetic approach). Unfortunately he falls short of the most important aspects of prototype theory, namely the fundamentally prototypical character of human categorizing, of cognitive framing and linguistic conventions.

One of the most important chapters of this book (in the authors’s own view) is chapter 5 “Meaning as Field”. In this chapter he discusses a lot of very interesting aspects and examples of epistemic “fields”, containing many inspiring ideas with special respect to social aspects of language, meaning and understanding-relevant knowledge. At least now he reveals the real background of his approach of “meaning”.

Since meaning fields often consist of socially or cognitively sedimented and standardized meanings, they may also function as a collective memory or as a mental lexicon. Consequently, meaning fields [are] seen as collective memories and mental lexicons. (p. 171).

We can learn from, this: “Meaning” sensu Staude is another word for “knowledge” (as activated by artifacts that are used as signifiers, or, as to be activated by recipients trying to “understand” what “is meant” or “intended to convey” by the signifiers); a “meaning field” thus should better be labeled as an “epistemic field”, a “field of knowledge”; i.e., Staude’s approach to “meaning fields” is closer to Foucaults « *épistème* » than to the current linguistic concept auf “semantic field” or—even more—“lexical field” (or “Wortfeld”).

The author lists different types of what might be seen as ‘indicators’ (or criteria) for meaning fields, as *particular words and expressions, particular statements and themes, particular knowledge and conceptualizations, particular objects or artifacts, particular behaviors and movements, particular images or pictures*. It is hard to say what the author wants to tell us by this pell-mell list that collects very different sorts of objects. In trying to discover the intellectual background of this list one may distinguish two types of classifications: (i) types, levels and domains of social knowledge with regard to its function as the knowledge that is a precondition and relevant for the understanding of a sign (of any type), or (ii) a list of all kinds of triggers for the activation of such kinds of knowledge (i.e. all, that is interpreted as a sign for something else, e.g. signals and artifacts some portions of this knowledge are attached to). A really manageable list of types should observe this fundamental distinction between types of knowledge (that are contra-intuitively labeled as “meaning” by the author) and types of triggers or elicitors for the activation of knowledge by interpreters.

Consistent with his approach the author points out that meaning fields are prototypical fields and distinguishes then “meaning fields” of “signifiers” (e.g. “lexical fields”), “meanings” (e.g. “conceptual domains”), and “referents” (e.g. “the meaning field of law”). It’s only in the context of prototypicality that the author

reflects the most important approaches in meaning-and-knowledge-research, i.e. frame-models and its cognates (as script-theory, schema-theory, ‘mental spaces’-approach etc.). Again, the author shuffles together what better should be distinguished. For him, frames (or schemata of knowledge) are only an additional aspect of knowledge amongst others; he does not grasp the idea that in contrast frames—as all important scholars (as Minsky, Fillmore, Barsalou, Schank & Abelson) pointed out—are THE fundamental format of knowledge at all. And he does not see, that the most of the things he wants to convey with his book could be said better and more precisely in terms of frame-theory as a genuine theory of knowledge (in its meaning-relevant and meaning-constituting function). At least, the equation of “meaning fields” with epistemic frames now makes clear that the author was speaking about structures of knowledge all the time (and not about meaning in any linguistically relevant sense). The discussion of “exclusion”, “inclusion” and “overlap” of meaning fields (pp. 186 ff.), however, reveals a highly problematic reification of epistemic structures.

Staude adds some “methodological and methodical proposals”; but his lists of questions to be posed (p. 201) are too restricted and do not cover all the aspects that would be relevant or interesting for a thorough research of knowledge structures (or meaning in an epistemic or cognitive sense). But his reflections contain some remarkable ideas too. One of the most important is “that there are no privileged empirical sources for all first-order descriptions of, for example, power and law, because these descriptions are found wherever signifiers, language, signs, concepts, symbols, or categories are found” (p. 203). His advice to distinguish carefully between “emic” and “etic” sources and “auto-” and “allo-descriptions” might be a good guideline for empirical research. Thus, taken alone his “methodological” remarks, they contain a lot of good and important ideas that make the book worth to be read.

The last chapter deals with “Activation of Meanings and Meaning Fields”. Here, Staude follows Luhmann’s medium-form-distinction and adds a lot of remarks that are not very useful for linguistic, or cognitive, or epistemological issues. His “model of activation” is very simple and lets the genuine role or function of linguistic devices (or other ‘triggers of meaning activations’) very unclear. In this chapter the author confounds the ‘activation of the meaning LAW’ and the sociological question ‘when, where, in which cases *law* (as a sociological phenomenon or a social institution) is present’. I.e., he does not distinguish between *social situations* itself and their *interpretation* by the participants or some observers. What is lacking is a concise account for the differences between the two levels of (i) social constellations, situations, behavior, interactions etc., and (ii) their *interpretation* as law, morals etc.

