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CHAPTER TWO

SOME QUALITATIVE FILTERS IN THE
CONSTRUCTION OF MEANING

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Introduction

Linguistic systems are necessarily open systems because they are symbolic representations at the intersection of the “real” extra-linguistic world and of individual subjectivities. How can this intersection of systematic rules and subjectivity be appraised?

This chapter will deal with linguistic phenomena where the relative weights of the English system and of subjectivity can be approached. First I will study examples that illustrate how the system imposes different markers for different evaluative contexts. Language speaks by itself (*die Sprache spricht*, in Heidegger’s terms): the paradigmatic oppositions of the system apply, expressing evaluative nuances, most of the time without any awareness on the part of the subject. Subjectivity and omnipresent valuations are revealed by the markers that are used systematically. These markers betray the subjects’ representation of the world or of events in the dynamic construction of meaning.

But subjectivity can go further in this balance of powers: sometimes, when a given system—English for instance—lacks the means to express certain fine subjective nuances or distinctions, it can be distorted or even violated. It thus seems that constraints can go both ways. The complex relations between a system and its use by subjects are admittedly the crux of literature or psychoanalysis, in which subjective viewpoints are essential. But these relations are always at play in any construction of meaning.

A linguistic description should take into account this interplay between a system and subjectivities and try to find the theoretical tools to describe it. A. Culioli’s *Théorie des Opérations Prédicatives et Enonciatives* (Culioli 1999) provides rather powerful tools to describe such phenomena because it allows descriptions to combine quantitative *vs.* qualitative location components. A speaker’s utterances are anchored in a situation and they are described as displaying two components: one is quantitative, temporal, relative to the location of represented events in time, and one is qualitative, pertaining to subjective, inter-subjective and valuating parameters. Utterances can thus “simply” refer to events located and validated in time, but most of the time they necessarily include viewpoints and subjective valuations, denote inter-subjectivity, or attribute qualitative properties. Language clearly does refer to the extra-linguistic world, but it does so *via* a subject whose personal representation of the world and

of him/herself unavoidably characterizes and values events according to social and/or personal viewpoints. Thus any linguistic system is constrained by its powerful shared code and systematic rules, but also by subjectivities at play in inter-subjectivity.

Moreover, in actual interaction, subjects have a representation—more or less correct—of how their interlocutors will receive what they are saying according to their own subjectivities. They keep adjusting their intended meaning to this inter-personal process, thus often avoiding misunderstandings or ambiguities which are part and parcel of the referential power of language.

Some of these constraints in the construction of meaning, at the intersection of the two spheres of language and (inter-) subjectivity are precisely what will be dealt with here. Since speakers are mostly unaware of all these constraints, it would be a mistake to refer to their “choices” of markers or syntax when they speak: corpora are needed to analyze the actual uses of passives *vs.* active forms for instance, of a present perfect *vs.* a preterite, of *be* + *-ing*, of an article *vs.* no article or of expressions like *now and then vs. every now and then*, not to mention the cohesive linear ordering of discourse. The reason why corpora need to be analyzed to have access to these phenomena is that subjects are not aware of the way their subjectivity permeates the way they speak. They are not aware either of the linguistic rules at play, whether respected or distorted and, when asked about forms, they regularly state normative and consequently very often false meta-linguistic representations, even though reflexivity and meta-linguistic activity are part of language activity.

I will exemplify two types of constraints, or violence: (i) the violence of the linguistic system itself, which imposes specific forms to speakers (here *now and then vs. every now and then*), (ii) the violence which is sometimes imposed by the speaker onto the aspect-temporal system of English. The latter will be exemplified by two sets of utterances: one where the speaker’s subjectivity gives a representation of the moment of utterance as still belonging to past time. It is the necessary to refer to the context to lift the ambiguities or even the contradictions raised by the use of the present perfect with or without prepositional phrases introduced by *for*. The other set of examples will show how the uncommon yet authentic use of the present perfect with a determination in *ago* construes specific qualitative meanings which could not be expressed otherwise. These examples will show that subjective properties sometimes cannot but violate some of the linguistic rules of a system if they are to express subjective nuances that the system cannot express.

