Interpretation

[in-tər-prə-'tā-shən] *Noun.*

1: The act or the result of interpreting
2: A particular adaptation or version of a work, method, or style
3: A teaching technique that combines factual with stimulating explanatory information[1]

by Taylor-Grey Miller (Metaphysics, Philosophy of Religion)

Consider the following sentence: "✌❒♓♦♦◆□◆●♏ ♠■□❒♏♦"

Chances are, you have no idea what sentence this is or even the language to which it belongs. You have no idea what the sentence *means,* no way to figure out what sort of information that sentence offers. Often when we fail to understand what a sentence in a foreign language means, we try to offer a *translation* of it into a language with which we are already familiar. If I translated the above sentence into English, for instance, then I could use my already firm grip on the meaning of various English words to work out what that sentence means. But I don't have to offer you a translation. I can remedy your problem more directly by offering you an *interpretation.* If I gave you an interpretation of the strange sentence above, I would directly give the meaning for each expression in the sentence along with a way of working out the meaning of the complete sentence based on what the components of that sentence mean.

Here our sentence has two words: "✌❒♓♦♦◆□◆●♏" and "♠■□❒♏♦"

Now I have to use a bit of language to describe the interpretation, and my language of choice is English. But don't misunderstand what comes next. I'm not translating our strange sentence into English; I'm using English to write out what meaning the interpretation gives to our strange sentence above.

"✌❒♓♦♦◆□◆●♏" designates Aristotle.

"♠■□❒♏♦" designates the set of things that snore.

Given this interpretation of the sentence's parts, I can work out the meaning of "✌❒♓♦♦◆□◆●♏ ♠■□❒♏♦"

It means that *Aristotle belongs to the set of things that snore.* What I'm now in a position to do with my interpretation is work out whether the sentence in question is *true.* This is because my interpretation is a characterization of the way the world would need to be in order for the sentence to be true. So, *interpreting* or *giving an interpretation* is an enterprise in linking up our language with the features of the world it represents. Lots of disciplines are interested in the project of interpreting languages, and each for importantly different reasons.

Linguistics involves interpretation in this sense because of the role that it plays in giving an account of linguistic meaning (as we have seen above) for natural languages like English. Philosophy, logic, and mathematics (the areas where my own academic interests lie) are often interested in interpretations of *non-natural* or *formal* languages (think here of languages like programming languages) because of the ways in which doing so allows us to understand certain aspects of logical reasoning. But all of us are nearly ubiquitously involved in the project of interpreting one another. When we speak to one another we aim, in part, to help each other coordinate on a picture of the world, and to do that we must first understand how the language that we use links up with the world we are trying to mutually reveal. So, the next time you encounter a text or an assertion, recognize that you are being called on to give an interpretation in the present sense: to connect a bit of language up with a certain conception of the world. ◘

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1. *Merriam-Webster,* s.v. "interpretation (n.)," www.merriam-webster.com.