

Language and Thought

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Introduction

This aspect of the Theory of Knowledge programme is perhaps the one that receives the greatest emphasis in my own teaching, because we keep coming back to it in all the other areas. If the way in which we organize and talk about the world around us (for example, categorization or classification) has anything to do with the way we perceive it, then language is central to all our activities as knowers, and Von Bertalanfy's characterization of human beings as 'animal symbolicum' may well be the closest we can get to pinpointing what is specific to us as human beings. As Benjamin Whorf has pointed out, language is not normally thought of as worthy of analysis because we use it so effortlessly and successfully. Thus, as teachers we must help students see the centrality of language for human beings.

Basic Characteristics of Language

Normally, I start off by asking students to define language. The definitions presented are often similar to those found in dictionaries, and at times are quite a bit better. We usually end up in tentative agreement that language "is a conventional code of symbols that allows a sender to formulate a message that can be understood by a receiver", or something fairly close to this. The elements of the definition are provided by the students, themselves. I only help put it together after some debate as to which elements are important for the final product.

The definition always speaks of a code of symbols, which is a good place to begin an examination of language. But then we must ask, what is a symbol? Well, it is a sign that stands for something else, like the national flag or the blindfolded lady with the sword and scales. Students have no trouble with this, and can provide numerous examples. It is worth asking if these signs are the same as those invoked when I say, "The footprints under my window are a sure sign of intruders", or "Those dark heavy clouds are a sign that we're in for some rainy weather". There is a sense, of course, in which they are similar: they both signal something to us. Clouds can make us think "Ah, rain!" in the same way that a red traffic light will make us stop. But that is probably as far as one could get in exploring the similarities, from there on the differences are far more important.

In one case, the sign could mean something to me alone, as I may be the only person who has had a certain experience that has made something a sign for me. (Think, for instance, of a doctor who for a time has exclusive knowledge of the symptoms of a certain disease.) It would seem that this sort of sign is the product of experience. We see things together and sometimes conclude that they must always come together (e.g. smoke-fire, perspiration-heat). There seems to be an element of relation involved in signs of this sort, and what this relation might be is a topic for discussion.

In the case of the red light the sign is more clearly social. This is something that the students are obviously hinting at when they mention that a language is a convention, and when they introduce the idea of a sender and a receiver. We understand traffic signs and act accordingly because we know what the social meanings of those signs are. In this way, an initial distinction can be drawn between natural signs (as in the first case) and artificial signs, which we may call symbols.

The words that go to make up our languages are, of course, signs in the second sense, that of symbols. The advantage of being able to manage this 'code of symbols' can be seen quite easily if one asks students to try and envisage what our lives would be like if we did not operate symbolically. Their experience with games like charades, though it does not escape symbols entirely, is pertinent here, as they will have had first hand experience of trying to express something without 'saying it'. What are we left with? Pointing? Gestures? (How many of these body-

language activities are actually agreed upon symbols?). This sort of discussion can last as long as there is interest, but while it continues it is worth trying to pursue the question of how much communication can occur without using agreed upon meanings.

Meaning

Once we know what we mean by a code of symbols we can begin to discuss the idea that what we call communication is only possible because the ways in which the symbols are put together in 'the message', have a shared MEANING for the participants (NB the term 'meaning' is extremely complex and has been a major bone of contention in philosophy and linguistics).

Words as symbols, however, are not always understood as conventional. For example, in many cultures the connection between the symbol and the thing represented is thought to be a natural one. Some people think there is a magical connection between words and things: consider the many invocations of names to be found in different social rituals, the casting of spells via the correct pronunciation of certain words, or the refusal to give names to strangers in case one may confer power to the person who gains such knowledge. In all these cases, the connection is hardly viewed as mere social convention. And a more widespread, and less magical, view holds that certain names are related to things through 'onomatopoeia', that is, because the word imitates the sound of the thing being represented (e.g. rock = hard, and dawn = soft). While such an approach might seem quite plausible to us, it is quite worth pointing out that Japanese cats do not seem to 'meow', they prefer to 'niago', while French ones 'ron-ron' instead of purring.

In any case it is a fairly widespread belief that words are labels for things, and, indeed, this much seems to be implied when we speak of words 'representing' things. A corollary of this is to believe that the meaning of words is the thing itself that is represented. While this view might seem O.K. for nouns and names that refer to objects, our languages are made up of an enormous amount of other symbols that perform very different functions, and that do not stand for or point to anything in the way a noun does. Imagine trying to apply this idea of meaning to exclamations such as:

Water!
 Away!
 Ow!
 Help!
 Fine!
 No!

It would be difficult to give an example of something we could point to in order to clarify the meaning of these words for someone who does not grasp their meaning immediately.