1. The violence of the system: how evaluative filters trigger *now and then or every now and then*

Now and then and *every now and then* are generally described in dictionaries as synonymous. However their respective use in context seems to be totally constrained by the English system which deals with the evaluative filters brought about by different contexts (Trévisé 2006). The following examples are all taken from the *British National Corpus*.

When the context is simply quantitative, *i.e.* when “normal”, expected, factual periodicity is expressed, *now and then* is generally used:

(1) *Science* has been accused, ***now and then***, of leaving no space for *religion*. (ABE 2751)¹

(2) We *do well* to remember that, after all the violence that humans had created on the earth, God surveyed the debris and said 'he was sorry he

¹ In all examples I have underlined the elements of the context that contribute to a quantitative *vs.* a qualitative meaning construction.

made man' (Gen.6:7). It is a point of view for which **now and then** I have some sympathy. (B04 887)

Now and then is used here in descriptions or factual considerations: science is opposed to religion and recurrent feelings in front of violence are expressed.

In the two following examples *now and then* and *every now and then* are used to determine the same expression *stop to look in shop windows* but the contexts reveal clear differences:

(3) *Alnwick had a relaxed air this evening that was a complete contrast to the bustle that prevailed during the day. Couples of all ages strolled leisurely along, stopping **now and then** to look in shop windows.* (E12)

(4) *A man in a doorway across the road caught her eye. He looked too uninterested, and when he saw her watching him he avoided her eyes. Pretty certain this must be the man, Paige set off down the street, stopping **every now and then** to look in shop windows and cast surreptitious glances backwards.* (JY8 319)

Now and then is used in (3) and *every now and then* in (4). In (3), the situation is seen as normal, expected, with people enjoying walking in the streets and looking at shop windows. In (4), the behavior is unexpected, not "normal". The woman feels threatened and is certainly not simply enjoying window shopping. The context clearly expresses negative evaluative elements.

The BNC systematically reveals that *now and then* is used in contexts of factual regularity whereas *every now and then* is nearly only used in evaluative contexts, where the recurrent events are seen as unexpected, erratic, coloured negatively in terms of norms generally admitted.

This insistence on the erratic quality of the events described can paradoxically lead to nuances where their importance is toned down and where they are seen as not as frequent as it seems after all as in (5)-(8):

(5) *"I still had nightmares about it," said William, "well into my teens. Still do, sometimes, **every now and then**." Preston looked at him and wondered if they were the same nightmares he had. They'd be worse, probably. William always went that step further into life's nightmares [...].* (F9C 3262)

(6) *Splurge-weed grows as a set of straggling, amorphous branches in the sea. **Every now and then** branches break off and drift away. These breakages can occur anywhere in the plants, and the fragments can be large or small. As with cuttings in a garden, they are capable of growing just like the original plant. This shedding of parts is the species's method of reproducing.* (ARR 1604)

(7) *Let us suppose that **every now and then**, perhaps every million atoms or so, slight irregularities occur.* (CEG 439)

(8) *What Taylor suggested was that **every now and then**, but very rarely, a sheet of atoms is not complete.* (CEG 442)

Not only are corpora necessary to analyze such phenomena but occurrences are to be considered in rather large contexts if the system of oppositions is to be fully described. The balance between the weights of quantitative vs. qualitative values can then be appraised. In example (9) *every now and then* is used to underline the exceptional quality of the behavior described:

(9) *When I was 15 I was in a depressed state and I thought, I'll do these last paintings about the end of the world and then I'll end it. So I go into*

these depressions every now and then, but I think the general tone of the work is about humanity struggling against all odds. (CFL 474)

In (9) the conjunction *but*² following *every now and then*, introduces the correction implying: “this is not normal, you shouldn’t pay too much attention”. The recurrence of the depressed states is toned down. In (10) which describes events in Belfast, the marker *but* is also used to underline the disconnection between what is normal, and thus expected, and what is absolutely awful but fortunately rather rare:

(10) This is what living here's about. People will tell you there's normality here and there is, but every now and then an abnormal thing happens which is quite horrific. The city then becomes a collapsed face, the perspectives will change. (G21 220)

On the contrary, in (11), with *now and then*, there is no toning down:

*(11) The best solution, I have found, is to throw them down, one by one, on to the horses' deep bed of wood-chips, off which they almost always bounce unscathed. In spite of these hazards, I generally visit the wall-nest every two or three days; but **now and then**, I have to admit, it escapes my attention. (ASK 142)*

The speaker does not want to minimize his shortcomings: he admits them (*I have to admit*). *Every now and then* would not seem to be possible in this context because it would insist on the rarity of the events and would sound apologetic whereas here the speaker owns up and only states facts.

