OpenAIR @RGU ROBERT GORDON UNIVERSITY ABERDEEN

This publication is made freely available under GREEN open access.

AUTHOR(S): HAMLYN, J.

TITLE: Networks of attribution: the cultural origins of meaning.

YEAR: 2015

Publisher citation: HAMLYN, J. 2015. Networks of attribution: the cultural origins of meaning. In Proceedings of the 10th international conference on the arts in society and arts in society knowledge community, 22-24 July 2015, London, UK.

OpenAIR citation: HAMLYN, J. 2015. Networks of attribution: the cultural origins of meaning. In Proceedings of the 10th international conference on the arts in society and arts in society knowledge community, 22-24 July 2015, London, UK. Held on OpenAIR [online]. Available from: https://openair.rgu.ac.uk

Publisher copyright statement:

This is the AUTHOR ACCEPTED version of proceedings originally published by COMMON GROUND RESEARCH NETWORKS and presented at Proceedings of the 10th international conference on the arts in society and arts in society knowledge community, 22-24 July 2015, London, UK (ISBN _____; eISBN _____; ISSN _____).

OpenAIR takedown statement:

Section 6 of the "Repository policy for OpenAIR @ RGU" (available from http://www.rgu.ac.uk/staff-and-current-students/library/library-policies/repository-policies) provides guidance on the criteria under which RGU will consider withdrawing material from OpenAIR. If you believe that this item is subject to any of these criteria, or for any other reason should not be held on OpenAIR, then please contact openair-help@rgu.ac.uk with the details of the item and the nature of your complaint.

This publication is distributed under a CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 license.

https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0

OpenAIR at RGU

Digitally signed by OpenAIR at RGU
DN: cn=OpenAIR at RGU, o=Robert Gordon University, ou=Library, email=publications@rgu.ac.uk, c=GB
Date: 2016.12.19 08:44:02 Z

Networks of Attribution:
The Cultural Origins of Meaning

Jim Hamlyn
Established Member of the IDEAS Research Institute,
The Robert Gordon University,
Aberdeen, Scotland.
2016

Abstract

Despite the fact that we commonly refer to artworks as "meaningful" things, this is not to say that meaning is a property analogous to size or shape. If meaning is not a property, then it seems reasonable to suppose that meaning can only be a way of using things, of treating them as if they were imbued with features that they do not actually possess. Meaning is thus an attribution in which we agree through social consensus to use objects as tokens of power, prestige, celebration, explanation, instruction and so on. I argue that such symbolic procedures originate in practices of exchange and tool-use in which raw materials are ascribed uses that fundamentally change their identity.

The purpose of this paper is to show that the ability to interpret artworks and more generally to ascribe meanings, is a highly sophisticated cultural capacity and, more specifically, a verbal skill dependent upon a network of symbolic resources and techniques that only a socially evolved linguistic culture can provide and enable.

Introduction

In order to explore the origins and implications of our capacity to attribute meaning, I have divided the following discussion into three sections that are intended to suggest some plausible origins for the emergence and development of the kinds of practices that have enabled the skills of meaning attribution to emerge. In doing so, I draw attention to the degree to which meaning is dependent upon the capacity to treat things in symbolic terms. I develop the view that these skills have their ancestral origins in longstanding social practices of exchange and tool-use in which objects are imbued with functions and values which transform their identity but leave their causal

properties entirely untouched.

Why is this analysis important? There are two principal reasons. The first is a point of clarity because it may not be immediately obvious that all meanings – including those we attribute to artworks – are enabled by precisely the same strategies of representation as language. Communication is possible without symbols of course (nonverbal communication that is), but without the capacity to accept thing A as a substitute – a symbolic representation – for an entirely different thing B, the whole enterprise of linguistic communication would be out of the question.

Secondly, an analysis of the symbolic practices of attribution that emerge from our ability to exchange things, raises some very interesting implications for our understanding of the evolution of language and the capacities that only language can enable. For example, I contend that without such attributive practices, the ability to ascribe psychological predicates to others – to conceive of what they think in abstract terms — would be impossible. This is not to say that only language users are capable of anticipating and otherwise responding to the perceptible behavior of other creatures. Clearly they are not. But what it does suggest is that intelligent nonverbal behaviour is not arrived at by contemplating the possible psychological states of other agents, but instead derives from more fundamental forms of knowhow the nature of which is beyond the scope of this article.

The rules of symbolisation

At the Olympic Games, sportswomen and sportsmen represent their countries of origin. Likewise, the medals they accumulate represent their sporting accomplishments. It may not be obvious, but the word "medal" stands in relation to the disk of gold, silver or bronze in precisely the same way that a medal stands in relation to the concepts of attainment, achievement and success. The relations are symbolic.

