

An Inquiry in to the Ontology of Language

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Abstract

This paper is an analysis of how language is understood based on ontological theories. I consider two basic ontological theories such as dualism and monism for this inquiry. I argue that any ontological explanation of language is bound to have an irreconcilable puzzle. Even the early greek thinkers were committed to have an ontological understanding of language. The trend continued to have a huge impact on the early analytic philosophising.

Language becomes a matter of metaphysics when it is viewed as a connecting agent of subject and the world. But does it have a separate ontological status? Language is neither extended nor a thinking thing. Many philosophers presumed it do have an ontological status. But that presumption is bounded to a philosophical anxiety of ontological connectivity and knowability. Either in the context of objective reference or in the context of social situatedness language continues to be an elusive concept. My analysis is focused mainly on two models of language. One is the picture theoretical model of *Tractatus* and the next is the use theoretical model of *Philosophical Investigations*. I think both these models consider language as an entity and thus, at the end of the day, both fail.

Key words: ontology, language, puzzle, wittgenstein, picture theory, the self

Introduction

How to understand the ontology of language? Everything that happens inside our head might not be linguistic. Yet, it is a fact that our existence is stick to the concept of language. We use language. In order to provide a satisfactory account of language we are required to analyze its peripheral components like sentences and words and its functional

components like meaning, truth and reference. The peripheral components such as sentences and words have completely different operation pattern. So, providing an account of language by thread through these components is not an easy task. The functional components such as meaning, truth and reference have been questioned heavily on ontological, epistemological and metaphysical grounds respectively. In a nutshell, every components of the concept of language is susceptible to philosophical scrutiny. But, we continue to inquire about the ontology of language because language is a central concept without it even questioning its ontology is impossible.

I am not rejecting the importance of the functional components. At least one of them has to be available to explain language. But most of the earlier characterization of these items is being misled by representationalism and varificationism. Most of the early theories of language shared the same goal of objectivising our knowledge. These theories shared the same fate of falling in to the puzzle involved in understanding the ontology of language.

The puzzle associated with defining language is this: Language cannot be taken away from the world. So we are required to imagine a relation between them. But under which metaphysical theory we can place our imagination. In a monistic framework where language and world are taken to be the same reality, we cannot differentiate language from the world and so that we cannot define it. In a dualistic or pluralistic frame work we are unable to theorize the exact relation between language and the world. As a result of these problems we are technically incapable of defining language. This puzzle is an amalgamation of two classical puzzles of monism and dualism in a disguised form. One is regarding our epistemological difficulties in differentiating something that is theoretically taken to be the same thing and the other is regarding our metaphysical difficulties in explaining relation.

Whichever metaphysical theory we presume, the ontology of language fails to blend in with it. We could work out a pluralist metaphysics within which language could be given an ontological status among the many other ontological entities. To provide a separate ontology will resolve the issue if we could actually achieve it. But in our current understanding of the universe we are epistemically ignorant about the non-reducible characterization of language. To give ontology to something we are ignorant about is a faulty exercise.

The fact of the matter is that the philosophers have a tendency to assimilate a separate ontology to language. This paper discusses this tendency of philosophers and the puzzle follows from it. I presume that the tendency is deep rooted in the philosophical tradition and its traces can be founded back in greek philosophy.

Part One

One of the most compelling theories in the history of philosophy is the theory of dualism. The brilliance of Descartes lies not in the classification but in the characterization of two entities. He made it clear that the properties cannot collide with each other. Though the logic of this idea cannot be logically disproved, the logic of not having collision cannot be compromised in the physical world. The troubles it created henceforth were unable to be unattended by the philosophers after that. That is why dualism is one of the most compelling theories in the history of philosophy.

The dualism affected the knowledge camp in philosophy and evoked a set of questions about truth. Rationalists and Empiricists came up with their answers to the questions. None of these answers completely satisfied the philosophical urge to justify objectivity of knowledge. In the beginning of twentieth century some philosophers started analysing language to deal with these questions. If language is a reliable system then the knowledge which is in the form of language also becomes reliable. The language is philosophically dealt as a 'system' and analysing that system became a philosophical technique by the early analytical philosophers like Gottlob Frege, G.E Moore and Bertrand Russell. The linguistic concepts such as meaning, reference and truth became the primary issues of philosophical inquiry.

