

Language and the conception of reality

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Abstract

There is a widespread belief that language is a veritable *instrumentum laborat* (working tool) for the communication of thoughts and the conception of reality. There is equally a lingering belief that language pictures or mirrors reality. Nevertheless, to what extent can we authenticate this existing opinion? Is it the case that the conglomerate of reality can be represented linguistically without any iota of defect/fallibilism? Can language mirror reality perfectly as it is, in itself? What really is the ontological status of language? What is language anyway? How does it relate to the world? How does it relate to the mind? Should our view of language influence our view of the world? Even more seriously, what is the limit of language in the herculean task of conceiving and revealing reality? Armed with the concerns highlighted above, this paper, attempts to grapple with these questions, by first seeking insights into the meaning, nature and use of language; the nature of reality; and the role of language within the context of effective representation and a veridical a fortiori conception of different 'forms of life and states of affairs' of reality.

Keywords:

Language; reality; conception; forms of life, states of affairs.

1 INTRODUCTION

Far from being a banality or a philosophical naivety, the labyrinth of language and the conception of reality has no doubt acquired the status of perennial concern in philosophy. The reality, which is sometimes conceived as, the state of things as they are, rather than as they may appear or might be imagined, includes in the central, everything that is, and has been, whether it is observable or comprehensible. That is, everything that has existed exists or will exist (Cohen, 2013). This nature of reality remains vague and incomprehensible without the tool of language. As such, language becomes a quintessential tool for or key to our knowledge of reality. Nevertheless, as Max Black succinctly observes, nobody knows how language came into existence (although many have tried to guess) (Black, 1937). This question of origination of language seeks to decipher (if any), the metaphysical or ontological basis of language as a vestige for the conception of reality. By and large, granted that language is a given, which lurks as a veritable bridge between man and his environment or between man and his fellow man, () we need to ask: does it (language) picture reality quickly? Does language reflect or mirror reality (as it is, in itself)? If our response to this question is in the affirmative, then the immediate question that follows would be: to what extent can language be said to picture a reality? What really is language anyway? How does it relate to the world? How does it relate to the mind? Should our view of language influence our view of the world? What is the limit of language in the huge task of reflecting nature, reality or the world? Furthermore, even more seriously, what is the limit of reality itself? Is reality all-revealing, and is a language all reflective? Does language picture reality or appearance? Cognizant of these questions, this paper therefore, seeks to grapple with the nitty-gritty of the problems herein highlighted. To achieve this, an excurses into the meaning, nature and limits of language and reality, is apposite.

2 UNDERSTANDING THE MEANING AND NATURE OF REALITY

The word 'reality' is a complex concept that at first sight, might seem indefinable. It is oftentimes contrasted with (and distinguished from) appearance. In *The Problems of Philosophy*, Bertrand Russell (1999) referred to the distinction between appearance and reality as one of the distinctions that cause the most trouble in philosophy. In the opening words of the first chapter of the aforementioned book, Russell raises an open question: "Is there any knowledge in the world which is so certain that no reasonable man could doubt it?". An attempt to proffer answers to this question would only make clear the limitedness of our sensibilities (and invariably the limits of human knowledge). Notwithstanding, reality seems to mean the state of things as they actually exist, rather than as they may appear or might be imagined. Reality could also include everything that is and has been, whether or not it is observable or comprehensible (that is, everything that has existed exists, or will exist). If this can be taken to be a tentative way of describing reality, then it means that when we talk about the meaning and nature of reality, it does not refer to the concrete, tangible or corporeal alone, but also the intangible, immaterial and incorporeal (that is, the physical world and the metaphysical world respectively).

Now, given the labyrinth associated with ascertaining the bulwark of reality, can we conclusively say that the summation of reality can be known or grasped correctly, (directly or indirectly) through language? In Russell's thinking, it is true that in the conception of reality, we need the cooperation of the senses, but what the senses immediately tell us is not the truth about the object as it is apart from us. Thus, what we directly see and feel is mere 'appearance,' which we believe to be a sign of some 'reality' behind (Penrose, 2016). However, if the reality is not what appears, have we any means of knowing whether there is any reality at all? Moreover, if so, have we any means of finding out what it is like? Can language serve this purpose? If yes, to what extent can language be said to do so?