These examples show that *now and then* and *every now and then* are not exact synonyms. They are used in different types of contexts to express the different weights of quantitative vs. qualitative values. Whereas *now and then* expresses quantitative periodicity, i.e. a periodicity established on the temporal axis, with *every now and then* periodicity is no longer the main stake; even if events are described as recurring, qualitative values of unexpectedness or of justification and toning down are dominant. This can even paradoxically lead to imply that the events in question are rare or at least not that frequent.

The English system possesses the means of opposing these two types of recurrence and of integrating subjectivity by imposing *every now and then* in cases where evaluative nuances are at play, signaling either that subjects have internalized social norms or else that they are expressing personal judgments. These two kinds of social or personal subjectivity are revealed through the markers they use, or rather by the way the system makes them speak, without any awareness on their part.

This paradigmatic opposition shows the need for meta-linguistic tools which can describe such phenomena. In A. Culioli’s *Théorie des Opérations Prédicatives et Enonciatives*, utterances are described as having an enunciative origin where two components combine and can have different weights: the quantitative component T, which pertains to the temporal axis, and the subjective component S, from which stem evaluative nuances and inter-subjectivity. The system imposes constraints in the choices of markers but it does so according to subjective symbolic representations. Such tools are useful to explain numerous phenomena, be it for instance the different values of modal auxiliaries (Gilbert 2001, Deschamps 2001, Bourdier 2008), or the two values of *since*, *while* or *when* according to whether they help determine temporal quantitative values or are used in inter-subjective argumentation (Sekali 1991, Wyld 2001).

² In the BNC, *but* precedes 10 % of the occurrences of *every now and then* and only 6.4 % of the occurrences of *now and then*.

The same two components will be used to describe the second set of examples, in which a different type of violence is exemplified.

II. Subjective violence imposed on the linguistic system

There are cases where the limits of the English system seem to be reached, where the system gives way to ambiguities or even apparent contradictions: this is sometimes due to the weight of the subjective component.

I will deal here first with some representations of the moment of utterance and then with the occasional use of the present perfect with determinations using AGO. In both cases temporal and thus quantitative specifications are backgrounded to allow qualitative evaluative specifications to emerge.

1. The moment of utterance: a malleable and adjustable representation

Concerning the opposition between the qualitative value of the present perfect and the temporal disconnection marked by the preterite, oppositions such as (12a) and (12b) are well known (Dubos 1990):

(12a) *Once I met him on the bus.*

(12b) *I have met him once.*

In (12a) *once* can occur at the beginning of the sentence. It is used with a preterite and specifies a temporal value of disconnection, locating the event as unique on the time-space axis. (12a) would be followed by more specific information about the encounter. In (12b) *once* is post posed and no longer has a temporal meaning because of the present perfect: it says something about the quality of the knowledge. The following utterance could well be *I hardly know him*. The present perfect is the marker of this qualitative change. *Once* cannot appear at the beginning of the sentence in (12b) where it would then be detached from the expression of the change of state.

The same qualitative specification is found in (13):

(13) *Because for centuries they have braved one of the world's worst climates, sturdy Londoners do not find leaky roofs and damp shelters unbearable. Because they've fought so many wars in the past, they don't look upon this war as a calamity, even though it's coming down on top of them.*³

A more precise specification than *in the past* would not be possible here because it would switch the determination into a purely temporal location and the system would not allow it.

As the present perfect expresses links between the present and the past time, it can sometimes lead to ambiguities as to the exact location of the moment of utterance relative to the duration of the process. In the following pair of examples (Cotte 1987), the preposition *for* would seem to introduce a "temporal" specification:

(14a) *He's lived in China for about thirty years.*

(14b) *He's been in China for about thirty years.*

³ Walter Graebner. 1941. *Their Finest Hour, First-Hand Narratives of the War in England*, A. A. Michie and W. Graebner (Eds), 203-206. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company.

