HUSSERL, LINGUISTIC MEANING, AND INTUITION

Wayne D. Owens

In Part 63 of Chapter Eight of the Second Section of Investigation VI of his Logical Investigations, Husserl wrote (1) "The realm of meaning is . . . much wider than that of intuition, i.e., than the total realm of possible fulfillment,"[1] and (2) "we must distinguish between authentic acts of thinking and inauthentic ones. The inauthentic acts of thinking would be . . . all significative acts which could possibly function as parts of . . . predicative intentions: all significative acts can plainly function in this fashion. The authentic acts of thinking would lie in the corresponding fulfillments, i.e., the intuitions of states of affairs, and all intuitions which function as possible parts of such intuitions: (LI, 825. Emphases are Husserl's). At this late point in his Logical Investigations, Husserl was concerned with, in his words, "the pure laws of . . . categorial intuitions in virtue of their purely categorial forms" (LI, 823. Emphases are Husserl's)—an odd turn of phrase, since he was actually concerned with the intuitability of, again in his own words, "the 'a' and the 'the', the 'and' and the 'or', the 'if' and the 'then', the 'all' and the 'none', the 'something' and the 'nothing', the forms of quantity and the determination of number etc." (LI, 782)

It seems to me that Husserl's proposition that the realm of meaning is much wider than that of intuition and his distinction between authentic and inauthentic acts of thinking apply not just to "categorial intuitions in virtue of their purely categorial forms" but to all written or spoken articulations which fall even vaguely within the range of customary linguistic practices.

I shall not here be able to explore this hypothesis fully, much less prove it or demonstrate its relevance to hermeneutics, which is my ultimate goal. I shall here only be able to explore a limited part of my hypothesis, namely, (1) what I shall call, borrowing and amending a term from Husserl, the linguistic signitive intention as such, and (2) the intention to understand linguistic articulations as such, or in Husserl's terms, inauthentic thinking. I shall have to leave the discussion of authentic acts of thinking—if any such there be—for another time. Even from such a limited perspective, however, certain inferences or, better put, valuable lessons can be drawn.

The Linguistic Signative Intention

Whenever we speak or write anything, the linguistic signative intention is present. It is not, of course, necessarily consciously present; it is entirely possible to speak without being consciously directed to the act of speaking. The linguistic signitive intention as such finds its fulfillment in linguistically formative acts, and the condition of its possible fulfillment is the syntactical ability to string together certain grammatical forms (nominative, verbal, adjectival, adverbial, gerundial, participial etc.—in short, words) in a way that is generally in keeping with the conventional rules of syntax in the language one is speaking or writing in—Husserl calls these "contingent linguistic habits" (LI, 519)—and that is therefore at least potentially understandable. This is the way the linguistic signitive intention usually appears because most of our linguistic articulations contain more than one word. When, for example, I say to my wife, "Did you feed the boys?", I show at least that (1) I have a signitive intention, (2) I know how to ask a question in the English language, and (3) I know how to put together the English words "did," "you," "feed," "the," and "boys" in a way that would not normally strike my wife or anyone else competent in everyday English as gibberish or complete nonsense. But, of course, linguistic articulations need not necessarily contain so many words; single words may be enough. If, for example, I exclaim, "Enough!", this single word all by itself can fulfill a linguistic signitive intention.

Frequently, the linguistic signitive intention, words, the syntactical ability, and the intuition—or "seeing"—of actual states of affairs go together. But if we focus on the linguistic signitive intention as such, as I am attempting to do here, then it must be admitted that the signitive intention and the syntactical ability that gives it body need not be grounded in any actually intuited—or "seen"— state of affairs; they can be exercised in the absence of an actual, immediate intuition of a state of affairs that guides and directs the linguistically formative, signitive intention. For example, I can ask my wife "Did you feed the boys?" even if there are no boys present.