2.1 The Labyrinth of Language: Meaning, Nature, and Use

In philosophy, when one asks: what is language? It is quite different from the question of what is a language? This implies that the term 'language' is applied not only to particular tongues but also to a variety of other systems of communication, notation or calculation. Etymologically, the word "Language" comes from the Latin "*Lingua*," which is literally translated as "tongue" (though distinct from the organ itself) (Bassey et al, 2018). From its etymology, language encompasses all means of vocal sounds and a combination of such sounds to which meaning is attributed. According to Battista Mondin, language is the instrument with which man effectuates communication; through language, man actuates himself as a social being, as the *Mitsein*, as the I-Thou (Mondin, 1963). This implies the communicative and social function of language, which is reflective of the notion that man is the only being referred to (and rightly so), as a *homo loquens* (a being that is capable of speaking or a self-speaking thing); a language-inventor and a *bona fide* language user. But, since man is a being-in-the-world (and not just a *solo ipso existentia*), as he tries to bridge the I-Thou gap socially, he must also interact with the realities of the external world, with language as the only veritable tool for such an engaging activity. Without language, man's uniquely complex knowledge and control of his environment could be inconceivable, for man never ceases to carry with himself this symbolic dimension, which is proper to him.

Now, language (as Rita Nolan opines), creates a specific cognitive advantage over members of other species. These advantages include: sorting out human experiences as a means of having a better grasp of the nature of this experience and devising means of coping with it; understanding the connection between things and processes as a means of enhancing human survival and wellbeing; generally, becoming more enlightened about the nature of the world and the place of humankind in it, including the kind of value orientation, which can facilitate human interaction within and between societies. Language is made up of words, symbols, sounds, signs and so on, but all these are meaningless, except when they convey a message, idea, or information about the world. The characteristic nature of language is such that, it is reflective of the arbitrariness of language; conventionalism of language; cultural Transmission of language and even the multiple structures of Language is so subtle an instrument, that we always lose sight of the multiplicity of its uses (Nolan, 2014). Apart from the communicative, descriptive and expressive uses of language; language (in the parlance of Martin Heidegger), also addresses people and things in the world; it points to them, as it were, showing them to be matters of concern. Bertrand Russell, lends credence to this, by arguing that our knowledge of the environment is limited to our senses, but by the help of speech, we can relate what is no longer sensibly present but only remembered (Faulkner, 2008). From the previous, it is crystal clear that language is germane in any human activity, be it social, private or even in the exclusive representation of the world (reality).

2.2 Language and the Mirror of Reality

There is a widespread belief that language is a veritable *instrumentum laborat* (working tool) for the communication of thoughts and the conception of reality (Paletta, & Fiorin, 2016). There is equally a lingering belief that language pictures or mirrors reality. In reaction to these enduring opinions, Bertrand Russell (1872-1970) thinks that philosophy should be concerned with understanding the world and his attention, is focused on language insofar as it is an instrument in fulfilling this task of philosophy. Criticizing those who do not employ language solely for this purpose, Russell observes that, Some philosophers, prefer to treat language as autonomous and try to forget that it is intended to have relation to the fact (world) and to facilitate dealings with the environment (reality) (Russell, 1986). Now, some philosophers believe that language can be treated and studied without reference to the linguistic world. They hold that the relation between the structure of sentences and the structure of the occurrences to which the sentences refer are not discoverable. However, on the contrary, Russell muses: "I do not think the structure of the non-verbal facts is wholly unknowable, and I believe that with sufficient caution, the properties of language may help us to understand the structure of the world" (Russell et al., 2009). Russell conceives analysis, as the logical study of fact, and facts are about the properties and relations of things in the world. Since language is a means for understanding things in the world, the analysis of language is therefore, to understand the world and not analysis for its own sake. Explaining how the study of the properties of language could lead to the knowledge of the properties of the world, Kenneth Blackwell (2014), quoting Russell strikingly writes:

The things in the world have various properties and stand concerning each other. That they have these properties and relations are facts, and things and their qualities or relations, are quite clearly in some sense or other, components of the facts that have those qualities or relations.

This implies that, insofar as propositions state facts, they are symbols of facts. Propositions themselves are composed of words. Some words are simple; that is, they are not made up of any components and, therefore cannot be analyzed. One example is the word 'Red'. Other simple words are proper names, which designate particular objects. The combination of a simple predicate and a proper name would constitute an atomic proposition. That is the simplest proposition, which states an atomic fact, which is understood by Russell to mean, "the simplest sort of facts." Now, talking about "Red," if we hold that language truly reflects reality or the world, the question that is likely to arise is: where can "Red" be found in reality (or anywhere in the world)? Is there anything like Red in nature, where individual objects, predicted of such color, derives its/their 'Redness'? Concerning colors, qualities and so on, which is heavily reflected and articulated in our speech acts (as linguistic items), can we successfully trace its archetypal-*cum*-basic structure to reality? That is, do words, in a genuine sense, correspond to reality? If our response is in the affirmative, then, to what extent can this be said to hold water?