In addition, we can soon agree that even nouns sometimes have various meanings and until we know the context in which a noun or name is used we do not know how they are being used; thus, we do not know what is meant. Ask students to test this idea by producing examples.

Finally, names often refer to things which have no existence, which again would make it difficult to point to a thing as its meaning. As an example, the thing may have ceased to exist without the name losing its meaning ('Socrates', for instance) or the name may stand for fictional entities such as 'unicorns', or 'little green men'. Then, too, words may be combined in phrases that do not refer to any existing things, i.e. a 'golden mountain'.

All in all, the idea that words are 'labels' is not a particularly useful one when one wants to understand 'meaning'. It would seem more fruitful to view words as tools that we use in different ways, and whose meaning is determined precisely by the way in which we use them. This does not mean that we can use them in any way we like (though for literary purposes many concessions are made) because, as Whorf points out, we are parties to a linguistic 'agreement', and only some uses will be considered legitimate in this context.

I think the easiest way to understand the importance of the topic of language, and the best way to approach it in class, is via a discussion of meaning and definition. After all, it seems to make perfectly good sense to say that if you know what a term means, then you must know its definition. Of course, all of us have experienced the feeling that we are quite happy to use a word, but very unhappy, indeed, if asked to define it. A classic example, borrowed from Wittgenstein, is the word 'game'. Try getting students to find a definition that will cover all instances of what counts as a game. It soon becomes clear that there is no such thing, yet one operates as if there were a class of things, with distinct properties, that make some things games and some things not. Of course, many games have things in common, but no one feature is common to them all! Many modern linguists argue that because we operate with prototypes or stereotypes, and give a single name to things that resemble each other, the meaning of a term lies in the way our linguistic conventions allow us to use it. If this is so, it would seem to rule out the idea of natural classifications and lead us to conclude that we impose a certain order on the world with a degree of arbitrariness.

Functions of Language

A second useful discussion involves the functions of language. In their grammar lessons, students may have come across the classification of sentences into categories such as declaratives, interrogatives, imperatives, and exclamations – different sentence forms which are commonly used to perform different functions. The classification of functions varies with different authors, but the one found in Copi's *Introduction to Logic* (which many teachers use for the section on Logic) is adequate. Copi classifies the functions of language as 'informative', 'expressive' and 'directive', but also speaks of the 'ceremonial' and 'performative' functions.

The function of the 'informative' use of language is to describe the world by asserting that such and such is the case. Statements performing this function can be considered true or false, according to whether the state of affairs described does or does not coincide with the description. The content of the statement is termed a 'proposition', and it is this which can be considered true or false. It is important to point out that the same proposition can be conveyed by different sentences as in:

The referee bit the player.
The player was bitten by the referee.

Obviously the switch from active to passive changes the sentence somewhat, but the underlying proposition remains unaltered. Similarly, the same sentence can be held to contain different propositions, as in the ambiguous case of "He is mad".

The 'expressive' function is performed by all utterances intending primarily to express feelings and emotions, or to evoke them. We can use language in this way constantly, but typically, we associate this function in literature with poetry and prose when feelings of admiration, of tranquillity, of sadness, are aroused. This is a good place to emphasize the distinction between form and function. One can choose a poem, and see that it contains declaratives, imperatives, and other forms, but all of them are expressing and evoking feelings. It is not the purpose of the poem to inform factually as one can see, for example, in Coleridge's "*You stood before me like a thought, a dream remembered in a dream...*".

The same point can be made in relation to the 'directive' function of language, whose purpose is to cause or prevent a particular action on another's part. The most obvious cases are the interrogatives which request an answer and the imperatives which command certain behaviour. But, for many reasons, some of which have to do with etiquette, the directive function is often cast in a different form so as to soften it. Thus, "It's a bit noisy in here," may seem preferable to "Shut up!", or glancing at the thermostat while saying "It's a bit chilly," seems more polite than "Turn up your heating!" And, as all students know only too well, a question such as "Would you mind keeping your eyes on your own work?" is not a request for an answer.

The 'ceremonial' function refers to all those numerous occasions in which we utter noises in what could be considered a ritual sense. All our greetings – the "How do you do's?" which require a similar reply – when looked at literally may seem strange, or even a case of hypocrisy in which we pretend to be interested in someone's well being. But because their function is to oil the wheels of social intercourse, it is absurd to accuse the speaker of insincerity. When we say "That was a lovely party" on the way out, there is not an implied commitment to sincerity. Ceremonial statements, like directives, are neither true nor false, nor do they function literally. That they are used so commonly is a mark of their social function, the success of which depends on our common acceptance and understanding.