Symbols are a type of representational stand-in. They employ a form of *substitution* in which we use one thing to represent another, even though the two things concerned

need share nothing at all in common. I can use anything to symbolise anything else, so long as the people with whom I am communicating know the substitutive rule I am using. It is for this reason that all symbolic systems are reliant upon shared rules.

> *Rules are alive only in practices,* in the context of the activities of being guided by them, justifying or being willing to justify what is done by reference to them, correcting and criticizing or being willing to criticize deviant behavior by reference to them and so forth. (Hacker 2013, 125)

Without rules and the practices that enact them, objects and behaviours are simply whatever they are; they are merely bundles or sequences of properties. For example, Kurt Schwitters' famous "Ursonate" (1922) is far from being a string of intelligible utterances. Schwitters' phonemes were deliberately arranged to have no identifiable reference and their meaning is thus indeterminate.

A contemporary philosopher who places significant emphasis upon the constitutive role of social practices in the negotiation of meaning is Alva Noë:

> I am not myself, individually, responsible for making my words meaningful. They have their meaning thanks to the existence of a social practice in which I am allowed to participate. […] …there is no requirement that each individual carry the burden of securing meaningful reference. We rely on others. And we can do that because meaning is not something internal: It is not internal to me; it is not internal to the experts. Meaning depends on the practice, in very much the same way that the powers of the rook in chess depend on the practice. (Noë 2009, 90)

Noë's position here harks back – via Putnam (1973) – to Wittgenstein's (1953) well known refutation of the notion of a private language. Wittgenstein developed the view that meanings are constituted by and embedded within socially negotiated *public practices*. For Wittgenstein, meanings are not to be found in the heads of experts or even in dictionary definitions but in the *ways* in which words are actually *used*. Nonetheless, we can easily lose sight of the fact that Wittgenstein's observations are not merely relevant to the meaning of utterances and texts. The view that meaning is established by socially negotiated conventions can be applied to all forms of meaning, including the meanings we ascribe to works of art. This is possible because language not only furnishes its users with techniques (rules) that can be applied to the use of intentionally generated meanings but also to objects and states of affairs that are not *meant*; that are not intentionally produced for the purposes of communication.

A common cause of conceptual confusion regarding meaning is the fact that we commonly speak of things "conveying" meaning or of being "meaningful" – as if they are the *bearers* of meaning. We even speak of the "content" of meaningful things as if meaning is a measurable property like temperature or mass. However, meaning is never a property of things but only ever an *attribution*. A meaningful silence is not a silence capable of being emptied, nor is a meaningful absence an absence with additional ingredients.

Things are meaningful not because they have special characteristics or properties, but because we do. The capacity to ascribe meaning to things is a sophisticated skill that must be learned through discursive interaction and the acquisition of techniques and conventions that have been accumulated over millennia and that continue to develop and change. To "read" an object or artwork — to be capable of articulating what it might mean — is to have something to say *about* it: something to tell.

In the same way that meaning is only ever *ascribed* to objects and states of affairs, psychological attributes like believing, thinking and intending can only be intelligibly ascribed to perceivers. When we say such things as "The sign says that the speed limit is 30mph." we do not mean to suggest that the sign *intends* its message. Signs are intended but they do not have intentions. Likewise, we do not suppose that the bullet, or the gun that propelled it, is *responsible* for the shot fired.

Meaning and intention are not objectively quantifiable *properties* of acts or representations – they are ascriptions. But how might this capacity to ascribe significance to objects and actions have arisen? I suggest that we first need to examine the ways in which the interpretation and use of objects may provide important clues to the origins of meaning.

The interpretation of use

> But I confess that it is frequently very hard to distinguish between use and interpretation. (Eco 1994, 62)

In his 1985 essay "On the Interpretation of Prehistoric Rock Art" , Australian art

theorist Donald Brook poses an interpretative problem that can be put in the following way: there are two stick figures on a cave wall. One is bigger than the other. For the people who did this, do these figures match a little person and a big person? Do they symbolise an important person and an unimportant person? Or do they simulate two people of the same size situated at different distances from their notional perceiver? Brook writes:

> The dismal fact is that we cannot interpret representations from any "first principles," abstracted totally from the cultural context of origin, in order to infer what that cultural context must have been. The best we can do, most cautiously, is to use them in conjunction with some more or less hazardous pure hypotheses about the general tendencies of human beings and the specific nature of the society we are interpreting. (121)