Furthermore, Russell opines that when two or more atomic propositions are joined, we have a molecular proposition. Moreover, every molecular proposition has words like 'or, and.' An example of such a proposition would be "John and Mary are witnesses to the incident." Thus, a molecular proposition is composed of the atomic proposition, while an atomic

proposition, on the other hand, is composed of simple words. The truth of a molecular proposition therefore, depends on the truth of the atomic proposition of which it is composed. Now, since the world is made up of atomic facts as its ultimate constituents and they (atomic facts) are inferred from experience, they are as it were the bricks with which our knowledge of the world is constructed. Russell understands facts to mean “everything in that is in the world,” and facts, are exposed by sentences. The simplest atomic proposition corresponds to the simplest atomic facts in the world, which are known from immediate experience (language, on this basis, is said to mirror/reflect the world). For Russell, in as much as language denotes things (objects) in the world, we must be careful not to impose arbitrarily, specific inexistent structures on the world. To avoid this, we need to develop a logically perfect language, that is, an ideal language whose syntax would serve two purposes: first, to prevent inferences from the nature of language to the nature of the world, which are fallacious because they depend upon the logical defects of language; second, to suggest, by inquiring what logic requires of a language which is to avoid contradiction, what sort of structure we may reasonably suppose the world. Armed with the above analysis, Russell avows that, partly employing the study of the syntax, we can arrive at considerable knowledge concerning the structure of the world”. In Russell, language connects with the world (reality) “referentially”, for every word has a meaning: the entity to which it refers, in the external world.

Speaking of language and the conception of reality, Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951) and his picture theory of language (meaning), birthed in *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, is a force to reckon with. Now, like Russell’s logical atomism (wherein Russell believed the world to be a collection of atomic facts- states of affairs), Wittgenstein opines that the function of language is to represent states of affairs in the world. For Wittgenstein, the world is all that is the case; the world is the totality of facts, not of things; a fact is the existence of states of affairs; and a state of affairs (a state of things), is a combination of objects (things). Wittgenstein believes language (or proposition), is meaningful if it describes a specific, possible situation within the world (Zalabardo, 2015). This means that a proposition (language), is a picture of reality, and a proposition (language), is also a model of reality as we imagine it. The early Wittgenstein, in the *Tractatus*, observed that our failure to understand the logic of our language, have impeded our conception of reality. However, is it not the case that reality is more substantial than Logic/Grammar? Is it not the case that reality transcends the web of language? As William Lawhead observes, since Wittgenstein believes whatever can be thought can be spoken, it follows that the limits of thought can be set out by determining the limits of language. This will give us the limits of what can be intelligible.

Now, the essential business of language (in Wittgenstein’s view) is to assert or deny facts. However, the question here is: what kind of facts? Wittgenstein would respond to this by saying: facts about the world (reality), which is made intelligible only through/in language. This idea of picture theory of language first occurred to Wittgenstein during the war, when he saw in a magazine an account of a motor accident that was represented in a law court by means of a small model. The case was about a reckless driver who knocked down a young boy. Thus, to give the judge and the entire court a true picture of what happened, the prosecutor employed the use of a small toy motor and a baby doll. This gave the entire court a true picture of what happened. But then, the question becomes: what is the relationship between the real accident and the miniature toy/doll used to depict it, such that the later could give a picture of the former? Wittgenstein might respond to this by claiming that, the picture theory involves a community of structures and the systematic correlation between the picture and the pictured. In other words, there must be a correspondence between the picture and the state of affairs it represents. Just as the miniature toy/doll depicts the real accident, so also language depicts reality. We must, however, note here that, in Wittgenstein’s view, the reality is concrete and tangible, excluding other realities like the spiritual, psychical or metaphysical. Spiritual realities are not included in Wittgenstein’s conception of reality. They escape objective inquiry and facts presented by them cannot be verified. That is, the truth value of such propositions does not make sense. This allusion by Wittgenstein marks the undoing of his attack on metaphysics as a speculative science.

