

PSYCHOLOGY REVIVALS

Subjective Meaning and Culture

An Assessment Through Word Associations

Lorand B. Szalay and James Deese



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Originally published in 1978, *Subjective Meaning and Culture* presents a framework and a method for the comparative study of the perceptions, attitudes, and cultural frames of reference shared by groups of people. The framework is the notion of subjective meaning, and the method is that of word associations. The authors present a detailed account of some particular cross-cultural and intergroup comparisons using the word-association technique described in this volume. However, rather than emphasize comparisons they focus on the technique itself as a method in the investigation of subjective meaning and with it subjective culture. Their purpose was to introduce a research capability which offered new kinds of information and made critical aspects of subjective meaning accessible to empirical investigation. Today it can be read and enjoyed in its historical context.



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SUBJECTIVE MEANING AND CULTURE: An Assessment Through Word Associations

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Contents

Preface vii

1. PSYCHOLOGICAL MEANING AND THE ASSOCIATIVE METHOD	1
Lexical and Referential Meaning	1
Psychological Meaning	2
The Study of Psychological Meaning	6
Associations and Meaning	9
Using Associations to Study Subjective Culture	15
Dominance, Affinity, and Affectivity	21
2. THE ASSOCIATIVE METHOD APPLIED	23
Associative Group Analysis	23
Testing the Subjects	25
Weighting the Responses	28
Some Examples of Cross-Cultural Comparisons	32
The Nature of Dominance, Affinity, and Affectivity	39
Reliability of Data	46

3. NATIONAL AND GROUP IMAGES	49
A Korean-American Comparison	49
An Example of Ethnic and Racial Images	55
4. IMAGES OF THE SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT	66
A Comparative Study of Social Milieu	67
A Comparison of Black and White Students	71
Acculturation in a Special Social Milieu	73
Subjective Geography	80
5. ASSOCIATION IN VARIOUS MODES	82
Bilingual Associations	82
Pictures as Associative Stimuli	88
6. INFERENCES ABOUT ATTITUDES	99
Associations and Affectivity	99
Associations and Interpretation of Attitudes	105
A Comparative Study of Political Attitudes	111
7. A COMPARISON OF ASSOCIATIONS AND OTHER METHODS	115
The Study of the Subjective Lexicon	115
The Subjective Lexicon and Subjective Culture	122
8. PROBLEMS IN THE TREATMENT OF DATA	130
Weighting the Responses	130
Data for Individuals	134
Limitations of the Associative Method	138

9. REPRESENTING SUBJECTIVE MEANING..... 141

Current Psychological Studies of Meaning	141
The Present Approach	144
Associations as an Elicitation Technique	149
The Uses of Associative Analysis	155

References 157

Index 163



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Preface

In this volume we present a framework and a method for the comparative study of the perceptions, attitudes, and cultural frames of reference shared by groups of people. Our framework is the notion of subjective meaning, and our method is that of word associations. We present a detailed account of some particular cross-cultural and intergroup comparisons using the word-association technique described in this volume. However, we do not wish to emphasize comparisons but rather the technique itself as a method in the investigation of subjective meaning and with it subjective culture. Our purpose, then, is to introduce a research capability which offers new kinds of information and makes critical aspects of subjective meaning accessible to empirical investigation.

While the technology of communication has progressed at a phenomenal rate, advances in the human aspects of communication are disappointingly small. We can transmit a television image around the world, but there have been no comparable advances in reducing psychological distance among peoples, in promoting mutual understanding, in acquiring and using knowledge necessary for the bridging of cultural differences, in being able to relate to others in terms of their meanings and experiences. Perhaps, by their nature, such advances in the human sciences are slow and difficult. We hope that the method presented in this book will make a useful contribution toward achieving these goals.

From a psychological point of view, communicating is largely a matter of knowing what themes are important to people and addressing those themes in ways that accord with the subjective meaning people attach to them. While subjective meaning and, most importantly, priorities in subjective meaning are personal and often inaccessible to the outsider, free associations have the unique potential for penetrating the world of subjective meaning.

The potential for word associations to reveal the mental content of our subjective world has been recognized by thinkers from Plato to Freud, but the exploitation of this potential has been hampered by deceptive preconceptions about the nature of associations as well as by the limitations of earlier methods.