Early Greek thinker, Parmenides, believed in an ontological continuity. He found that although the opposite forces moving away from each other, the unity continues to sustain in the world. This deep ontological principle is the absolute reality for him. It is complete and change less. He says: “ It has a farthest limit, it is complete on every side, like the mass of a round sphere, equally poised from the centre in every direction; for it cannot be greater or smaller in one place than in another”(Burnet 1930, p. 176)

The existence is to be understood in his system as a part of reality. The non-existence, on the other hand, is another part of reality. In the dualist opposition in the world non-existence serves as the opposite counter part of existence. That means non-existence is not unreal for him. The unreal is something that cannot be understood. For him, “What is not cannot be named.”(Greaser 1977) That which cannot be named is unreal. If something is conceivable, it is real and namable. There cannot be a name that which does not denote anything. He uses “being”, “not-being”, “becoming” and “perishing” as naming expressions.(Vlastos 1973, p.238)

This theory might not be compatible with our current understanding of language. The modern notions of truth and falsity of a sentence are very much related to the notions of the ‘real’ and ‘unreal’. All of this could be explained as the after effect of considering a logical relation between name and real. When we come to Plato this is more systematically presented. He was concerned about the object-property relation.

Plato was of the view that only by establishing a correct explanation of the relation between property and the object; we can be justified in using our sentences of subject-

predicate form. For him, a true sentence is true because the predicate is present in the subject. So predicate and object must be ontologically available in order to make a sentence true. There is no option to discard the truth in a true proposition. So apparently it follows that the denotation of predicate really exists. This theory presupposes what we call 'ontological predication', i.e., the predicated subject is one of the participants of the provided predicated form or set.

The topic of subject and object had a different schematic structure in the Greek age from that of the Cartesian or modern structure. Greek philosophical tradition has its roots in what is known as materialistic monism. Their search was after the key element of the world. The search then extended to the non-material objects also. The entire world is considered as alive in some sense. Everything including human beings are understood as a part of it. This picture is at the background of the Greek way of philosophising.

The concept of a 'mysterious Nature' of the Greek age was replaced by the concept of a 'material World' in the modern age. Rene Descartes differentiated subject and object as mutually exclusive categories. The mind is non-material, non-extending and thinking category and matter as non-mental, non-thinking and extending category. This assumption was followed by the question regarding their connection. If they cannot be connected, knowledge is impossible. If any of them is explained to have the upper hand in the process, the other can be tragically explained away.

In the beginning of the twentieth century, when Language became the primary philosophical concern to some philosophers, both of these problems (that of the predication and of the mind-matter dualism) were presumed to be answered. Frege's problem was to see how the same referent can have different meanings in different contexts. Names and descriptions are for him referring expressions. Any name is understood based on its mode of presentation, which is in other words, its sense. Bertrand Russell agreed with Frege that the names and descriptions have the status, without being referring expressions. For him, the only proper referential tools are those of the ostensive expressions like, 'this' and 'that'. Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* has advanced this theory with a detailed metaphysics including a fact-ontology. He imagined language as a picture of reality in which the words corresponds to the objects and the sentences corresponds to facts.

II. A. a. Words and objects

The primary mechanism, the early philosophers of language founded to solve the problem of language-world dualism is to provide a theory of reference. A theory of reference is a justification enough to imagine that the language has a grip on the world. In the entry on 'Reference' in Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, Timothy Williamson defines reference as "Reference is usually conceived as the central relation between language or

thought and the world. To talk or think about something is to refer to it.”¹ These referential theories proceeded with the assumption that two main categories of language such as words and sentence refer to object and fact respectively. John Stuart Mill had a direct reference theory. A direct reference theory is a theory that a word would refer to the concerned object directly, without mediation. Frege introduced a different theory of reference which is known as the descriptive theory, which says that in order to pin point the reference the word should be associated with a proper description of the object.

Frege's famous paper, 'On Sense and Reference' starts with a question regarding the identity statements. With an intense analysis he concludes that some identity relations (such as $a=b$) are synthetic statements which has informative content and their difference is due to the difference in their way of presentation that is sense. (Frege 2003, p. 36)

For Frege both name and sentence have reference and sense. “A proper name (word, sign, sign combination, expression) expresses its sense, stands for or designates its reference. By means of a sign we express its sense and designate its reference.” (Frege 2003, p. 40) Further, he writes:

The regular connexion between a sign, its sense, and its reference is of such a kind that to the sign there corresponds a definite sense and to that in turn a definite reference, while to a given reference (an object) there does not belong only a single sign. The same sense has different expressions in different languages or even in the same language. To be sure, exceptions to this regular behaviour occur. (p. 38)

According to Russell, there are two ways we can know about something. Things that are available to someone directly are knowable through her acquaintance with that. Those things that are not directly available to her are known through the descriptions associated with it. (Russell 1912)

The knowledge by acquaintance is immediate knowledge which is available to us through sense-data. Sense-data, for Russell, are the entities we receive from an object. We can have different kind of acquaintance to know different kind of things. We can have an acquaintance of a thing based on our memory. We introspectively acquire the knowledge about our own mental things. We can have acquaintance of universals such as Indians, philosophers etc.