Now, having enjoyed the spoils of the moment if it lasted, Wittgenstein discovered that the picture theory of language was susceptible to a pool of hydra-headed difficulties (and that the search for a perfect language that accurately mirrored the world could not be realized). In the wake of this, and in an attempt to correct any of such anomalies, Wittgenstein adopted a new position called the Language Game theory (or the Use theory of meaning), superbly scripted in his work titled *Philosophical Investigations* (a work that culminates what is known as the later Wittgenstein in Philosophy). To sum up then: what is said of “language” in the *Tractatus* is said of “Languages” in the *Investigations*. However, what exactly does Wittgenstein mean by “Languages” or “Language-games”? First of all, of course, Wittgenstein does not mean languages in the sense in which French, German and English are languages, arbitrary or conventional systems of signs and rules, but in the sense in which one may ask if the “Language of science” or “the Language of ethics or the Language of poetry.” For instance, when we speak of the language of science, we mean how terms are used (for scientific purposes, or in scientific contexts), for describing, or predicating and so on; and in the same way we may speak of the language of ethics, as the whole set of ways in which terms are used for the ethical purposes of commending, blaming, advising, and so on. This simply shows that for (later) Wittgenstein, the way we use language is likened to the way we play a game and the rules which govern our use of a language, to the rules of a game (chess for example). Here, different forms of life, have different rules governing their conception of reality, and as such, what counts as reality, is only meaningful within the context of use or the state of affairs that postulates such. As Olatunji Oyeshile (2008) observes, the use theory of meaning is a pragmatic theory of meaning which enjoins us to ask for the use of a word and not it is meaning. It is at this point, that language and the conception of reality becomes tricky, for if reality is to be conceived wholly, then one must be cultured in the rubrics of all forms of life- a seemingly impossible task. This marks the limits of language and even the limits of the world.

2.3 The Limits of Language and the Limits of the World

There is a lingering tendency to postulate some essential connection between word (language) and thing (reality), the relation, however, seems entirely artificial. The world (reality) in its exclusive preserve, is not all-revealing, especially with great consideration of the limitedness of our sensibilities. Even language, which is a product of human constructs, is plagued by a plethora of defects, which makes it difficult to suppose that language (amidst the visible shortcomings) can picture reality perfectly. Bertrand Russell, however, believes that with an ideal, logical-cum-perfect language, we can gain knowledge of the world (reality). However, despite this conviction, P.G. Kuntz, is of the opinion that “to infer from the structure of language to the structure of the world, was in Russell’s nominalistic phase, the very model of fallacious reasoning.” One difficulty of going from the order of the words to the order of the world is that grammatical order is manmade and hitherto varies considerably from language to language. Another difficulty that arises from trying to gain knowledge of the world through the study of the structure of language (which Russell acknowledges), is the heterogeneity of worlds, represented by the homogeneity of words (Russell, 1986: 38). That is to say that, the world is varied in composition while words are formed of parts that are all the same types, and so cannot adequately reflect the structure of the world. It is true that Wittgenstein, is quoted to have said that “the limits of my language, means the limits of my world” (Rescher, 1956), but the limits of reality, are in a sense, “inexpressible” or indefinable, at least in any direct way. Language therefore, can only grasp a piecemeal of what is given by the benevolence of reality, but the alarming difficulty that besets us is the question: can language, (in all its forms and no matter how perfect), picture, reflect or mirror the quiddity of reality or the shadows of appearances? Is reality not larger than logic?

3 CONCLUSION

Let us bring this engaging exercise to a close. We set out to delineate the nature of language and the conception of reality. We have seen that language is not only a veritable tool for communication but also a germane *instrumentum laborat* (working tool) for the conception of reality. But we need to ask: is reality fixed? If we answer in the affirmative, then that will mean that whatever language describes, mirrors or pictures, is a fixed and unchanging reality that remains the same, trans-generationally. This is implicated in Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (early Wittgenstein), wherein he sees language as having a fixed meaning and as picturing reality. On the contrary, it would seem that reality is not fixed; the world is ever-changing. If that is the case, then language, which is meant to reflect reality, must of necessity adjust to these changes and by so doing, it experiences an inevitable change also. Notwithstanding, if the summation of reality, can be mirrored by language, then that means that even language (at some point can create reality). The reality, in this light, maybe reducible to the *imprimatur* of social constructs and the hegemony of individual conceptions. To avoid this parsimony of thought, one may propose a *reductio ad absurdum*, which reads that instead of mirror reality, language mirrors appearance, for things-in-themselves cannot be fully grasped *in toto* (that is, totally, synolonistically or entitativity). Language (in all its defects), cannot create reality as the word itself suggests, but language can reflect, mirror, or capture the world, to the extent that the world reveals itself (that is, to the extent, the world appears). The limitedness of language only leads to partial incomprehension and partial misrepresentation of reality. Thus, our submission is that reflection on language can doubtlessly serve to sharpen our awareness of the features of extra-linguistic reality and to make us notice what we possibly had not noticed before. However, that language can serve as an ultimate premise for inferring properties of the world, which seems to be highly/naively questionable (Copleston, 1967).

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