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Language – A Necessary Evil

Reading Time: 5min

Imagine a world devoid of the vernacular: Without language, would it be possible to lend meaning to ideas that exist independently of thought? What would our internal monologues embody? Would we experience sensations that lack explanations? Would one be able to conceive realities to which no words are assigned? – the list is inexhaustive. Since the dawn of contemplative thought, language has deeply embedded itself into our psyche, acting as a medium for expression and understanding. Its ultimate purpose is to serve as a transmitter of ideas (whether views, beliefs, emotions, concepts, or theories). But does this necessarily mean that language determines thought?

With the aid of language, cultures flourished, and with this tool at our disposal, so did our history. The power that words wield in shaping perception is philosophically intriguing. Since, language is at the core of human existence, intertwined with our way of life, its purpose and relevance are worthy of consideration. Human language was not the first to bloom. Ants use pheromones as chemical signals to communicate, bees dance in the direction of food, and birds sing to each other in complex melodies and calls. Despite these cultivated processes, designed on the cornerstone of survival, ours is a language that defies all odds. What sets us apart is the methodological use of fiction that enables us to collectively believe in things which do not exist. From a limited pot of expressions, we can unearth an infinite amount of meanings. While language plays an important role in sustaining the fragility of human perceptions, what happens when this expectation is faced without a definition or meaning?

Austrian-British philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein famously wrote, "the limits of my language stand for the limits of my world." For Wittgenstein language was a fixed, logical structure. It was a medium used to convey reality, the state of affairs, that it pictures. Therefore, the limits of language were responsible for outlining the restrictions of thinking. He believed, if you cannot describe something in words then it does not exist. However, in his later works, Wittgenstein contradicted himself. He made accommodations for the obscurities in language. He went on to famously write, "the meaning of a word is its use". Language then, was no longer a fixed structure conformed to rules, but a malleable construction that adapted its meaning from context. The meaning of language did not lie in painting a picture of human reality but in the context of human existence and activity.

Language, to be precise, is chock full of prejudices and assumptions. The notorious Sapir-Whorf hypothesis in Anthropology went as far as to suggest that language plays a crucial role in determining an individual's worldview; what can be thought in one language may not necessarily be perceived or understood in another language. This hypothesis, though eventually disproved, is a claim that intimately links the two distinctive pillars of language and thought. While language-first models believe that thought is disrupted in the absence of language, thought-first models, on the contrary, suggest that language conveys thought rather than being a precondition for its occurrence.

"For a large class of cases of the employment of the word 'meaning'—though not for all—this word can be explained in this way: the meaning of a word is its use in the language." (Philosophical Investigations, 43)

Which brings us to this question – how does one process the events of everyday life? Do we think about our day in words? Not necessarily. Humans are driven by emotions. A mango, for example, can evoke the nostalgia of summer days; a feeling that can be processed without the need for a sentence. Colours and images grant contextual evidence to a more holistic way of thinking. By creating a fictional account, we relay some meaning to the objects around us, thereby generating due interpretation, and constructing logical sense with our thoughts.

Ancient Egyptians believed that language was gifted to mankind by Ptah. Unlike us, they seem to have recognized that language must have had a beginning. American linguist and philosopher Noam Chomsky agrees that this is a field that belongs to inexplicable mysteries, namely how, when, and where language came into being. He further argues that this ability is innate to humans, being the result of a genetic mutation in our ancestors which eventually passed on to become dominant. While this is one theory, several others have attempted to demystify the obscurity surrounding the topic.

My concern is regarding language, not as a boon but a curse. If it is true that our legacy is one of syntax and semantics, could it be that language oils the wheels of our insanity? Have we been so hung up on feeding our untamed curiosity that we have lost ourselves in a fictional realm, desperately trying to define our interpretation of reality against that which is true and exists? Society functions on common myths rooted in the collective imagination. The metaphysical reality of laws, rights, and money find their existence in our imagination alone, for outside of this planet, these terms are rendered meaningless. Since the sun cast its light on the threshold of the cognitive revolution, our existence has been at odds with two distinct realities – one that is objective and constitutes Mother Nature and the other, entirely imagined reality, which constitutes gods, nations, corporations, and ethics. Over the years, we have focused our energies more toward imagined realities, because of which concepts like religious extremism, wars, hatred, and evil have persisted.

This can be dangerous because fiction can be misleading or misinterpreted. A hypothetical life is merely make-believe; we cannot assume it is real simply because it is widely believed. According to George Orwell, "Political language is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind." He argues that it is intentionally vague to blanket the truth.

I realize the irony here – though I harbour doubts regarding the legibility of language, I choose to use this very medium to convey my thoughts and opinions. It occurs to me that like everybody else, I too am a slave to the written and spoken word. In my attempt to be accepted and understood, I will forever be chained to this illusion that calls itself life. Now that we are all too caught up in a web of imaginary lies, it seems impractical to dream about an existence otherwise. It is probably futile to believe there will come a day when we will return to our natural roots, becoming one with the universe simply by devoting our energies toward mutual growth and harmonious living, instead of dwelling on pure fiction to deconstruct reality while desperately seeking meaning in places that are entirely lacking it. Despite all the power words grant us, helping us cope with the void of existence, we must not deny that it is that evil which is necessary as a means for catharsis.

Sukanya Menon is a writer with a penchant for words.

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