In fact, (14a) and even (14b) are ambiguous: the moment of utterance may or may not be included in the duration of the process. Either the man is still in China or else he spent 30 years in China, is no longer there, but has now acquired the characteristic of knowing China. The verb *be* in (14b), which cannot be paradigmatically opposed here to an aspectual form using *be* + *-ing*, seems to trigger the first interpretation more readily: he is still in China. On the contrary (14c) would only yield this interpretation, without any ambiguity, *be* + *-ing* insisting on the quantitative component of the on-going process:

(14c) *He's been living in China for about thirty years.*

What is of course interesting is that (14d) is perfectly acceptable:

(14d) *He lives in England permanently now, but he has been in China for about thirty years.*

The beginning of the sentence erases any potential ambiguity so that the prepositional phrase (PP) introduced by *for* is then understood as adding a qualitative precision: the man is in England now but knows China very well. The speaker underlines this characteristic and the moment of utterance is not constructed as part of the process *be in China*. What is at stake is the present change of state, expressed now, and qualified by the length of the previous stay in China. The qualitative value of the PP (especially with *about*) thus totally outweighs its quantitative temporal value. The construction of meaning here takes the two coordinated clauses into account and excludes the moment of utterance from the process *be in China*, thus resolving the apparent formal contradiction.

(15), on the contrary, in the negative form, without any context, is ambiguous, just as (14a) was:

(15) *He hasn't slept for days.*

The interpretation will depend on the context or the situation showing whether or not he is sleeping now. (16) on the other hand is perfectly possible, along the same line as (14d):

(16) *The weather's been gorgeous for days but it's raining now.*

The subjective representation of the moment of utterance is still under the influence of good weather, and is not (yet) contradicted by the new extralinguistic situation expressed until the statement made in the second clause (*it's raining now*). A PP like *a week* or *3 days* would not be acceptable, because such precision would make it switch towards a quantitative temporal value and the system would not allow the use of the present perfect.

Here are some more examples where all the PPs lack temporal precision:

(17) *He went in a car! He hasn't driven a car in twenty years. He'll kill himself.*

(18) *This seaside town is a place I have thought of coming to for many years. I have heard various people talk of having spent a pleasant holiday here. (...) I arrived in this town yesterday afternoon, and have decided to remain a second night here so as to allow myself this whole day to spend in a leisurely manner. (Kazuo Ishiguro. 1989. *The Remains of the Day*. London: Faber and Faber, p. 243.)*

The speaker is already in the seaside town when he says: *This seaside town is a place I have thought of coming to for many years.* But he still says *I have thought of coming.*

In the following examples, the present perfect is even used with *be* + *-ing*:

(19) *There was also a very interesting letter in the Guardian on this same subject. It is by a maths teacher, Cherry Waters who says: 'I have been waiting for more than ten years to hear about single-sex lessons in co-educational schools'*

The preceding context, not given here, shows that this sentence is uttered although the teacher has just heard about such lessons, *i.e.* is no longer waiting.

(20) *All of my classes have been picked and as of today I am a starving student. I am waiting for it to hit me that I don't have a job. I have been working for so long that the thought of not having a job makes me feel so unproductive. I do have to admit it's nice to be taken care of for once. I was always the provider and now someone wants to take care of me. I think I will keep this one.*

The sentence *I am waiting for it to hit me that I don't have a job* is a perfect explanation of the point in case. The period of work is not yet erased, is at least still part of this blurred present.

(21) *This is my first real experience away from home, Doctor. I've been waiting for it all my life. Saving for it. It's all I've had to look forward to for years.*

It is only natural to find the verb *wait* in such appraisals of the frontier between past and present time. The waiting was felt as very long and even though the present extralinguistic reality expressed by the first sentence (*This is my first real experience away from home*) proves it has stopped, the English system finds this way to express the malleable frontier between past expectations and present time. The remaining feeling of waiting seems to be all the more all-pervading with the use of *be + -ing* which stresses the quantitative validation of the on-going process. The PP still expresses temporal vagueness (*all my life*). The dynamic interpretation makes the necessary adjustments between the apparent contradictions.

