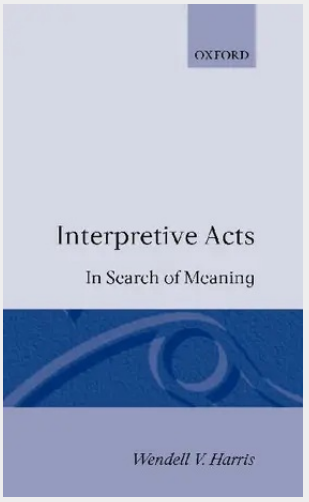
Harris

Interpretive Acts

In Search of Meaning



Over the last twenty years, the humanities and social sciences have been preoccupied with the powers and limitations of language. During these years literary theory has become peculiarly fascinated with what language cannot do, with the impossibility of language meaning what the individual intends it to mean, if indeed individuals can intend or mean. But language does exist and does appear to be useful in communicating, and most of the time those who use the same language feel they are successful in communicating with each other. In Interpretive Acts, rather than ask whether communication is possible, Professor Harris explores the issues that arise from the question: how does communication occur? In this, he draws on a variety of fields which have contributed to literary theory by the study of strategies for expressing and for interpreting intended meanings: discourse analysis, sociolinguists, philosophy of language, and rhetorical theory. For language to be understood, there has to be a mutually understood context: Professor Harris argues that there are seven dimensions of context in terms of which an author calculates readers' responses. Having defined the goal of interpretation as the author's intended meaning, criticism is then seen in terms of the question: `what does it mean that the author meant that meaning?'

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