Some of the preconceptions come out of psychological theory. So-called association theory and the classical "laws of association" have prevented many psychologists from seeing the full potential for associations to reveal the inner world. The layman has often been less blinded. It is easy for the average person to see that associations do reveal inner relations. He can see that freedom is a promise to the oppressed and a threat to the tyrant, that transportation to an American is a car or a jet, to a Bedouin a camel.

But there are other preconceptions that the psychologist and the layman share. One is that associations are commonplace and trivial. Another is that they are erratic and whimsical. We can, however, in comparing our own commonplace associations with those of people from other cultures, become aware of the fact that these apparently commonplace and trivial associations reveal profound aspects of our subjective culture and how that culture differs from the culture of others.

Associations are not erratic and whimsical. They are stable, and they relate clearly and naturally to our experiences. They are organized and structured just as are our perceptions, beliefs, and attitudes. In fact, associations reflect the structure of perceptions, beliefs, and attitudes.

The particular technique used in most of the comparative studies performed by Szalay and his associates is called associative group analysis. The results of these studies support the notions introduced by Deese in his concept of associative meaning. Associative group analysis focuses upon those aspects of subjective meaning common to members of a group rather than upon those unique to individuals. In this volume we have placed associative group analysis in the more general framework of the study of association, but the primary group comparisons.

Chapter 1 presents the theory relating subjective meaning and word associations. We assume that word associations allow us to reconstruct subjective meaning. While word associations also reflect the lexical meaning, more importantly they reveal perceptions and attitudes. It is this aspect of the distributions of word associations that causes us to use the term subjective or psychological meaning and to argue that it is more than linguistic meaning. Since subjective meaning is frequently below the level of awareness, it cannot always be verbalized or communicated in response to direct questions. For reasons pointed out in Chapter 1, free associations reveal understanding at a deeper level than would be conveyed by a definitive statement or response to a particular question. Distributions of responses characterize the general subjective meaning shared by groups or cultures, and comparison of distributions of responses reveals differences in group thinking, perception, and attitudes.

It is possible, by examining consistent group priorities revealed by responses to particular themes and domains, to reconstruct the subjective representational system that characterizes a group. The representational system provides the particular cultural frame of reference for a group. The characterization of such a cultural frame of reference requires a particular strategy in the selection of stimuli to be used in free association, and this question receives only a passing treatment in this volume. The primary focus of the present volume is instead upon illustrating the use of distributions of free associations to infer subjective meaning.

An important characteristic of associative analysis is that it minimizes intervention by the investigator. It does not rely on questioning or scaling, and it is relatively free, except in the selection of stimuli, from the rationalizations and preconceptions of the investigator. Even here, techniques exist to select stimuli so that they are representative of the significant themes in a culture and not the investigator's preconceptions.

We are mindful that there is a certain skepticism about the use of free associations to infer subjective meaning, and we have in many places throughout this volume explained what it is that gives free associations their unique ability to probe the important and affectively significant relationships in people's lives.

We are indebted to many agencies which have supported the work upon which this book is based, and we recognize the collaboration and assistance of many persons in carrying out the work. Among the agencies and institutions which have supported this work are: National Institute of Mental Health; U. S. Office of Education, Division of International Education; Department of the Navy; Advanced Research Projects Agency; Philosophical Society; and the National Science Foundation. The authors express their sincere gratitude and appreciation to the numerous colleagues, coauthors, and work associates who made important contributions to the present volume. To mention a few: Roy D'Andrade, University of California; Bela Maday, National Institute of Mental Health; Rita Kelly and Vincent Kelly of Rutgers University; Robert E. Williams, University of the District of Columbia; Ralph K. White, George Washington University; Jack Brent, UNICOR, Department of Justice; Ralph Swisher, LEAA, Department of Justice; Norman Smith, American Institutes for Research; Dale Lysne, American Institutes for Research; Margret Brena, Institute of Comparative Social and Cultural Studies; John Kringen, University of Maryland; Charles Windle, National Institute of Mental Health; Garmon West, Howard University; Hilda Wing, U. S. Civil Service Commission; Alyssa McCabe and Cassandra Wright, University of Virginia. Among the various contributors listed or unmentioned, the valuable and continuous assistance and contributions offered by Jean Bryson Strohl through her interest and dedication deserve separate recognition.

