The Poetics of Language:
Reality, Thought, Language and the World

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Not only commonsense and psycho-linguistic science but also traditional philosophy have taken it for granted that a thing is ontologically independent of, and prior to, the conception of it on the one hand, and that reality is ontologically independent of, and prior to, its linguistic representation on the other. Indeed it seems obvious that what there is different and separable from the way it is conceived, as Trigg (1973:1) put it, " [a] fundamental distinction must be drawn between the way the world is and what we say about it, even if we all happen to agree. We could all be wrong. What is true and what we think is true need not coincide." For whether or not I am awake and thus see it, the World Trade Center in New York was there before September 11, and before Copernicus, our conception of the relation between the Sun and the Earth was in the wrong. It seems equally unquestionable that our conception of something, be it external or internal to our mind—such as either physical things like atoms and Platonic *ideas* or mental things like one's beliefs, intentions and

feelings of all sorts—is independent of, and prior and external to, the language representing or expressing them. For, our conception of atom or *idea*, or rather our *a priori* beliefs about all sorts of things are the same although they may be represented or expressed in hundreds of different languages, each time in different voices and orthographies, regardless the inevitable physical difference of the language one uses to express such concepts and beliefs. A mathematical concept of, say, '5,' or the truth of the mathematical proposition '5+7=12' appears to be independent of, and prior to, a linguistic representation, be it Arabic or Chinese.

Upon a deeper reflection, however, these assumptions become less self-evident than they appear to be. The present paper aims to i) argue for the epistemological priority of language over thought as well as that of thought over reality, ii) discuss the poetic nature of language, and finally iii) stress the plurality rather than the unity of the world.

1. Epistemological Priority of Language over Reality

If the notion of knowledge without something which is there prior to knowledge is unintelligible because knowledge is necessarily knowledge of something, the reality of something without the knowing mind is equally unintelligible because as Berkeley has already shown, a rock, for instance, cannot be said to be real unless it is perceived by some mind—because, that is, "to exist is to be perceived" (*esse est percipi*). The notion of reality prior to being perceived or thought of by some mind is empty. Unperceived reality is a contradiction in terms.

This is not to deny that there is something out there. It only means

that a thing that remains as such in the darkness, entirely silent and unintelligible, means nothing. Only when it is articulated, described, interpreted, believed, and known to be necessarily *as* something by a mind, can it have a meaning. Although ontologically reality is presupposed in the concept of perception and thus has priority over mind or thought, epistemologically cognitive mind is presupposed by the notion of reality, and thus has priority over cognitive mind (Park 1998).

The ontological question of what there is is different from epistemological question of how we know it: the one is unintelligible without the other, and requires each other with equal weight. They constitute two dimensions of a single relation between a cognitive mind and the world. They are two different ways of describing the same thing (Park 1997). However, as Sartre (1943) pointed out, the starting point of all questions and reflections must be epistemological rather than ontological, for all questions and reflections are primarily matters of the mind, of our beliefs about something.

What we believe to be real can hardly be reality as such. We are never in a position to be in direct touch with reality which is virginally there prior to our interpretive, constitutive mind. For, just as we see only through eyes and hear only through ears, so we perceive, conceive and think only through some kind of conceptual system which in turn is built up on the broad background of a worldview constituted at a given time by a culture in constant process of dynamic transformation (Park 1997).

When in Ancient Greece Protagoras said that "man is the measure of all things," when in 18th century Kant proposed "transcendental epistemology," when in the early 20th century Heidegger stated that

"man is the shepherd of Being," when in the middle of 20th century Hanson argued for the theory-laden aspect of perception and Kuhn described *scientific revolution in terms of paradigmatic shift*, they all assumed the epistemological priority of thought or ideas over the ontological priority of reality or being. Perception of some object is not mere physical reflection of an object to our eyes; neither is knowledge of some reality a mere mental representation of it as it is in itself. They are already interpretations, and interpretations are already linguistic.

