

Take a simple statement, perhaps: ***The cat is on the mat.***

What does it or could it mean? What does it or could it imply? Does it have only one meaning or could there be others? And what, if anything, needs to be added for it to convey any particular meaning.

A particular cat, but which one? We are told how the cat is situated, but not where it is (we are not told where the mat is). Is this actually present tense? It might not be. Is the assertion made from current observation or presumption (the cat was on the mat just now and it is expected to still be there). Is the cat in question feline and domestic or a cat o'nine tails – or a catamaran on a very large mat? Maybe the cat in question is a picture.

If we know what it means, do we therefore know that it is true?

If we know what it means, does it require that anything referred to actually exists?

It may or may not be true that there exists a particular something called **cat** which is currently situated vertically adjoining to another particular existent called **mat**.

Or it could be a sentence taken out of a story, neither true nor false.

Take another statement: ***Time flies like an arrow, fruit flies like a banana.*** Now we are into different territory where nothing is literal and it is on the face of it nonsensical. Yet the meaning is clear.

And take a helpful definition: ***Brexit means Brexit.*** Now we have a statement whose meaning is essentially infinite, allowing everyone to interpret it as meaning whatever they most want it to mean, even though in itself it is entirely devoid of meaning.

How are we to decide what is meant? It seems that we need to add context and interpretation to extract meaning from the simplest of statements – but we ourselves are a factor in that process. It is we who are processing the statement to extract its meaning, and we are subjective, not objective. Any meaning we extract is relative to us and may or may not have the same meaning to anyone else.

Kant talks of the thing-in-itself as if there were a way in which something *is* in isolation. But nothing ever is in isolation, there is always a context. Are we to allow that there is such a thing as integral meaning, meaning-in-itself, independent of context? To do so would be to go against the meaning of meaning – surely nothing can mean anything to itself, rather it must mean something *to* something or someone else. Meaning is relational.

A number of consequences flow from these observations:-

- Meaning does not imply truth - rather it is more closely allied to function.
- Language (verbal or otherwise), syntax, naming conventions and so on are mechanics (tools) of meaning but not meaning in themselves – rather they are agents of meaning.
- Data is not meaning – rather meaning is derived from data in a process of attaching significance.
- Meaning is essentially internal, although widely shared by common experience and common culture.
- There is no such thing as intrinsic meaning, meaning-in-itself.
- Meaning is independent of reality – sense does not imply reference.
- Meaning can be entirely subjective, such as my response to music, art, or indeed anything at all.

If you don't like these consequences, there may be others .....

Meaning is not static. Our brains have evolved to extract meaning from our experiences. It is a survival tool. But like all tools, it is only as good as we are in using it. Poor or inexperienced users will suffer, expert users may prosper or perhaps manipulate.

Meaning is dynamic.