In (22) the verb *wait* is used again, this time without *be + -ing*:

(22) *Maternal love shines out of Hilary Winshaw's eyes as she lifts her giggling, one-month-old daughter Josephine high in the air in the conservatory of the happy couple's lovely South Kensington home. They've waited a long time for their first child - [...] - but, as Hilary told Hello! in this exclusive interview, Josephine was well worth waiting for! !*

The preterite in the last sentence of (22) (*was well worth waiting*) seems to show that reality has (at last) put an end to the waiting in the subject's representations. One last example, without specifications using *for*:

(23) *I remember Eric's laughs. He abandoned himself to them. They were throaty guffaws of white teeth and dishevelled hair and streaming eyes. And they will return to my nightmares with the smile which preceded them and the clap of his hand on my back. It has taken fifty years to banish all thoughts of Eric, to close my dreams to the sight and sound of him. Now I have undone the work of decades; I have remembered. And Eric will return to haunt me. (Robert Mason, 1999. *The Drowning People*, London: Penguin Books, p. 150.)*

The narrator remembers his fight to forget his friend's death, which occurred a long time ago. His representation of the fight for oblivion is present though. He refers to it saying *It has taken fifty years to banish all thoughts of Eric* (and not it had taken me) and compares it to a different, more recent and realistic now expressed by the sentences where the adverb *now* appears: *Now I have*

undone the work of decades; I have remembered. If the fight for oblivion was seen as lost and past, he would have said *It had taken me fifty years to banish all thoughts of Eric.* Two conflicting representations of his present state (50 years of fight for oblivion still going on vs. lost battle brought about by sudden remembrance) are expressed by the use of the present perfect in both segments.

The seemingly conflicting markers express this malleability which excludes any clear-cut limit between past and present time: the present perfect is the perfect tool to do so because it marks the links between present and past time. The utterance time is a subjective representation which does not exactly correspond to the extra-linguistic moment of utterance. The links constructed by the sequence of sentences in a large context sweep away any possible ambiguity about the present reality but allow for contradictory subjective ongoing representations. The reader makes all the necessary adjustments, without thinking twice about it.

These are cases which show how the English system can sometimes handle the fleeting property attached to the present moment, a difficult philosophical and cognitive concept, as Greek philosophers already knew (Trévisé 2003). The situation of utterance, where utterances are anchored, is at the intersection of the extra-linguistic situation of the speaker and the linguistic aspect-temporal representation. And the situation of utterance, which all utterances stem from, necessarily comprises two components, T and S. It can thus be expected to show complex signs of the intersection of the linguistic and extra-linguistic spheres but also of the T and S components. And sometimes the system has to adapt to be able to express the possible conflicts between T and S, and even within different conflicting subjective viewpoints. The usual aspect-temporal oppositions are slightly distorted but no one notices this and these formal contradictions do not hinder interpretation because the conflicting meaningful representations are unconsciously adjusted. It would seem that this is the way subjects handle a system which does not have all the necessary formal oppositions they need to represent some qualitative subjective nuances.

2. Present perfect and AGO: when temporal determinations become evaluative

A greater violence is apparently imposed on the system when the present perfect is used with determinations using *ago*. Native speakers, when made aware of this co-occurrence, are slightly shocked, even though they had not perceived it when first reading the excerpts (Trévisé 2004). Their conscious representations of the norm of English seem to be infringed.

They find no objection to (24) because the PP including *ago* appears as an afterthought:

(24) '*She's been X-rayed already,*' I said. He looked at me questioningly. 'I don't mean today. I mean a few weeks ago. Her GP - Dr *Campion* - sent her up here and they took X-rays then.'

But they do not readily accept (25) in spite of the comma:

(25) *Rebecca had been gone for more than four years, and I was still missing her terribly. (I still do, if you want to know the truth, although of course I have got used to the feeling, a long time ago.)* (Jonathan Coe. 2007. *The Rain before it Falls*, London: Penguin Books, p. 172.)

And they are puzzled by (26), an example found in Quirk (1985):

(26) *They ask me about something I've said years ago.*

And also by:

(27) *'Don't,' said Irene.*

'Irene, enough don'ts! I already have heard your don'ts a long time ago.'