If it is true that thought or mind is epistemologically prior to reality, it is also true that language is epistemologically prior to thought or mind, as has been argued by Heidegger in the early 20th century, Quine in the mid-20th century, and Foucault and Derrida in the second half of 20th century. Heidegger's notion of "language as the house of Being," Quine's definition of being as "the posit of the linguistic variables of a proposition," Foucault's notion of "epistemic regime" understood as a linguistically constituted system, Kuhn's notion of "scientific paradigm" and finally Derrida's notion of "arche-writing" can all be taken to be convincing proof of the epistemological priority of language over mind. To the extent that reality as we see and know it is perceived, thought of, and interpreted by mind, and thus is necessarily 'idealized (i.e., mentalized) reality,' and that our mind and thought remain blind, silent, and thus unintelligent until and unless linguistically mediated, reality as we know it is not the reflection of reality as it is, but a thing linguistically interpreted and constructed. We never discover or think reality or a Being in general as a single and abstract whole, but only as some particular and concrete objects classified into linguistic categories such as 'sky,' 'the Earth,'

'mountain,' 'river,' 'man,' and so on. At this point an objective thing is transformed into a subjectively intelligible object of mind, and the reality in general into the linguistically meaningful 'world.' Reality, whether interpreted in daily experience, scientific research, artistic creation, or religious or philosophical reflections, becomes identical to the 'world,' when understood in subjectively non-neutral way. That is, the naked reality that exists in itself becomes linguistically constituted meaningful world.

For humans, the nature or the universe is already of cultural kind just as for Midas everything he touches is gold. For humans, whatever exists exists as a 'text' to be understood and interpreted, ideated and linguistically construed: it is not necessarily the kind of thing physical sciences talk about. The world, or reality, or being, insofar as it refers to the existence of the totality of what there is, is as a matter of fact identical with our worldview, our linguistic reconstruction of the existence. To know the world is to have a worldview; to have a worldview is to have a linguistically articulated thought of what there is. Perhaps the ultimate goal of philosophy, science, or even religion is to picture or visualize a single and eternal world that is ideally acceptable and transparent to all viewers—not only to humans but also to all living beings.

While mental state may be not identical with language, it cannot actually, as much as phenomenologically, be independent of language. The world is the 'known reality' and the knowledge of the reality is necessarily linguistic. It is in this respect that "language is the house of the truth of Being," as Heidegger (1977:193) puts it. Since interpretation is a form of constitution, the world as we take to be real is a constituted, hence 'cultural,' world. This means that our

understanding of being depends upon the kind of language we use, the way we use it, and on the clarity of linguistic meaning. Lakoff and Johnson (1999:21) were right to the point when they wrote:

> The question of what we take to be real and the question of how we reason are inextricably linked. Our categories of things in the world determine what we take to be real: trees, rocks, animals, people, buildings, and so on. Our concepts determine how we reason about those categories. In order to function realistically in the world, our categories and our forms of reason must "work" very well together; our concepts must characterize the structure of our categories sufficiently well enough for us to function.

2. Thickness of Linguistic Meaning

From philosophical and scientific points of view, the ideal function of language is to categorize our diffused perceptual experiences and organize them into a coherent and transparent worldview. This is what analytic philosophers like Descartes, Kant, Frege, Carnap, and Quine have pursued. Similar attempts were made by classical philosophers such as Plato, Aristotle, and LaoTzu, and more recently by Hegel and Husserl. How did they pursue their tasks? They all searched for the possibility of language with absolute clarity of meaning, language that is intelligible to all, at any time and in any place.

Has this tasks been successful? Scarcely so. And the reason has to do with the very nature of language.

Language is notoriously hard to define. The moment we try to mean something, we feel the absence of the language to express it. Sometimes there are multiple forms for one meaning, or multiple meanings in one form, making one-to-one mapping between forms and

meanings impossible. This is why some philosophers refused the common-sense beliefs and assumptions that characterized natural languages in search of "conceptual clarification" or "logical simples," establishing mathematical or other systems of codes and rules, which suit their particular purposes.

As it turns out, however, the criticism against natural language has more often that not ill-founded. Under no spatial or temporal circumstances, can a single word, say, 'man' have the exactly the same meaning, let alone larger linguistic expression such as a sentence or a discourse. Analytic philosophy takes it self-evident that the meaning of the word, 'man,' or '3' is simple and always the same, and that while the sentence "Rose is red" is cognitively meaningful, "Rose is beautiful" is cognitively meaningless. This view, however, obtains only through arbitrary elimination of the richness and complexity of the meanings provided by natural languages — only through intentional self-blindness to the fact that all linguistic symbols have some kind of meaning. Several facts support this.

First, the actual language one uses or reads is not something abstract but necessarily something sensible, and it is used or read in a particular spatial and temporal concrete context. Strictly speaking, therefore, no linguistic expressions, be they verbal or non-verbal, can be exactly the same. That is, no words, no sentences, no paragraphs are the same, insofar as they involve actual context.