The knowledge by description is the knowledge we get through a detailed description of something. There are two varieties of description, one is definite description which is of the form 'the so and so' and the other is indefinite description which is of the form 'a so and so'.

¹ See the entry on Reference by Williamson, Timothy in *Encyclopedea of Philosophy, Second Edition, Volume 8*, p.288

Proper names, for Russell, are encapsulated descriptions. But he holds the view that there are logical proper names which are not encapsulated descriptions. Logical proper names are the ostensive expressions like 'this' and 'that'. As per Russell's analysis, it is through these logical proper names that we referentially connect to the world.

In *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Ludwig Wittgenstein gives a detailed metaphysical theory in which language and world share same logical form. For him, a sentence can be decomposed into its constituents, the words or names. These names refer to 'objects'. These Tractarian objects are simples, which cannot be further divided. Similarly the names are also simple symbols. Objects are the building blocks of the world. These objects are necessary conditions of this world but their combination is contingent. Wittgenstein says in the Tractatus:

2.02 Objects are simple.

2.021 Objects make up the substance of the world. That is why they cannot be composite.

2.014 Objects contain the possibility of all situations.

2.0141 The possibility of its occurring in states of affairs is the form of an object.

For Wittgenstein we do not give same name to two objects. These names have reference but no sense.

Imagine a possible format of language where words are syntactic signs which are in themselves devoid of any semantical properties. In order to make these signs capable of referring to an object outside the domain of language, it is needed to provide a set of directions so that it could be able to differentiate the object from its neighbourhood. Wittgenstein's names are not equivalent with the common usage of 'words'. These are signs which are connected to the objects based on the idea that they share same logical scheme.

II. A. b. Sentences and facts

Sentence is commonly understood as a connected set of words which has a complete meaning. Though it has two neighbouring concepts such as propositions and utterances my primary focus is on the concept of sentence as such. Some philosophers make a distinction between propositions and sentences. Since my primary worry here is the structure of language and the relation between its two elements(words and sentences), I prefer to use sentence to propositions.

In his criticisms of Russell, P. F Strawson gives an explanation that the truth value of a sentence is required only if the presuppositions of that sentence is suggestive of a positive reference. We can see this idea in Frege's 'On Sense and Reference' when he says, "... the reference of a sentence may always be sought, whenever the reference of its components involved; and that this is the case when and only when we are inquiring after the truth

II. B. The Self

There is another kind of explanation is provided to the concept of language by philosophers. In this form of theorizing language is explained either with the self or with the society. The *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* could have a Kantian reading in which Tractarian 'I' is comparable with the transcendental unity of apperception. The Tractarian 'I' can be understood as a uniting factor of language in which the form of world is represented. But in a formal sense, the relation between language and world happens because of the very nature of these two categories. They are interested in the logical connections possible between language and world without the aid of any kind of psychologic enterprise. The Tractarian 'I' has little role to play in the logical relation between language and the world.

Plato had a concept of soul and rebirth. In his theory of recollection soul is the agency possessing true knowledge. But the concept of soul in Greek period is not identical with the modern understanding of that concept. In Aristotle's 'De Anima', he explains soul as the principle of animal life. Aristotle's theory of soul could be understood better through his theory of substance. Aristotle says, "Of natural bodies some have life in them, others not; by life we mean self-nutrition and growth. It follows that every natural body which has life in it is a substance in the sense of composite"(Aristotle 1941, p. 555). With Rene Descartes the self becomes an epistemic agent. David Hume was sceptical about an empirically unavailable self whereas Immanuel Kant considered it as a principle of unifying experiences.

In contrast with Kant's subject, G.W.F Hegel construed the self as a historical element. There were two kinds of understandings of self after Kant. One is self in itself which has an essential structure and the other is a construction of social and historical circumstances.

Edmund Husserl, in his phenomenological method, reinstates an essentialistic concept of self. The phenomenology is a method to establish proper scientific mechanism by taking recourse to the pre-reflective awareness of the given world. For Husserl this experience of the given is possible because of the self.

