

A Vocabulary for Interpretation¹

The **meaning** of a text is that pattern of meaning/concepts the author consciously willed to convey by the words or shareable symbols he or she used.

Implications are those meanings in a text of which the author was usually unaware but nevertheless legitimately fall within the pattern of meaning he/she willed.

- E.g. Matthew 5:28: don't look at a woman lustfully. Implication includes video and photo images that didn't exist in Jesus' time
- We discover the implications, **but the author determines the flow of implications.** We need to get his meaning correct or we'll miss his implications
- Deut. 6:6-9. We teach God's command to our children, but we don't literally write His commands on our doorstep. The implication is that we do things to show and teach our commitment to the Lord.
- Multiple times, Paul writes to greet one another with a holy kiss. We don't literally kiss. We do this according to our culturally appropriate and warm greetings to other Christians.

Significance refers to how a reader responds to the meaning of a text.

- Do you do it? Do you do what the Word says?

Subject matter refers to the content or "stuff" talked about in the text.

- Not meaning. It's the stuff talked about in the text.
- E.g., Lot and Sodom and Gamora (Gen. 19). Don't focus on Lot's hospitality. That is subject matter but not what the author is trying to convey.

Understanding refers to the correct mental grasp of the author's meaning.

- Not yet verbalized or written. Remains in mind.
- Has not been expressed yet. Once it's been expressed, it becomes interpretation.

Interpretation refers to the verbal or written expression of a reader's understanding of the author's meaning.

- It's what happens after understanding is expressed.
- You can have various interpretations of the same meaning. People can have a proper understanding of the meaning but can express that meaning in different ways.
- Understanding is singular. Interpretation can be plural.

Mental acts refer to the experiences the author went through when writing the text.

- We don't know these unless the author tells us these things.
- Biblical authors are dead and can't refute wrong assumptions of mental acts, so we need to be careful about not speculating on mental acts of author.

The **semantic range** is the range of meanings allowed by the words (verbal symbols) of a text.

¹ Adapted from chapter 2 of Robert H. Stein, *A Basic Guide to Interpreting the Bible*, 2nd edition (Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Academic, 2011).

- Dictionary definition. The range of meaning of a word
- “Kids sale” range of meaning: baby goats, kids’ stuff, kids themselves, sale for kids, etc. Need to narrow the range of meanings to a singular. Need context.

The **specific meaning** is the specific meaning that the author has given to a word, phrase, sentence and the like in a text.

- Be very precise. “The least meaning is the best meaning.”
- Words mean what they meant in the culture at that time/historical context
- Etymological fallacy—false thinking that if you know origin of word, you know meaning of word. Not true. “Nice” comes from a Latin word meaning “ignorant”, but people today don’t mean that people are ignorant when they describe others as nice.

“Perhaps the classic example of this issue is found in Lewis Carroll’s Alice in Wonderland, where Alice and Humpty Dumpty have the following conversation:

“There’s glory for you!”

“I don’t know what you mean by ‘glory,’” Alice said.

Humpty Dumpty smiled contemptuously. “Of course you don’t—till I tell you. I meant ‘there’s a nice knockdown argument for you!’”

“But ‘glory’ doesn’t mean ‘a nice knockdown argument,’” Alice objected.

“When I use a word,” Humpty Dumpty said, in a rather scornful tone, “it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less.”

“The question is,” said Alice, “whether you can make words mean so many different things.”

“The question is,” said Humpty Dumpty, “which is to be master—that’s all.”

There is a sense in which Humpty Dumpty is correct. He can make a word mean whatever he wants it to mean. But—and this is critical—if he wants to communicate his meaning to others, he must submit himself to the semantic range of possibilities allowed by the language he shares with his hearers. He can create a new word or a new meaning for an old word, of course, but if he wants to communicate his meaning, he must explain such an unusual usage. Thus Alice, too, is correct. Whether he likes it or not, if Humpty Dumpty desires to communicate, he cannot arbitrarily create unique meanings for words unless he informs his hearers/readers that he has done so. For communication to take place an author’s text must possess shareability; that is, the meaning of the symbols of the text must fall within the semantic range of the language or code shared with the intended readers.”²

Literary genre refers to the literary form used by the author and the rules governing that form.

- Different rules, things that are assumed in poetry, proverbs, historical narratives, etc.
- We make these decisions unconsciously, but we need to be aware of it. E.g., If a child says “I’m starving” or “I have a ton of homework”, you don’t call her a liar. You

² Stein, 50.

understand it's a figurative expression, hyperbole to communicate deep emotional content.

- We understand and do this all the time, but it can be difficult with the Bible since it's a different culture and time.

Context refers to the willed meaning that an author gives to the literary materials surrounding the text.

Meaning

- primarily related to author

Implications

- primarily related to author

Significance

- primarily related to reader

Subject matter

- primarily related to text because it's stuff in text that doesn't have anything to do with author's intended meaning

Understanding

- primarily related to reader

Interpretation

- primarily related to reader

Mental acts

- primarily related to author

Semantic range

- primarily related to text. Author can't control possible range of meaning of a word. That's related to the language of the day.

Specific meaning

- primarily related to author

Literary genre

- primarily related to text. Author doesn't create new genres but submits himself to the genres that are available to him.

Context

- primarily related to author. He determines the willed meaning prior and after the specific writing