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The impossibility of meaning: On the misbehavior of words and images

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ABSTRACT

In this brief essay, I argue that language does not describe the world as such, but is a useful, though arbitrary tool. I argue as such by aligning with Wittgenstein's "words as tools" thesis and family resemblance and also take my cue from Derrida and the language turn. I conclude though that the extreme idealism where mental constructs do not reflect or correspond with an understanding of the external world might be mitigated if we see language as approximate or "loose" (like metaphorical understanding), and that though the word and image appear to "misbehave" in eliding meaning or absolute definition, perhaps some meaning or sense through language can be gained.

KEYWORDS: language, Wittgenstein, Derrida, language turn, meaning, correspondence

1. INTRODUCTION: CHAOS AND INFINITY

If one considers language as a system where rules tell us how to construct sentences and structure, where words are defined to create meaning and that this meaning corresponds to reality, then it would appear that language stands in some kind of one-to-one correspondence with such a reality. However, post Wittgenstein and post structuralism, the matter is not so simple.

Initially Wittgenstein continued the mimetic form of correspondence theory: language creates a sort of picture or representation or model of the real world. However, his later work, declared or argued that language does not function so, but rather is simply a tool where words and meanings are used in certain contexts to create sense. In this way, language is not a transparent medium but rather one way of parceling up the external world, so to speak and the bounds of the world are determined by the bounds of language. Derrida and others went further distinguishing language as an interconnected web, whose boundaries are forever shifting, where meaning can only occur because of the co-presence of all signs. Signs are arbitrary and thus words have no intrinsic connection to something out there.

Given Wittgenstein's thesis and the "language turn", I will argue that in fact language does not do a good job at saying anything however real it may seem and however counter intuitive this might be. For really, if x is x because it is not y, then x is only x because of y and therefore x and y stand in some real relationship with each other. I argue that this can be understood as the "misbehavior" of words and the impossibility of actual sense, justifying current trends that cast a skeptical eye on any overarching truth, deep structure or metaphysical realm that can be known.

The result then is that language is not an ordering device in the strict sense and that interpretation is so open ended as to exclude precise meaning and denotation, but rather the infinite expanse of language itself, and it is only finitude that can deliver the kind of mimetic and correspondence exactness required for "word x" to carry one and only one meaning. At best, language is a metaphor, but metaphors are elusive and insubstantial. My argument applies to verbal and written language as well as language in the form of images and signs (or art).

2. THE WORD: DIFFERENCE, PRESENCE-NON-PRESENCE

The concept of difference in Derrida's thought is that a word only has meaning insofar as it can be distinguished from another word. Hence the network of language is interconnected, but this also means no word actually has anything "in it" – it is a structure as flimsy as the house of cards. A word appears – it is present – but it is only present to the extent that all other words are absent. Yet, such a word can only assume meaning because it is defined by recourse to other words which in turn are defined by other words and so on ad infinitium, rendering no particular word as actually present. It creates an infinite regress, an onion whose layers are peeled and at its core it is really empty.

You may retort that this is nonsense, that when I say "heart" all users of the language know exactly what this refers to. It is clearly specified and excludes all other terms, having a reference that is as real and solid as the chair I am sitting on. However, on the quantum level distinct objects do not truly exist. Moreover, "heart" forms part of a language game that fulfills a certain function and one could imagine a science (that also works) that parcels up objects and things in a different way. And of course, languages have different words for the same thing. There is no intrinsic connection between the word and thing it is said to refer to. In addition, "heart" includes a myriad of other terms – subdivisions into veins and arteries, chambers, chemical and atomic processes, so that the "neatness" of a single term, "heart", splinters into an infinite array, to the extent that from "heart" one could link it to other (more absent) terms, eventually, within an interconnected framework reaching anything and any term from "ant", to "mountain", to universe" and outward towards the poetic and metaphorical, leading to terms such as "love" or "hope" and so on and so forth.