II. B. a. Aboutness: Reference as a human activity

Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* held a view that the limits of language are the limits of the world and the language is limited by the self. What if this self has a social dimension? Then language becomes a social enterprise. Wittgenstein of the *Philosophical Investigations* reflects upon the social dimension of language and self.

While explaining language use as a social enterprise, Wittgenstein introduces the idea of

'form of life'. The idea of 'form of life' has to be understood in contrast with the social agreement notion of truth. There is a theory that truth is nothing but social agreement. That is the society will come to an agreement that some concepts and norms are valid. A sentence gets its truth value based on how the society decided about its validity. Social agreement theorists oppose the idea that truth lies in the correspondence between language and world. The idea of 'form of life' is also an idea which does not accept the correspondence theory of truth. But it is not satisfied with the idea that social agreement is the foundation of truth. 'Form of life' is a concept that the use of language is a part of our very life itself. The concept of life is associated only with the concept of language use. Using language is an act of living itself. As Wittgenstein says:

241. "So you are saying that human agreement decides what is true and what is false?"—It is what human beings say that is true and false; and they agree in the language they use. That is not agreement in opinions but in form of life.(Wittgenstein 1958, p. 88)

II. C. Nature of Language

One worry which could persist in the social situatedness of language is regarding the exact ontological status of language. Language is ontologically allied with subject and the world. If language is taken as a separate ontological category, then only there could be a relation between self and the world through language.

As a part of accepting the dynamism of language, there are two major ideas developed. One is that of accepting the social nature of language. Instead of translating the form of language to formal systems, it can be seen as a social enterprise. The contingencies involved in a socially situated language cannot be ruled out.

The other idea is that of the relations among the sentences in a language. A sentence is said to be connected to other sentences. Such a theory is popularly called as 'Holism'.

II. C. a. Language as a social enterprise

When human beings are taken to be understood as social creatures, the language they use may also be social. Infact, its reverse, just because the language they use is social, humans are social, also may be correct. If that is the case, being social and being linguistic go together.

There is a theoretical formulation by Wittgenstein of the idea that language cannot be non-social. He explains that a person cannot have a language of his own, which cannot be understood by others.

262. It might be said: if you have given yourself a private definition of a word, then you must inwardly undertake to use the word in such- and-such a way. And

how do you undertake that? Is it to be assumed that you invent the technique of using the word; or that you found it ready-made?((Wittgenstein 1958, p. 93))

A private language is of the form that the words in that language must be private. Only a single person can be able to use it. It is a situation in which a collection of letters is taken to be a word by a person and that word has a meaning which he only knows. For Wittgenstein, that explanation is counter-intuitive to our concept of language.

The private language argument has two dimensions. One is the referential dimension, which is concerned with the public availability of objects. If language is not private, then the objects it refers also cannot be private. When a sentence is used it tells something about some state of affairs. Understanding that sentence means being aware of the state of affair it concerns.

275. Look at the blue of the sky and say to yourself "How blue the sky is!"—When you do it spontaneously—without philosophical intentions—the idea never crosses your mind that this impression of colour belongs only to you. And you have no hesitation in exclaiming that to someone else. And if you point at anything as you say the words you point at the sky. I am saying: you have not the feeling of pointing-into-yourself, which often accompanies 'naming the sensation' when one is thinking about 'private language'. Nor do you think that really you ought not to point to the colour with your hand, but with your attention. (Consider what it means "to point to something with the attention").(p. 96)

276. But don't we at least mean something quite definite when we look at a colour and name our colour-impression? It is as if we detached the colour-impression from the object, like a membrane. (This ought to arouse our suspicions.)(p. 96)

The other dimension of the theory is that the language is social. The meaning of a word lies in its use. All human beings are potentially capable of using every word. All human beings are potentially capable of understanding the meaning of every word. The structure of language lies in the expression of it.

The problem of this view is that of an ontological explanation of language. The self or the society will increase the number of categories in our ontology. Either in terms of self or in terms of society we are expected to provide a dualist or monist theory of language. But both are entitled to have the puzzle I discussed.

Conclusion

Any explanation of language in terms of ontology is fallible. The failure is due to the logical rules of the ontological context of the explanation. Richard Rorty in *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* criticizes the 'medium' view of language.(Rorty 1989, p.10) For him, a medium view is an essentialist notion where language is said to have an intrinsic nature. I am presenting a similar position here. I think any explanation of language as an entity

leads to a puzzle.

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