Moreover, the linguistic signitive intention and the syntactical ability that gives it body need not be grounded in any actually intuitable state of affairs. I can say, for example, "The square circle is both red and green." Here the linguistic signitive

intention has been fulfilled insofar as the linguistically formative act of stringing together nominative, verbal, and adjectival grammatical forms is in keeping with the assumed rules—contingent linguistic habits—of English syntax, even though it clearly lacks any reference to any immediately intuitable state of affairs. Husserl writes, "Names such as 'wooden iron' and 'round square' or sentences such as 'All squares have five angles' are names or sentences as genuine as any". (LI, 517) The same could be said of a poetic utterance such as e. e. cummings' line "anyone lived in a pretty how town." Clearly the assumed rules of syntax—contingent linguistic habits—are pretty loose, loose enough to allow for a meaningful linguistic signitive intention even in the absence of any possible immediate intuition which guides and directs it. This is perhaps what Husserl meant when he wrote, "In the sphere of . . . pure signification . . . anything and everything can be brought together in unity". (LI, 826)

The conclusion at this point is that the linguistic signitive intention can contain intuited, non-intuited, and even non-intuitable states of affairs. The latter two do, I believe, show clearly that the realm of meaning—here linguistic meaning—is wider than that of intuition.

The Intention to Understand Linguistic Articulations

When we turn to the intention to understand, as opposed to form, linguistic articulations, things get a bit more complicated. But it is here that Husserl's comments about authentic and inauthentic acts of thinking and the realm of meaning being much wider than that of intuition can best be seen as applying to all linguistic articulations which fall even vaguely within the realm of customary linguistic practices.

When we reflect on our intentions to understand linguistic articulations made by others—and even our own, after the fact—a wealth of factors present themselves. Husserl, however, has given us a good place to start with his distinction between authentic and inauthentic acts of thinking. Here, as stated before, I shall only focus on the latter, on inauthentic acts.

Inauthentic acts of thinking concern themselves with what I, following Husserl, have called linguistic signitive intentions and the linguistically formative acts which have to do only with the ability to string together various grammatical forms in a way that

is generally in keeping with the conventional rules of syntax in the language one is speaking or writing in and that are therefore at least potentially understandable. It might be thought that not much is understood if we as listeners or readers focus only on the articulations that embody such intentions. But this, I believe, would be too premature a judgment. An essential and no small part of our understanding of any spoken or written articulation depends on our familiarity with or knowledge of the customary rules of syntax—the contingent linguistic habits—which apply to the language of the articulation in question and on our familiarity with or knowledge of the possible meanings of the words embodying the linguistic signitive intention, both of which can be from the point of view of the reader or listener completely independent of whatever meaning the writer or speaker intended them as having. Let us call this linguistic intuition. A little reflection will show that the understanding which results from such intuition is really quite complicated.

The intention to understand any particular linguistic articulation minimally involves familiarity with or knowledge of the words and conventions of syntax of the articulation synchronically considered. If I don't know anything of the current vocabulary or syntactical conventions of the language of an utterance, I can never be sure whether the sounds or marks I encounter constitute a genuine articulation at all. Of course, the more I know about these, the fuller my understanding of the possible meanings of the articulation as such becomes. In view of the ever present fact of polysemia, however, it seems that a focus on the articulation as such and its language synchronically considered would result in a multiplication or proliferation of possible meanings. And so it does, although the polysemia often gets reduced—without being eliminated altogether—by the verbal context of the articulation (the course of a conversation, a monologue, or a text, for example). But again, this depends on my knowledge of the vocabulary, the idioms, and the syntactical conventions of the language synchronically considered. In cases of obviously creative language use—as in, for instance, my previous reference to the line from e. e. cummings' poem, "anyone lived in a pretty how town"—even this knowledge may not be much help. The upshot is that what I have called the linguistic intuition can and certainly sometimes does fall short of all possible meanings of any particular linguistic articulation. It is

always possible that the realm of meaning in what Husserl called inauthentic thinking—i.e., thinking which concerns itself only with the signitive intention—can transcend any or all linguistic intuitions.

The understanding of any particular signitive intention and the linguistic articulation that embodies it, as troublesome as it may be, involves not just familiarity with or knowledge of the words and conventional rules of syntax in the language synchronically considered but also familiarity with and knowledge of the history of the meanings of the words of the language and the practical syntactical conventions—and at times the forms of intonation—which govern the making of statements, asking questions, exclaiming, etc., i.e., words and syntax diachronically considered. For example, if my wife says to me or leaves me a note saying, "Did you feed the boys?", whatever else I might glean from this linguistic articulation, I perhaps immediately recognize that it is a question and that all the words which make it up are familiar to me as being part of my understanding of presently acceptable English vocabulary. But only a little reflective hesitation inclines me to think that the linguistic form of the question and all the words which constitute it also have a history and that that history cannot be so easily separated from this immediate articulation. Although it may not be of any practical consequence vis à vis my wife's intended meaning and/or the situation in which the articulation is made, this history does bear on the possibility of understanding the articulation as such. How can I say that I completely understand any signitive intention if I am not familiar with the history of the words and the history of the syntactical forms which embody it? I emphasize the word "completely" here not because I wish to suggest that no understanding is possible without knowledge of the history of words and syntactical forms but only that complete understanding of any articulation requires it.