Thus, if one comes across a book with a title, all seems well and good – this book is about x. Then one reads and the title now becomes fractured in thousands of other terms, fragmenting and distorting, all but losing form as defined by the title of the book. It's akin to writing a book on nothingness, where the very words and treatise contradict the title itself as it assumes the form of something. However, you retort books are not about nothing and hence a title circumscribes a particular something, hence we have categories and subjects and library catalogues that order things. But is this not an illusion? If we assume the interdisciplinary is true, then a book on medicine and geology and philosophy and art and so and so forth might as well be stuck together. Of course this would create confusion, but perhaps chaos is a better model of reality than an ideal and contrived order, an order that may in fact be erroneous or simply arbitrary in the first place, like a narrative that is told – and a narrative is imaginative with the seeming logic of coherence.

3. THE IMAGE: ANYTHING CAN REFER TO ANYTHING

The image suffers the same fate. A simple representational or mimetic theory says that image x refers to the thing x in the external world. Correspondence theories though have been deconstructed so much so that images can be symbolic, metaphorical, distortions, copies of Plato's so-called world of forms, a realm beyond this world (as centuries of Christian art tried to depict) or simply empty and superficial (like Pop images).

Since one cannot know the world as it is in itself, following Kant's theory of the phenomenal/noumenon distinction, no image can actually be an ultimate image or reflection of how things are – rather they are ideals, images really (that is, reflections) and even things in themselves as perceived in the so-called external world can be subdivided into qualia, or simply the framing devices of the perceiving consciousness which differs both between and within species.

In this sense, one can follow the same logic as applied to language in the conventional sense. Any present image can be correlated with any other (non-present) image so that in itself the present image is as if it were not there. Again, you retort that surely a photograph with the best tools available of a heart gives one great insight and diagnostic ability into the nature of that heart precisely because we know what it is and that it is as close as possible to an accurate rendering of a living, pumping heart? In fact, such an image says more than 10 000 words and so on. On a certain level, this is true: It does give us both quantifiable and qualitative information that can be deepened as knowledge, but that should not be confused with the thing itself, since this image, though highly useful, is in

accordance with the tool that is able to peer into the body and in accordance with what this perceptual apparatus gives us via this image, just as the eye does. But the eye like the human mind is already predisposed to see in a certain way and reality yields to us finite dimensions. What the "heart", for example really is, we cannot see. This is not to undermine sight or hearing or extending our perceptions through highly efficient tools – the point is rather to not equate that image with the reality of which we cannot know save via our means of perceiving. In this sense, as with words, the image is not present, but rather a reflection of other "absent" filtering devices. Language, both visual and verbal, is not a transparent window onto the external world.

4. FAMILY RESEMBLANCE AND APPROXIMATIONS: SOME SEMBLANCE OF MEANING?

To avoid the extreme conclusion that anything can mean anything and therefore nothing, one would do well to apply Wittgenstein's concept of "family resemblance", wherein a word (or image) may not have an absolute meaning or reference, but rather displays a sort of "family resemblance", a cluster of meanings in close proximity and thus excluding all possible meanings (and therefore none). In this way, one could say words approximate meaning, just as the word "blue" converges on a variety of shades and subtleties of blue but is blue all the same or bluish. Thus, meanings are approximate or in quantum terms, statistical and probabilistic rather than absolute and pinpointed.

Just as mathematics is an invented structure (arguably) whose answers are useful but no more "in reality" than a word that denotes x, so languages are rule-based systems that allow humans to communicate and negotiate reality, irrespective of truth-claims, though its pragmatic utility is obvious. Only one cannot claim ontological truth and metaphysical accuracy: such languages have no basis in knowing reality as such beyond their function and purpose as useful tools, while the tool itself is not an absolute form, that is, it yields no truth in itself – for it would be absurd to say that, for example the microscope both penetrates into matter and is a reflection of the essence of matter itself in the form it so assumes.

5. CONCLUSION

The curious conclusion to this speculation is that if this argument is true, then it is not true, which is contradictory and nonsensical. On the other hand, it seems that languages, such as constants in mathematics are truly descriptions of reality/nature – they are discoveries concerning nature. Similarly certain words may have an intrinsic connection or correspondence to that to which it refers, a sort of magical incantation and so with images (certain structural models) are able to represent reality as it truly is, hence the power of art, symbols and the alphabetical system itself as a means to both access and describe the external world, while offering consciousness a mechanism to not only thrive within the world by virtue of at least some grasping of it, but commune with one another and produce cultural artifacts, the very processes of nature itself becoming conscious.

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