Brook's point is worth further consideration. Imagine that we gave a hammer to someone who had never seen one before. It seems very likely that they would quickly determine that the hammer is good for pounding things. Now imagine how this same hammer might be interpreted by a non-human creature with the equivalent of human intelligence and a completely different morphology — the shape and size of a horse for example. Without some idea of the creatures for which hammers are made or the kinds of activities to which our tools are put, the hammer would present an impossible interpretive puzzle, unsolvable even by the kinds of "ready-to-hand" manipulation discussed by Heidegger (1962). For Heidegger, a tool like a hammer "has a usability that belongs to it essentially", a "'towards-which' for which it is usable." In Heidegger's view, tools are best understood through use — through being "ready-to-hand". Artist and Heidegger scholar, Barbara Bolt (2006) puts it like this:

> The kind of being that a tool or material possesses comes to light in the context of handlability. I can look at pots of different coloured paints, a camera or a computer screen and take pleasure in contemplating them, but it is only in use that they begin to reveal their potential. I can lay out my brushes and set a fresh canvas before me, but until I actually begin to work with them in making a painting I can not understand their being. (4)

In the context of human practices — of tool use and manipulation in particular — it is true that hammers, paint brushes, canvas etc. are ready-to-hand in ways that make them extremely well suited for the tasks to which we put them, but I hope the example of the intelligent non-human creature makes it clear that the notion of a "towards-which" that "belongs to [the hammer] essentially" is not necessarily the case. In fact, a

hammer is only a hammer by virtue of the specific human techniques that instantiate its hammer-hood. Without these embodied procedures, the hammer might be used in innumerable other ways, but in each case its identity would be significantly shaped by its integration within what Wittgenstein called a "form of life". By this I do not simply mean a culture, I mean a broader conception of the full gamut of biological and morphological features, needs, strengths and weaknesses which typify a species.

Uses emerge in relation both to needs *and* capacities. A stick has potential uses only in relation to the various embodied means by which it might be wielded and it is only by being useful that a tool acquires its *value,* i.e. its capacity to be exchanged for other objects or actions of an equivalent utility.

Value and the emergence of predication

To interpret an object is to make use of it according to the scope of one's competence, according to skills one has acquired through instruction and experience. Moreover, it is to attribute a purpose to an object, a purpose that – like the meanings of words – is not an measurable property of the object. Thus, to interpret something as having a use is not exactly a symbolic act, but it is what we might call a "proto-symbolic act." Or to put it another way; to interpret an object as having a dual identity – to ascribe a use to it in addition to its intrinsic properties – is a crucial step towards a very particular form of symbolisation that we might call "artifactual symbolisation." Simple forms of behavioural symbolisation are very widely observed in nature but the production of symbolic artefacts — of meaningful tokens and tools — that are valued by other members of the species, is unheard of outside human culture. Not only do humans attribute value to various objects and behaviours but we are also willing to trade these tokens, to exchange them for other things of equivalent value — at least those we *deem* to possess equivalent value. This is a profoundly sophisticated attributive skill underlying all symbolic communication.

In a 2010 paper, on the co-evolution of tools and minds, Ben Jeffares writes:

> "Tools start to play a role in the world of hominin that is ubiquitous in modern environments. Cultural products – tools – signal, buffer, and become available

> as means to reading the capacities of others. In a community of individuals such as the Erectines, who were without full language faculties, tools become important communication devices." (517)

Dennis Dutton's more recent work (2010) on the evolutionary emergence of our concept of beauty takes a very similar view. For Dutton our predilection for certain kinds of objects and material forms has a significant evolutionary basis in our long history of tool use. Speaking of the stone tools that our ancestors were already crafting 3 million years ago, he states:

> What were these artifacts for? The best available answer is that they were literally the earliest known works of art, practical tools transformed into captivating aesthetic objects, contemplated both for their elegant shape and their virtuoso craftsmanship. Hand axes mark an evolutionary advance in human history -- tools fashioned to function as what Darwinians call "fitness signals" -- that is to say, displays that are performances like the peacock's tail, except that, unlike hair and feathers, the hand axes are consciously cleverly crafted. Competently made hand axes indicated desirable personal qualities -- intelligence, fine motor control, planning ability, conscientiousness and sometimes access to rare materials. Over tens of thousands of generations, such skills increased the status of those who displayed them and gained a reproductive advantage over the less capable. (11:11)

It is important to note that, despite their name, "Darwinian signals" do not function symbolically. Peahens do not *read* the meaning of the peacock's tail – they merely respond preferentially to larger tail displays. So when Dutton or Jeffares use the term "signal" it should be borne in mind that they intend this in a technical sense, not in a symbolic sense. And when Jeffares' states that tools become "available as means to *reading* [my emphasis] the capacities of others." he is drawing our attention to the suitability of tools as *potential* objects of symbolic communication, not as evidence of symbolic communication on the part of their makers. This is an important point because it is all too easy to assume that our early ancestors were trading meanings (i.e. communicating symbolically) before the basic skills of symbolic attribution had even emerged. It is my view that linguistic skills emerged first through the attribution of value to objects and more specifically through the practices of exchange that instantiate this value.