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1 Psychological Meaning and the Associative Method

The notion of meaning is viewed differently by different disciplines. The linguist, the philosopher, and the psychologist each views the concept in some unique way, though all agree that meaning is a kind of relation, as Ogden and Richards (1923/1956) first pointed out, among mind, object, and word. The differences in viewpoint come down to what pair of terms in this triadic relation are emphasized. The interest of the linguist, for example, centers on what might be called *lexical meaning*, the conventional and arbitrary relation between a word and its referent.

LEXICAL AND REFERENTIAL MEANING

The basis of lexical meaning is convention. It operates as a broad and tacit agreement, as a collective force connecting words with objects and categories of objects. This convention, a collective code of labeling, has its roots in the use of language by countless individuals — in their habits of language and in their correlated mental processes. Linguists do not deny individual variations in use, but they generally disregard them. Although each linguistic act has some individuality and each use of language has its foundation in subjective psychological processes, linguistic interest begins at the level of the shared, the collective rules, the conventional. Thus, for lexicography, users of a language count as individuals only to the extent that they represent the collective and that their behavior conforms to, and informs about, the conventional. Bloomfield (1933) justified the linguist's omission of the individual by stressing the importance of definitions as reflections of collective agreement: "If he (the individual speaker) has not

heard it (the word) very many times, or if he has heard it under very unusual circumstances, his use (meaning) of the word may deviate from the conventional. We combat such personal deviations by giving explicit definitions of meaning: this is the chief use of our dictionaries" (p. 152).

This limitation affects the practical utility of the concept of lexical meaning only where lexical meaning is misconstrued to represent subjective meaning. Naturally, lexical meaning is inappropriate for application to psychological processes in individual human beings.

The philosophical or rational concern with meaning centers on the concept—referent relation. It is this relation that has so occupied the attention of contemporary theorists. Since the rise of generative theory, almost every serious treatment of meaning has centered on this relation (e.g., Katz, 1972), and despite the use of such theory in models of human memory and the like (e.g., Kintsch, 1974), the relation is essentially rational and logical in nature. In this treatment, meaning becomes synonymous with rational knowledge. This synonymy leads to an epistemological interest in meaning and concern with problems intrinsic to the acquisition of knowledge.

These notions, lexical and referential meaning, emphasize the arbitrary nature of the relation between word and referent. Despite the essential correctness of such a point of view, it can lead to the wrong conclusion. It produces a strong disposition to forget about the human organism's highly interdependent and not necessarily logical system of semantic habits and representations. These semantic habits interact with the structure of language in a complex way, for in language words are not created as arbitrarily as it might appear. Words with related meaning often derive from common roots, and the predispositions created in people by these semantic affinities represent powerful psychological forces operating beyond the level of awareness. Some concepts are psychologically more important or controlled than others. The less the speaker is aware of such semantic affinities, the greater their potential for influence.

PSYCHOLOGICAL MEANING

Psychological meaning describes a person's subjective perception and affective reactions to segments of language. It characterizes those things that are most salient in an individual's reactions and describes the degree and direction of affectivity. In comparison, rational or philosophical meaning describes the abstract characteristics of the referent and its relation with other conceivable referents, while lexical meaning describes the dyadic relations between words and referents. These are all, to be sure, interrelated, but it is possible, and indeed even necessary, to concentrate on one or the other aspects of meaning in order to understand certain problems. In the balance of this book, we are primarily concerned with psychological meaning.

The Notion of Mediation

The psychological study of meaning has been chiefly empirical. What theory there is arises out of a kind of neobehaviorism. Osgood (1952), of course, is the person, who, more than anyone else, has championed the psychological study of meaning through his famous semantic differential. Although Osgood's predecessors are not all behaviorists — after all both Wundt and Titchener espoused a process view of psychological meaning — his chief roots are in behaviorism. The incipient fractional response theory of meaning, which lies at the bottom of the conceptual framework of the semantic differential, has its origins in Watson (1924) and his demonstration that thought processes are correlated with small, incipient movements of the vocal organs. The notion of response mediation, which provides the theoretical background of the semantic differential, owes more to Hull (1930) than to Watson, however. Hull's notion of the pure stimulus act arises from the proprioceptive consequences of responses and leads directly to the notion of mediation. It is the concept of mediation that is responsible for the behavioristic notion of psychological meaning.