Second, there is no meaning outside language, and the meaning of a language is at least partially dependent on the particular context in which the language is used for a particular purpose by a person with particular unique biological, cultural and historical background. Since the meaning of such a particular language is interpreted by the reader

or interpreter with unique background in a particular spatial and temporal context, no meaning can be exactly the same.

Third, what a language means is derived from and rooted in mind, mind reflecting reality. Knowledge itself is rooted in reality because knowledge is knowledge of something. This means that linguistic meaning is necessarily meaning of something, ultimately rooted in reality. Now, just as the nature or content of reality remains silent and invisible unless mediated by mind, so the content of mind or thought remains in darkness, devoid of any meaning, unless and until it is mediated by and in language. And just as the relationship between reality and mind is complex and vague, so the relationship between mind and language remains extremely complex and vague. As Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology (1948) and Lakoff and Johnson's recent cognitive science (1999) has argued, human body and mind, contrary to metaphysical dualism, are not metaphysically separable but form a continuum: mind is always 'embodied,' and what mind means is always, and to some extent inherently, corporeal. Mind is primordially in flesh, and fleshily exemplified in perceptual experience prior to its abstract rationalization. Therefore the meaning embodied in language—which in turn is derived from, and rooted in, perceptual consciousness in touch with reality/being—is, as Merleau-Ponty puts it, "brute," "savage" and "conceptualness" (op. sit., 463). All thoughts, as Johnson and Lakoff tell us, are metaphorical, and all the linguistic meanings are as infinitely multiple, comlex and thick as they are ambiguous, vague, hence not easily determinable and thus open to creative interpretation (Merleau-Ponty 1964). The clarity of some technical languages, such as logico-mathematical languages, is a product of artificially controlling or excluding a variety of meanings in

favor of one single meaning that is in keeping with a practical purpose. The search for logical simples, however, has never been completely successful. Even the meaning of the number '3' is not as transparent as it appears to be. Depending on how it is written or pronounced, who the reader or interpreter is, under what context it is pronounced and written, the word generate many nuiances. Language does no more merely express what is already in thought than thought merely mirrors what is already out there. Our thought—even our perception—is a creative mental synthesis of the dispersed myriad particular sensations of things, and a linguistic meaning is equally a creative synthesis of a variety of particular prelinguistic perceptions and thoughts. It is for these reasons that thought and language are inherently poetic and that linguistic expressions are potentially infinite and thick in meaning.

The richness or thickness of linguistic meaning may be said to be inversely proportional to the transparency of meaning: the more one seeks transparency, the less one get thickness. The choice between these two opposing attributes of the linguistic meaning depends on what purpose one sets up in dealing with his language. For instance, a poet's purpose will be different from that of an analytic philosopher. As far as the relationship between transparency and thickness goes, verbal languages are relatively more transparent than nonverbal languages such as pictorial, musical, kinetic, gestural languages. Within verbal languages, the meaning of phonetic language is less thick than that of ideographic language, and the meaning of ideographic language is in turn less thick than that of hieroglyphic language.

To sum up, no two languages, artificial or natural, verbal or nonverbal, or no two words or nonverbal signs can have exactly the same meaning. There are no synonyms in the strict sense of the term.

Synonymy is not founded on the universality of the Platonic ideas, but rather on the generality abstracted from concrete meanings. Meanings are more or less concrete and thus infinitely plural as our experiences of, and in, the world are. Language is infinitely plural, and the meaning of the most simple word can undergo metaphorical and poetic multiplification.

3. Worldview as an Image of 'Nest'

From the plurality and poeticality of language two things concerning the nature of the worldview follow.

The plurality of language entails the plurality of the world. Just as no two different species living in the physico-temporal space which is phenomenally and scientifically identical, see, hear, or smell the same thing, no two culturally different communities experience the same world. Insofar as the reality as we know it is not reality understood as the ontological totality as such but a world created poetically, i.e., constructed by means of language, and insofar as language is infinitely plural in kind, in form, and in the actual context of its use, no two worlds can be exactly the same. Contrary to the commonsensical and fundamentally epistemological view, every one lives in a different world in that every community which is linguistically distinct, creates its unique world, although this is not to deny the fact that we, as humans, live in the same world, sharing biological, corporeal, intellectual, and, to a certain extent, emotional constitution. Each individual person, each small community, and each civilization which is linguistically, culturally, ethnically and historically distinct, imagine and create their own unique world. As the linguist B.L. Whorf (1956)

has already argued at the beginning of the last century, it is one's language that constitutes and determines the world around him. Linguistic communities are of necessity different from each other because the difference of linguistic systems reflects different ways of categorizing and organizing the world. There are as many worlds as there are languages.