Before our early ancestors were proficient in the exchange of differing resources, it is extremely unlikely that they would be proficient in the attribution of relative value either. And if they were not yet proficient in the attribution of abstract attributes like

value, it seems highly unlikely that they would be capable of attributing psychological states to others.

There is considerable debate within current ethological research — the study of animal behavior — regarding the capacity of nonverbal animals to interpret the intentions of others: to form what is referred to as a "Theory of Mind" (Andrews 2014, Lurz 2009). The evidence so far gathered is inconclusive, but what is clear is that the capacity to interpret intentions requires an ability to respond to the perceptible behaviour of another creature as if it symbolised, indicated or referred to a disposition, attribute or propensity on the part of the individual concerned. If my characterisation of the basic procedure of symbolisation is correct, i.e. that symbolisation requires an ability to treat things as if they are endowed with characteristics that they do actually possess, then the capacity to make ascriptions of meaning to objects or intentions to other agents, requires this same skill. If, as I have been arguing, such skills are dependent upon more fundamental capacities and *practices* of exchange and substitution, then these fundamental skills should also be observable on the part of the individuals themselves.

Conclusion

The purpose of this article has been to show that meaning is dependent upon a system of socially negotiated attributive practices of substitution and exchange.

Attributions fall into three distinct classes, each more sophisticated than the last. Firstly, we learn to attribute functions (and thereby value) to things. This is a skill that does not require language but is obviously necessary for the development of language. Two further sorts of attribution are both symbolic in form.

The attribution of meaning is a skill that we encounter as soon as we begin to name things, but the capacity to ascribe psychological predicates to agents — to have a theory of mind — I suggest, is a significantly more sophisticated skill. One of the most common ways that we are introduced to such skills is obviously through narrative storytelling and episodic descriptions as children (Hutto 2008, von Heiseler

forthcoming). Such narratives introduce us to the rudiments of logic as these are inscribed into our primary system of communication. But narratives also enable us to speculate and to reason about the intentions of others. In order to achieve such sophisticated inferential techniques, we already need to be competent not only in the skill of symbol attribution but in the more sophisticated procedures of symbol manipulation. It has been my aim in the preceding discussion to show why I believe that the manipulation of symbols has been significantly assisted by our ancestral history as tool users and as producers and users of symbolic objects.

I hope it is clear from the foregoing that the meanings and uses we ascribe to artworks and objects more generally are never definitive. Our interpretations of the world and the attributions we make are to a very significant degree conditioned and enabled by our cultural and biological make up: by our form of life.

References:

Andrews, Kristin. 2014. *The Animal Mind: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Animal Cognition*. Routledge.

Bolt, Barbara. 2006. "Materializing pedagogies?." Accessed September 8. https://www.herts.ac.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0015/12381/WPIAAD_vol4_bolt.pdf

Brook, Donald. 1969. "Perception and the Appraisal of Sculpture." *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 323-330.

Brook, Donald. 1992. "*On the Interpretation of Prehistoric Rock Art*." In *ARE: Art, Representation, Education*. Originally published in Rock Art Research 2 (1985)

Brook, Donald. 1997. "On non-verbal representation." *The British Journal of Aesthetics* 37, no. 3, 232-245.

Brook, Donald. 2014. *Get a Life.* Artlink.

Dutton, Denis. 2010. "A Darwinian theory of beauty." Accessed September 8. https://www.ted.com/talks/denis_dutton_a_darwinian_theory_of_beauty?language=en

Eco, Umberto. 1994. *The limits of interpretation*. Vol. 869. Indiana University Press.

Hacker, Peter MS. 2013. *The intellectual powers: A study of human nature*. John Wiley & Sons.

Heidegger, Martin. 1962. *Being and time*. Translated by J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson. Oxford: Blackwell.

von Heiseler, Till Nikolaus. 2015. *How Language Evolved as a Backchannel between*
Two Feedback Loops. Theoria et Historia Scientiarum.

Hutto, Daniel D. 2008. *Folk psychological narratives: The sociocultural basis of understanding reasons*. MIT Press.

Jeffares, Ben. 2010. "The co-evolution of tools and minds: cognition and material culture in the hominin lineage." *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* 9, no. 4: 503-520.

Lurz, Robert W., ed. 2010. *The philosophy of animal minds*. Cambridge University Press

Noë, Alva. 2009. "Out of our heads." *New York: Hill and Wang*.

Putnam, Hilary. 1973. "Meaning and reference." *The Journal of Philosophy* 699-711.

Schwitters, Kurt, and Kurt Schwitters. 1993. Ursonate. Mainz, Germany: Wergo.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig. 1953. "{Philosophical Investigations, trans. GEM Anscombe}." *New York: The MacMillan Company*.