Husserl's judgment that the realm of meaning is much wider than that of intuition has particular relevance at this point. If understanding the meanings of words and syntactical forms is a process of intuition—what I have called linguistic intuition—and if this intuition involves not only knowledge of the range of meanings particular words and syntactic forms presently have but also the history of words and syntactical forms, then the linguistic articulation that embodies a signitive intention is sure to

include elements of possible meaning that transcend the realm of ordinary, intuitive fulfillment. Another way of putting this is to say that words and grammatical structures, like things, have, as Husserl would say, horizons. And just as it is in principle impossible to perceive every possible profile or aspect a thing may present, it is impossible to grasp or understand every possible meaning any particular embodiment of any particular linguistic signitive intention can have.

These reflections from the point of view of the listener or reader on the linguistic signitive intention of others and the words and syntactical forms which embody it—what Husserl called inauthentic thinking—witness to a sort of trans- or im-personal aspect at work in all linguistic articulation. This trans- or impersonal aspect has to do with the possible meanings of any linguistic articulation we encounter. Although, as I mentioned before, the range of possible meanings often gets narrowed in 'further telling,' when we focus on the embodiment of the linguistic signitive intention as such, it's hard to see how the element of possibility can be totally eliminated from the intention to understand the embodiment of any particular linguistic signitive intention.

Conclusion

My focus here has been purely on what I have called the linguistic signitive intention and what I have called the linguistic intuition that seeks to understand it. The conclusion so far seems to be that possible meaning is an apparently inescapable aspect of any spoken or written discourse. Ignoring, as I have here, issues surrounding intended meaning, it is appropriate to ask, in light of the inescapability of possible linguistic meaning, what would constitute understanding a spoken or written articulation? This question can be answered by bringing in the ideas of empty and filled linguistic intuition. Husserl says (LI, 744), "Purely signitive acts are . . . 'empty' acts, acts lacking in the moment of fulness . . . ."[2] But this can't be right. Linguistic intuition of purely linguistic signitive acts is empty only if no meaning at all is grasped, as when the signitive intention is filled with words or grammatical/syntactical structures which are not part of our familiar linguistic world. It seems to me that the intention to understand any spoken or written articulation is filled when some

or any meaning is grasped. Of course, the meaning grasped need not necessarily be the one intended by the speaker or writer; such is a consequence of focusing on the linguistic signitive intention as such. "Did you feed the boys?", considered purely and only as the embodiment of a linguistic signitive intention, has linguistic meaning regardless of who says it.

Moreover, when we focus on the linguistic signitive intention as such and its fulfillment in at least a potentially understandable combination of words and ignore the intended meaning or meanings of the speaker or writer, the true poetic character of all written or spoken linguistic articulation comes to the fore. The peculiar feature of poetic utterance is that it can have more than one meaning. Any and all linguistic articulations qua embodiments of linguistic signitive intentions can also have more than one meaning. The meanings of a question like "Did you feed the boys?" multiply as I consider all the possible meanings of "did," "you," "feed," "the," and "boys." The same applies, I believe, to all linguistic articulations and not just to categorial intuitions in virtue of their purely categorial forms, as Husserl thought.

I stress here at the end one last time that I have attempted to isolate the linguistic signitive intention—and efforts to understand it—from whatever non-linguistic intuitions may have guided and directed its formation. Such an attempt is warranted for a number of reasons, not the least of which is that our lives are so involved with them, they have immense hermeneutical significance, and the fact that so many of the linguistic signitive intentions we encounter occur in the absence of their author.

Indeed, the realm of meaning is much wider than that of intuition in the realm of linguistic meaning and intuition. Is it any wonder that there is so much misunderstanding in the world and so much debate about the meaning of linguistic articulations?

NOTES

[1]Edmund Husserl, Logical Investigations, Vol. II, trans. J. N. Findlay (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970), p. 824. Husserl emphasizes everything up to the first comma. Hereafter LI plus page number in body of text.

[2]See also LI, pp. 728, 738, and vicinity.