From the poetic character of language follows the fact that no meanings of language, hence no world and worldview constructed by language are, and will never be, as transparent as analytic philosophers have wanted them to be, either for intellectual satisfaction or for practical benefit. It is ultimately impossible to make sharp distinction between reality understood as the totality of what exists in itself and the worldview as the comprehensive picture of it, between things and our conception of them, between object and mind, in short between ontological questions and epistemological ones—even though there seem to be logically and intuitively self-evident differences between them. Our commonsensical, mythical, religious, scientific and philosophic classification and organization of particular things in the world, and of beliefs on the world as the totality of what there is, are doomed to remain opaque and confused, as long as the world is vague and ambiguous.

If there are so many different and contradictory worlds and worldviews, on what basis should one choose one among them? The worldview is not an objective mental reflection of what is already out there but a linguistic reconstruction of all the confused and vague perceptual experiences. The worldview which provides us with the most comprehensive and coherent sense is the one which makes us most comfortable, both physically and intellectually, both biologically

and spiritually. Such a worldview is a house of being in which each of us can be most 'happy.' In this way, the worldview is more like a poem than philosophic or scientific theorization. A desirable image of the worldview can be found in the image of bird's nest, which is at once natural and, to some extent, cultural — a nest where culture and nature are in perfect harmony, with no hard and fast borderline between them, whose architectural aesthetics is stunning, and which, as Bachelard (1959) has shown, evokes the image of protection of newly born chicks from all kinds of external hazards, of the emotional as well as biological warmth and happiness, i.e. "felicity." It is only in the light of this worldview, in the image of 'nest,' that particular views and beliefs on particular things and facts can be said to be true or false.

The words 'truth' or 'falsity' cannot be determined in the light of the correspondence to an objective thing or reality. For two reasons. First, the worldview itself is not an objective reality independent of the mind but already an interpretation. Second, since the worldview may vary from one person to another, from one culture to another, and from one perspective to another (as with different relgious, philosophic, scientific and aesthetic perspectives), the notion of truth cannot be related to universal objective worldview but rather to the correspondence between one particular view and another.

At this point the meaning of 'truth' ceases to be understood in terms of the correspondence between reality and our view on it. Truth is another name for the coherence of our view on a particular thing which we attain in the light of the worldview we choose, the choice of which, in turn, should be evaluated in terms of the degree of the satisfaction it brings about.

The ultimate concern of human intellectual, technical, and institutional endeavor is neither the value of truth defined in terms of the correspondence between a proposition and a fact, nor political power, nor material accumulation of wealth. Perhaps what we humans try to attain through philosophy, science, art, and religion is the state of happy 'nest' in which our thoughts, emotions, and spirits find sudden and surprising correspondents in the materials constituting the nest — such as small twigs, dry leaves, green moss, mixed with mud and pasted with broken sea shells. This will amount to "seeing science through the lens of art, art through the lens of life," to use Nietzsche's expression (1956). Through these lenses, through this new worldview, every human activity will take on a refreshingly different meaning.

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Abstract

The paper argues for the necessicity of revising many fundamental concepts that we use in everyday situations and in communication such as reality, thought, language, the world and finally the truth. The paper develops the argument that what the word 'truth' actually signifies cannot be addressed just by explicating what philosophy, science or even religion denote but that it can only be answered fully by the study of language and therefore in a larger context linguistics. Language is the very tool that enriches the communication between one another due to its diverse significations that one may use when expressing one's views, thereby making life more enjoyable. The paper develops why the above corresponding argument should be justified by developing three outstanding views as follows. The world or reality is indistinguishable from the common worldview that we associate with without the means of language. That the worldview is in essence inseparable from the mental and intellectual representation of it and the only means of expression lies with language. And finally, that the language is a complex signification in itself in every aspect. Language in short is the very essence of what we define as being 'poetic.' With these arguments in mind, we may once again ponder the signification of Nietzsche's words when he states that "to see science through the lens of art, and art through the lens of life."