Thoughts About Meaning

Meaning is like movies inside the head. I’ve got moves in my head. I want to put them inside yours. Only I can’t do that because our heads are opaque. All I can do is try to be clever about sending you the sound track and hope I’ve done it in such a way as to make you construct the right movies in your head. What’s worse, of course, is that since neither of us can see the movies in each other’s head, we are apt to be mistaken about how well we are doing in trying to make the other person show himself the movie we have in mind.

This account of meaning is grounded in what real people do when they speak. When people speak successfully with each other it looks as though there is a transfer of meaning: the speaker puts the meaning into the words and the listener takes it out at the other end. If you look at it from the larger perspective this account is fair:

1) the listener ends up knowing what the speaker wanted him to know, and

2) the listener ends up knowing something he never knew before,

so it must be that the words put this knowledge into his head.

But it is important also to take a closer perspective and realize that, strictly speaking, words cannot contain meaning. Only people have meaning. Words can only have meaning attributed to them by people. The listener can never get any meaning out of a word that he didn’t put in. Language can only consist of a set of directions for building meanings out of one’s own head.

Though the listener’s knowledge seems new, it is also not new: the meaning may be thought of as structures that the listener never had in his head before, but the listener had to build these new structures out of ingredients he already had. The speaker’s words were merely a set of directions for assembling this already-present material.