Finally, the performative function refers to those instances in which the words transform reality by the very fact of their utterance, such as "I declare thee man and wife" said by a priest or functionary in the appropriate circumstances. The same happens with a variety of verbs such as promise, agree, apologize, accept, and so on. When used they bring into being the state of affairs they declare: promises, agreements, apologies, and so on. A useful example is found in statements such as "You're out!" or its equivalent in sports, when pronounced by umpires, referees or other officials, though one can argue whether the assertion that justifies these claims ("The ball touched the player", for instance) is true or false. Those who have spent some time doing this, however, soon realize that their arguments are unable to transform the reality generated by the utterance!

In any case, it is worth noting that it is only in the first function, the informative, when propositions hold something to be the case, that truth or falsity can be attributed. And, of course, as soon as you start trying to analyze some examples of language, to try and identify the function being performed (Copi has many examples), you will find that these analytically separable functions often overlap. Most of the time we use language to perform more than one function simultaneously, and the task of the hearer is to decide which one is intended or predominant, a task not always possible unless one has a very clear idea of the context in which the utterance took place.

Communication as a Problem

In closing this introductory part on the characteristics of language, I mention some additional problems related to meaning to help convey the idea that communication, via language, is very complex. And rather than take it for granted, simply because it works, we may well wonder how success is possible at all.

Ambiguity, the fact that a word, a phrase or even a sentence, may have more than one meaning, is important here. Obviously, one cannot determine the sense out of context, and if the sentence itself is ambiguous, then the more general context in which it was spoken or written will have to provide the required information. A related problem is caused by words that may have a single meaning, but whose limits or boundaries are vague. How bald do you have to be to be bald? How fat to be fat? How many trees before you have a forest? And so on.

One suspects that these 'problems' already highlight the complexity of language, but when one then adds the need for a shared background (because so much is left unsaid in any communication), a capacity to deal with the emotive use of words, and understanding of emphasis, a capacity to detect the use of euphemisms, and an understanding of the body-language that accompanies speech (I have not exhausted the list), then the whole question of meaning and our ability to communicate should seem a valid problem for analysis.

For those who still are not persuaded and feel that language is far more straightforward than what I have suggested, I recommend an exercise in 'automatic listening'. What I have in mind is reading a poem that is heavy on description and feelings (for example, memories of a faraway place or childhood memories), and then asking the students what went through their minds as it was read. When the different images begin to come up, you can ask why there was so much diversity if they all heard the 'same thing'. The interesting point here is to understand that listening is not a

passive process, but rather an activity to which we bring much of our personal history. (Read the poem in a very matter-of-fact tone or you may be accused by some students of manipulating feelings, which is an irrelevant objection but might interfere with their willingness to examine the process.) At this point you may want to re-examine the notion that the 'message' is encoded by the speaker and then decoded by the hearer, as the original definition of language suggests. Communication does not seem to be as straightforward as this if the hearer constructs part of the message in the process.

Language and Reality

From the writings of Whorf we find that

the categories and types that we isolate from the world of phenomena we do not find there because they stare every observer in the face; on the contrary, the world is presented in a kaleidoscopic flux of impressions which has to be organized by our minds -and this means largely by the linguistic system in our minds.

From this he concludes his principle of linguistic relativity,

which holds that all observers are not led by the same physical evidence to the same picture of the universe, unless their linguistic backgrounds are similar ...

When the full force of this idea comes home, to student and teacher alike, it allows for a very different view of our relationship to 'reality', and of the role of language in this relationship. After all, the linguistic distinctions that we use so frequently lead us to believe that the world is really made up of "all those things that I talk about all day". We tend to feel that this is why our language has all the terms that it does - so we can refer to this huge variety of 'things' out there. While I find the metaphysics fascinating here, I keep the discussion away from arguments about what is 'real' as far as possible (because there is a sense in which one can argue that Whorf is claiming that we create our reality in language). Instead, one can ask students to engage in some exercises in imagination or 'thought experiments'.

Year after year I fall back on the same old examples (I only ask them to use their imagination), and they seem to find this quite tolerable. The examples are not easy to make up, for the very reason that our world seems to be populated with the objects to which our language makes reference. The most typical one is to describe a situation in which an Eskimo, a skier and I are walking in the snow, and to ask them if we are walking through the same world (oops, the metaphysics again!) or whether we are all seeing the same thing. The reason for asking this apparently silly question is that I only have one word for snow, whereas the skier will probably have half a dozen, and the Eskimo (reputedly) no less than 35. A similar example could perhaps be that what I call a dune would be an irrelevant term to someone who lives in the desert. The question is, will he see 'dunes' the way I do? Or what about societies that have names for every species of tree but none for 'forest'?