It might be that this non-distinction is seen by the author as consistent with his own meta-theoretical approach and that the need for its distinction as false—but this view is erroneous anyhow. The fundamental difference of these two levels does not vanish if one advocates a ‘non-dualistic’ or ‘constructivist’ approach. The supposition of a fundamental difference admits the “non-dualistic” view that the observations at a fundamental level of recognition that are—in a secondary and additional act—observed and objects of social interpretations, itself form “construed” or “constituted” “meanings” in the author’s terms (i.e. schematized

epistemic structures). If one did not acknowledge this fundamental difference of levels, it would not be possible to describe a lot of very interesting issues in the linguistics and semantics of politics and law. E.g., it would not be possible to grasp or gather the differences between (in the terms of ethnomethodology) an everyday constitution of a social situation or a purposeful strategic interpretive activity (as is often the case in political semantics). Linguistically as well as sociologically interesting issues as “semantic struggles”, “to occupy (the opponent’s) concepts” or “competition of signification as competition of interpretation” could not be accounted for adequately if one would follow the authors’ position.

In the last chapter, called “extroduction” the author gives a summary of the most important theses and guidelines of his approach. He classifies his theory as “a formal-abstract theory”, that “was presented in a semi-formalized way” (p. 265). The first marks one of the advantages and equally one of the problems of his approaches; the latter makes the reading of this book cumbersome and leads to a glaring violation of the principle of Ockham’s razor (“entities must not be multiplied beyond necessity”), i.e., the stipulation of purely theory-induced entities the need for which might be very questionable.

Summary: The author presents a rather idiosyncratic approach of what he calls “meaning” or “theory of meaning”, that reveals itself (in the eyes of the reviewer) in fact as an approach for social knowledge and epistemic structures. Although the book contains a lot of references to important authors and approaches in the field of linguistics, semiotics, philosophy of language and recognition, sociology of knowledge and system theory, the book is lacking a profound examination and discussion of those approaches. Thus the author falls short of many important aspects that would be apt to make his approach a really inter-disciplinary and fruitful endeavor. The most important shortcomings of this book are the lack of a systematic discussion and treatment of the knowledge-related, epistemic aspects of its subject and the completely insufficient account for the difficult and complex relation between the sign-material (and its “meaningful” usage) and the epistemic parts of what we call “signs”. As the author more than once confounds these two parts of every sign that must be separated strictly (if one follows the founder of modern linguistics and semiotics Ferdinand de Saussure), his approach lacks that degree of sign-theoretic and linguistic detailedness that is indispensable for every adequate theory of meaning as a knowledge-related issue. His aims are highly ambitious, as he writes in his final “prospect”:

Due to this broad conceptualization, the concept of meaning is connectable with the concepts of sense, sign, language, signification, communication, discourse, symbol, text, interpretation, media, code, etc. Since these are key concepts in Semiotics, Symbolic Interactionism, Speech Act Theory, Sociology, interpretive approaches, Semantics, Non-Dualism, Anthropology, sociological Systems Theory, Psychology, constructivist approaches, and Philosophy, the present study may be relevant to, or useful for, these disciplines and theories.

He declares his approach compatible with.

concepts such as semantic field, conceptual frame, lexical domain, and mental space, which are prevalent in Linguistics and Psychology, but also to concepts such as culture, finite province of meaning, social knowledge, Systems Theory's medium or societal semantics, classification scheme, social script, or symbolic structure, which are common currency in Sociology and Anthropology, and, disciplines and theories [...] that focus on the use and user of meaning in temporal processes and human interactions, e.g. Pragmatics, Symbolic Interactionism, Discourse Theory, interpretive-hermeneutic approaches, Systems Theory, conflict-theoretic approaches, or Conversation Analysis.

Although one is torn between, on the one side, admiration for the courage of the author to tackle very difficult questions in the field of language, cognition, semiotics and sociology and its intersections as well as for a plenty of fresh ideas never heard of before in these disciplines, and, on the other side, a disappointment concerning a lot of gaps and misconceptions in this approach as well as concerning a thorough examination of and discussion on all of the dozens of theories and approaches the author refers to, the evaluation at the beginning of this review remains correct: despite all its shortcomings this book is worth to be read thoroughly by all scholars that are interested in the relation between linguistics, semiotics, theory and description of knowledge (as the sign-constituting or meaning-relevant knowledge), and social factors. Even if the reviewer (as a scholar of linguistics and philosophy of language and a researcher in the field of semantics of law and politics) has to state that the author's objective to formulate a completely new and more adequate approach to a theory of meaning is not as successful as he might think by himself, the readers can learn a lot of details not mentioned before and unknown to the most scholars of the most meaning-related disciplines—details, that should be accounted for in every theory of meaning and meaning-relevant knowledge that wants to be worth this label. At least, they can sharpen their own argumentation in discussing the author's arguments and hypotheses.