

# Do You Mean What You Say?

By HARVEY DAWSON

TWO pretty girls were slowly walking to the Henry George School. They were early for their class in Fundamental Economics. The weather was pleasant. The window shopping was interesting. They paused before a smart shop where a particular dress caught their eyes.

"That's pretty," said Patricia Pupil longingly.

"It's a honey," agreed Sally Student. Unspoken was the mutual thought, too expensive.

Half a block later Patricia said, "you know that black dress we saw a minute ago . . ."

Sally interrupted with impatience, "heavens, Pat, that was a brown dress."

Suddenly from the opposite side of the street came a whoop, and there was Larry Learner, greeting his fellow students. "What's up, girls," he queried, "arguing about something in *Progress and Poverty*?"

"No, Larry," said Patricia. "Sally and I can't agree on the color of a dress we saw in a window."

"Oh that's not important," boomed Larry. But noting the disagreement on their faces, he added, "Where's the shop? Let's all go and look. I promise to render my impartial verdict."

All three walked back briskly, but the lights had been turned out in the window. "I'll tell you what," said Larry appeasingly, "we'll go look it up in the school library—it's only a matter of definition."

Both girls thought that idea pretty silly, but to satisfy Larry they agreed. "It can't hurt," Patricia murmured. "Maybe we'll settle the argument."

In the big unabridged dictionary they found that "Brown" is a dark color shading toward black, red or yellow. "Black" means having little or no power to reflect light: The name is also colloquially given to bodies that show selective absorption, as "very dark browns."

## The Dilemma Grows

Thus did Webster's add confusion, for now all three were involved, and all were convinced that the definitions gave encouragement to the diametrically opposed views.

"Let's ask Phil," chirped Sally. "He's learned and I'm told he's a student of semantics, whatever that is."

Phil didn't let the earnest trio down. He patiently explained that using the scientific method would probably throw light on the problem.

"In order to come to a conclusion as to the color of the dress," quoth Phil, "the scientific investigator (who simply uses orderly method), delimits the physical phenomena present. A

human being eyes the dress. Is he or she color blind? The dress was viewed under lights. What was the source and wave length of the light? The dress is made of fabric—what dyes were used—what is the effect of the dyes on the fabric?"

"Oh, I get it," sighed Pat happily. "Sally and I may both be right. There are lots of possibilities. Maybe I am color blind to a degree, or maybe Sally is. Maybe there was a shadow cast from where I was standing or maybe . . ."

"Yes," interjected Sally, "I knew all along that it didn't really matter whether the dress was black or brown. It was my *amour propre*, my dignity, that was affronted. My word was doubted, and that hurt. Now I see that Pat and I were both right. We were just careless with our definitions. What frightens me is the keen

rage I felt over something I knew innately to be trivial. It is only inquiry and education that will save us."

"Hey, look here," Larry broke in, "you cleared it up O.K. for the girls, in fact, inspired them. But you make me wonder. You said in effect, define your terms, and that's what the girls did. Sally and Pat realized that a lot of technical points went into their seemingly spontaneous decision about the color of the dress, but, when we did as you suggested, and looked up definitions, we didn't clarify a thing. We only buttressed our original decisions. You say define—we defined and got nowhere."

"Well," Phil replied philosophically, "since the beginning of mankind, yes, since the first two people we know anything about, man has had the problem of communicating. We know that man has ideas in his mind and we know too, that man attempts to communicate the ideas to his fellow man. How successful the effort is has only recently been subjected to examination."

"What, only recently? Why philology has been a subject of inquiry for centuries," put in Larry.

## The Real Problem

"Words have no inherent meaning, but you saw how directionless philological inquiry is when you attempt to decide whether a dress is black or brown," Phil explained. "Realize that colors are here on earth, tangible, tactile and visible. A unit of thought, so far as we know, never moves from one person to another direct and in kind. How much more grave it is when one man attempts to communicate a concept which has no physical manifestation to another."

"Then," countered Larry, "I have a clincher for you. Tell me what you are doing in this school, or, for that matter, what I'm doing at the Henry George School, or these two earnest and sweet girls. Henry George had an idea in his mind, lots more than one idea, and he spoke and wrote about his ideas, but aren't we stymied completely from learning what it was that he had in mind?"

"No," Phil insisted. "If you obey the canons of symbolism first enunciated by Ogburn and Richards of Oxford University in their book *The Meaning of Meaning*, and see if George adhered to these canons of symbolism, then you can be assured that Henry George successfully communicated his ideas."

"I'm not from Missouri," said Larry, in his far from witty manner, "but you gotta show me."

### ***Everybody Happy?***

"It's a deal," promised Phil, "you can semantically analyze George's writings and when more of the students and faculty members in the school become aware of the widespread evaluational disorder in the field of political economy they will want to make this careful semantic study."

"I suppose even political economy looks black to some people and brown to others," Sally was heard saying to Pat as they moved toward the classroom.

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