



Malinowski: Context of Situation

Let us have a look at such a text, an actual utterance taken down from a conversation of natives in the Trobriand Islands, N E New Guinea. In analysing it, we shall see quite plainly how helpless one is in attempting to open up the meaning of a statement by mere linguistic means, and we shall also be able to realize what sort of additional knowledge, besides verbal equivalence, is necessary in order to make the utterance significant.

I adduce a statement in native, giving under each word its nearest English equivalent.

<i>Tasakaulo</i>	<i>kaymatana</i>	<i>yakida</i> ;
We run	front-wood	ourselves ;

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<i>tawoulo</i>	<i>ovanu</i> ;	<i>tasivila</i>	<i>tagine</i>
we paddle	in place ;	we turn	we see
<i>soda</i> ;	<i>isakaulo</i>	<i>ka'u'uya</i>	
companion ours ;	he runs	rear-wood	
<i>oluvieki</i>	<i>simlaveta</i>	<i>Pilolu</i>	
behind	their sea-arm	Pilolu	

The verbatim English translation of this utterance sounds at first like a riddle or a meaningless jumble of words ; certainly not like a significant, unambiguous statement. Now if the listener, whom we suppose acquainted with the language, but unacquainted with the culture of the natives, were to understand even the general trend of this statement, he would have first to be informed about the situation in which these words were spoken. He would need to have them placed in their proper setting of native culture.

from: MALINOWSKI, Bronislaw: 'The problem of meaning in primitive languages'. Supplement I to C.K. OGDEN and I.A. RICHARDS: *The Meaning of Meaning. A study of the influence of language on thought and of the science of symbolism*. London: K. Paul, Trend, Trubner, 1923. pp 300-301.