The concept of mediation became particularly popular with neobehaviorists because it allowed them to deal with and "explain" cognitive processes by conceiving of them as mediating chains with one or more covert links. Osgood (1952) described the meaning as a covert coding reaction that is both mediational and representational in nature. The recognition of these two aspects of meaning gives Osgood's notion considerable flexibility. Both Osgood and more recent cognitive theorists agree that meaning has a mediating and a representational function. This difference is one of emphasis, with cognitive theorists being much more concerned with representation. Osgood placed particular emphasis on the fact that psychological meaning is a reaction of the human organism, a reaction subject to rules and controlled by characteristic dispositions. He emphasized that psychological meaning constitutes, in the final analysis, a neural process and that we know practically nothing about its neurophysiology. Osgood (1964) cogently argued, however, that it is compelling to assume that meaning consists of a bundle of components: "The meaning of a sign is conceived to be a simultaneous bundle of distinctive semantic features — which identify with component r 's of the total r_m " (p. 403). These components represent the main constituents of the person's understanding and evaluation of the word (that is, its referent). They may represent experiences, images, and feelings about the word (that is, its referent), accumulated directly or vicariously in the past.

Background for the Present Method

The background for the investigations reported in this book shares some of this view, but places it in a broader perspective. The main practical departure is in the rejection of the fixed-response format associated with the semantic differen-

tial and its replacement by a method of free responding consistent with the propositional notion presented later. We may begin with the common experience that meaning as a subjective reaction involves the person's actual understanding, perception, and evaluation, even though certain elements of this understanding are necessarily vague, ambiguous, and not readily communicable. The psychological meaning of a concept such as "war" for a professional soldier may include, for instance, such components as "military strategy," "victory," "order of battle," "combat training," and "image of enemy." For a civilian, components such as "H-bomb," "radiation," and "fear" may be particularly strong. One may object that radiation, its biogenetic effects and other things, do not, in a logical sense, constitute parts of war; they are merely consequences of it. Yet important consequences and their anticipation appear to be potent components of a system of subjective meaning. The understanding of the subjective meaning of war is not the same for those who look forward to victory as for those who anticipate fatal radiation effects.

Our interest in the behavioral implications of subjective meaning underlines the importance of certain components that lie beyond the framework of a logical meaning. In the control of goal-oriented human behavior by subjective meaning, components such as those involving anticipated consequences are of particular importance. Anticipated consequences do influence our behavior. The anticipated consequences of war influence what position people are inclined to take, what alternative action they will choose, whether they will fight or demonstrate, whether they will go to combat, to exile, or to jail.

Although this point has been made before by psychologists ranging from Titchener to Osgood, there is a strong and general inclination to fall back upon purely linguistic and logical categories. Logical and linguistic analysis creates a natural disposition to neglect what is important in psychological meaning, the fact that certain components are more central to the psychological representation than others and the fact that the whole of psychological meaning is suffused with affectivity.

This disposition is responsible for the failure of certain direct elicitation techniques or detailed linguistic analysis to reveal components of subjective or psychological meaning. Direct questions about what words mean lead to explication often in the form of part-whole relations, superordinate categories, or other linguistically relevant relations. Psychological aspects of the reactions persons have to words and the concepts behind words are systematically disregarded. If we are to learn something about the structure of subjective meaning, we need to do what Osgood (1952) and Deese (1965) have done, namely to conceive of a meaningful reaction as being the aggregate of component reactions and potential component reactions irrespective of their linguistic or logical status. Thus, the subjective meaning of "war," can be approximated by listing the potential component reactions: R_1 "fight," R_2 "killing," R_3 "fear," R_4 "enemy," R_5 "victory," R_6 "strategy," R_7 "patriotism," R_8 "military," etc.