

Theories of Language and the Task of Interpretation

Language as Reference	Language as Discourse
Semiotics (<i>langue</i>)	Semantics (<i>parole</i>)
Descriptive function: language refers to the world, gives a pictorial representation of a state of affairs	Performative function: language accomplishes a task, performs an illocutionary <i>speech act</i>)
Language can be studied in the abstract	Language must be studied as it is used
Interpretation seeks to discover the meaning of words as signs and systems of signs	Interpretation seeks to discover the meaning of the sentence or discourse

Changing views of how language refers to the world

Premodern views of language were characterized by a focus on the object. The mind knew the world directly. Language was viewed as an imitation of the world. Words were viewed as signs of things, representing and referring to the world itself. Reality was fixed and revealed by God.

Modern views of language are characterized by a turn to the subject. Language is viewed as information.

Words are viewed as signs of thoughts, representing what people think or feel. Reality has an eternal order, knowable by reason. For Kant, the mind did not know the world directly but supplied the categories that shaped experience and made it determinate. For the *logical positivists* (based on the early work of Wittgenstein), language could only refer to that which could be verified and falsified by science.

Postmodern views of language are characterized by a turn to language itself. Language and meaning is viewed as indeterminate, ungrounded in the world, reason, or revelation. For *structuralists* a word was viewed as a sign that gains significance by its differences from other signs in a system. For *poststructuralists* a word could not be contained in a system; a word is a sign that refers to a sign that refers to a sign, etc., in an indeterminate play that never comes to rest in reality. Reality is a constructed and forcibly stabilized product of our language systems. *Deconstruction* displays this groundlessness of language, undoing the covenant between language and reality.

(see Kevin Vanhoozer, "Language, Hermeneutics, and Biblical Theology," NIDOTTE, pp. 15-50)

Speech Acts

Three levels of communicative action impact our understanding of meaning at the level of discourse:

1. **Locution** refers to the actual utterance or writing ("fire").
2. **Illocution** is the act that one does through the locution ("fire" might be a command to "shoot" or a warning of "danger!").
3. **Perlocution** is the effect of the illocution on another (it persuades, surprises, informs, etc.).