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What the Meaning of Is Is: A Disarming Question in Northern Ireland

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Title: What the Meaning of Is Is: A Disarming Question in Northern Ireland

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Abstract. This article describes problems of meaning related to the latest crisis in implementing the Good Friday agreement of 1998 for Northern Ireland.

The two-month-old self-government executive in Northern Ireland is in imminent danger of being suspended, if not terminated. The crisis serving as catalyst for this danger is the issue of disarmament of the Irish Republican Army (IRA). The political wing of the IRA (Sinn Fein) argues that the 1998 Good Friday agreement stipulates only that "best efforts" would be made to complete IRA disarmament by May 2000--and there should be no crisis of the moment during the week of January 31st. Sinn Fein also argues that as long as the IRA continues to respect the ongoing cease-fire, disarmament remains only a symbolic issue. In contrast, representatives of the Irish and British governments as well as of mainstream Catholic and Protestant parties contend that Sinn Fein indicated that disarmament would begin once the self-government executive came into existence. These representatives also argue that in return for legitimate political representation and full civil rights for the Catholic minority in Northern Ireland, Sinn Fein provided assurances about prompt disarmament as a symbol of an IRA commitment for electoral politics as opposed to violence as a vehicle for change.

There are aspects of denotative, connotative, and symbolic meaning at the essence of the crisis. To various constituencies, the IRA cease-fire is disarmament, is associated with disarmament, or is at least a symbol of a sincere disarmament commitment. To various constituencies, the IRA not turning over any weapons as of the week of January 31st has no denotative relationship with the May 2000 expectation, denotes meeting the May 2000 expectation, connotes meeting the May 2000 expectation, or symbolizes a lack of good faith towards any disarmament.

These differences illustrate a basic problem with formal agreements. Negotiation formally addresses language, less often the diverse meanings of language, and even less often the psychologies on which meanings are based. Moreover, it may be the case that some benefits alluded to in agreements should be obtained without the need for any change in status based on a matter of value. For example, in an era of some consensus on universal human and civil rights, should a political constituency necessarily be required to give up security assets for obtaining inviolable rights? Should another constituency play the role of issuing what cannot be issued because it is inalienable--by demanding sacrifice of security assets?

Ultimately, the latest crisis in Northern Ireland may be less about politics than about the most basic human endeavor of constructing and negotiating meanings. Is it any wonder that seemingly minor differences through the lens of objective analysis signify crisis warranting a fight to the death? (See Carruthers, B.G., & Espeland, W.N. (1998). Money, meaning, and morality. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 41, 1384-1408; Dangerous stall by the I.R.A. (February 1, 2000). *The New York Times*, p. A24; Leont'ev, A.A. (1998). The forms of existence of meaning. *Journal of Russian and East European Psychology*, 36, 28-47; Moxley, R.A. (1997). Skinner: From essentialist to selectionist meaning. *Behavior and Philosophy*, 25, 95-119; Park, C.L., & Folkman, S. (1997). Meaning in the context of stress and coping. *Review of General Psychology*, 1, 115-144.) (Keywords: IRA, Negotiation, Northern Ireland.)