Rather long excerpts are given in (28) and (29) to emphasize the evaluative nature of the preceding contexts. *Ago* is always used with vague "temporal" determination (*long ago, a long time ago, years ago, a few weeks ago*). The deictic marker normally locates events quantitatively in reference to the moment of utterance (or shifted moment of utterance in fiction), but in the following contexts qualitative nuances are brought about: things are now different because of long past phenomena. The qualitative change of state marked by the present perfect overrules the changes between past and present and *ago* no longer serves to locate events in the past but rather to add something to the present properties of the new state. *Ten years ago* would be perfectly impossible because precise chronology is not at stake here:

(28) *Inside the warehouse there are all kinds of strange, sharp things half hidden in the junk, rusty edges and broken glass from the windows that have been smashed. "Please, Ron, let's climb in the window," I beg. She laughs and we go around to the window. There is an important board pulled out that makes a place for your foot. Then you jump and put one knee on the window ledge, then you slide inside. The boards crisscrossing the window have been torn down a long time ago. Ronnie goes first and then helps me up. (Joyce Carol Oates. 1974. *In the Warehouse*. London: Penguin Books, pp. 81-82.)*

(29) *Drunk and high on drugs, bloodlust ramping through their veins, Samuel Doe's men had eviscerated their president, William Tolbert, in his office and carried his ministers, fifteen baggy old men stripped naked, to the beach, where they lashed them to the poles and shot them dead in front of television and home-movie cameras and a crowd of wildly jeering citizens and left their bodies tied to the poles to feed the vultures and the dogs. The poles lie buried in the sand now, and the bones of the corrupt old men have long ago washed out to sea. (Russel Banks. 2005. *The Darling*, London: Harper Perennial, p. 40.)*

The English system lacks any normative⁴ means of expressing such nuances: it has to be violated. To respect it, (29) for instance would have to become:

(29') *The poles lie buried in the sand now, and the bones of the corrupt old men have washed out to sea. This happened long ago.*

Or:

(29'') *The poles lie buried in the sand now. The bones of the corrupt old men were washed out to sea long ago.*

The visions would be different because of the disconnection value brought about by the preterite and a strictly temporal determination using *ago*. In (29) on the contrary, the present time is qualified as different, and simultaneously this qualification is said to be due to past events.

One last example:

(30) *I'd like to oblige you, Miss Hemmings. But unfortunately I've already replied to the organizers some days ago. I fear it'll be rather late*

⁴ Or maybe the norm, a difficult notion to define, should be changed...

to inform them of my wish to bring a guest.' (Kazuo Ishiguro, 2000. *When we were orphans*. London: Faber and Faber, pp. 31-32.)

Which exact day the answer was given is not at stake, but the fact that several days have gone by is important all the same in the present situation of refusal. Such compactness could not be expressed by two different sentences, more respectful of the established norm, where *some days ago* would switch back to a temporal meaning:

(30') *But unfortunately I've already replied to the organizers. I did it some days ago.*

Conclusion

The systematic uses of *now and then* and *every now and then* in different contexts is yet another example of the violence of the system of formal oppositions: the system allows for temporal vs. subjective qualitative nuances, without any awareness on the part of the subject.

But the system sometimes seems to reach the limits of its ability for paradigmatic oppositions. Then subjectivities impose more or less severe distortions. There are cases where the context fosters the necessary adjustments to apparent aspect-temporal contradictions concerning the moment of utterance for instance. And there are also rare examples where the grammatical rules generally admitted by native intuition seem to be altogether violated, but are yet found in authentic texts.

All these cases exemplify some of the ways in which subjectivities and linguistic systems intersect, which is after all the essence of natural languages. The systems are open by necessity since they are used by subjects constructing meaningful linguistic representations of the extra-linguistic world. A language cannot be described as a totally structured linguistic system. Language results from an activity both of producing and understanding utterances. This dynamic activity requires constant adjustments at play within subjectivities and in inter-subjectivity. The observation here was conducted within a theoretical framework which gives powerful tools to formulate certain characteristics of language activity, both referential and linguistic. Two components are needed to describe the origin of utterances: the parameter T to which the quantitative delimitations on the axis of instants are associated, and the parameter S from which stem qualitative, evaluative properties. The various aspectual values with all their subjective added nuances can be represented through the different weights assigned to the quantitative and qualitative components: either — rather rarely— the relation is constructed from the sole space-time anchoring or else the subject's evaluative delineations take part or prevail in the construction of meaning. The system is not exterior to or independent of its use by subjects who express aspectual or modal determinations.

A linguistic theory should try and take into account such malleability implying so many adjustments. The construction of meaning cannot be approached without considering its multi-dimensional and dynamic nature.

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