Another example, borrowed from Hanson, is the one about Tycho Brahe and Kepler on the beach watching the sun rise. Brahe still holds to the Ptolemaic view of the motion of the planets and the sun, while Kepler (his assistant) has already gone over to the Copernican view. Again the question is, as they watch this process, (that we still call a sunrise) are they seeing the same thing? The answer that I get back almost universally is that, of course, Brahe and Kepler are seeing the same thing, it is just that they interpret it differently. To this they might add the optics of the situation with the photons bouncing on the different retinas in identical fashion, so that they see the same thing. The problem with this response is that we do not seem to perform two separate acts, one of seeing and then, later, one of interpretation. It would seem that 'seeing' for us is always 'seeing-as' (with the interpretation built-in, as it were). This is what Nietzsche meant when he referred to the fallacy of 'the immaculate perception'. We cannot perceive except through interpretation. There are many experiments in the field of perception to illustrate this idea: for

example, the rabbit-duck drawing of Jastrow, the faces vs the goblet, Necker cubes, reversing staircases.

There are four interesting themes I like to explore here.

- (i) Does our language impose limits on our possibilities of knowing the world, so that if I only 'see-things-as' I can only know them in this way?
- (ii) Is it our language that imposes an order on the world, or is the world made up of certain objects that impose themselves on us? In this second area, the answer is not necessarily an either/or situation, and it might be reasonable to explore a third possibility.
- (iii) That our interaction with the world, and the experience that results from this interaction, means that certain things in our surroundings impose themselves as objects on our understanding (perhaps this is what Whorf means when he refers to social needs making themselves felt in our language), but that once we understand the world in this way this is how it continues to be seen. This would account for the constants and for the diversity in language across different societies.
- (iv) If language is a determinant of how we see reality, or if it completely determines our view in this respect, then how do languages change over time? (This may well lead to a view along the lines of the third possibility outlined above.)

In any case, in my own treatment of this question, I do not ask students to reflect on these as separate issues. After an introduction on linguistic relativity, we build the three themes into our discussions of the subject using the experiments in perception referred to above. When shown these various objects, they will come up with different claims as to what they are, or how they are to be viewed, which immediately brings us to Whorf's idea of "*carving up the world in different ways*". In this way the problem is first a problem from their own experience, and only later (or if you prefer, never) a problem in an anthropologist/linguist/philosopher's head. It is worth remembering the Theory of Knowledge objective of getting students to reflect on their own experience and that no guide to your teaching forbids the teacher to put them through experiences that they have not had before. Creating the experience may be an important part of various sections of the programme.

Language and Thought

All human thought comes into existence by grasping the meaning and mastering the use of language. (Polyani)

The question of the relationship between language and thought has been around in philosophy for some time, but the purpose of discussing it in Theory of Knowledge is hardly to recap the arguments of philosophers. It would hardly be possible, however, to ask students to reflect on the role of language and thought in knowing, without directly considering the question of the connection between them, and whether the one (thought) is possible without the other (language). Some of this has already been considered, of course, under the question of language and reality. If language determines the way in which we view reality (even if this is partially true), then it certainly holds a powerful sway over our thinking in general. But some would argue that this relationship is even more all-embracing, and that no thinking takes place outside of language.

If one asks a class whether thought is possible without language, the likely answer will be "yes". Most people feel they have had thoughts without being conscious of having been thinking, and that some emotions or feelings can count as thoughts and yet are inexpressible in language (the question of knowledge by acquaintance will probably come to mind if they are familiar with this distinction). Some, on the other hand, will often question whether one can use thought in such a broad sense, and whether this will not deprive the word of its meaning. Our normal way of

using 'thinking' does not seem to be quite as loose as this, and the discussion may end up in an analytical discussion of the meaning of the term 'thinking'.

- Do we mean that any mental process or state can be viewed as thinking?
- Is 'real' thinking only that which we term reflection or reflective thinking?
- Can emotions or feelings properly be called 'thoughts'?
- If language is what we use to express our thoughts, then are there thoughts first and language only later? But if this is the case, how do we formulate the thoughts that are to be expressed in the first place? And so on.

All this may seem overly philosophical and perhaps a bit frightening to those who have not given this much attention, but it is precisely the sort of area where you do not have to have much experience, and where you will have fun thinking these sorts of questions through with your students. One of the best experiences for Theory of Knowledge students is the feeling that their teacher is thinking along with them, and feels that these questions are worth pursuing.

In any case, regardless of what conclusions your students may reach on the questions presented above, the importance of language can also be highlighted by considering what language makes possible, namely, social knowledge. The capacity to communicate knowledge, to have it questioned, corrected or shared by others, definitely seems to be a peculiarly human capacity. Perhaps this is what Polyani means by 'human thought'.