

The Nature of Language and Its Impact on Philosophy

Thi Ha Soe Shwe*

Abstract

Since philosophy is mental and verbal activity, language involves as the vital role in philosophical issues. Many philosophical problems are concerned with the interpretation of linguistic meaning and its function. The clarity and correct use of language can help to solve some metaphysical disputes in philosophy. This paper, thus, will present what language is and its nature, and the relation between philosophy and language.

Keywords: Language, meaning, philosophy

Introduction

Language is the highest faculty of all what human invented and what human possessed. Generally, language is assumed as speech. Speech is the combination of the sentences and sentence is the combination of words. So the meaning of a word is so important and it has a major impact on human affairs, from our daily life problems to the crucial problems of political, social and academic fields. The main purpose of language is to communicate each other and to transfer one's beliefs, feelings and emotions to another successfully. But no language is perfect and the weakness of language, its ambiguity and vagueness makes the difficulty of understanding among people, and establishes the metaphysical debates and many philosophical problems. Human's believes and even passions are the result of language he used and all what he knows are the cognitions arising from the limit of language he uttered. Therefore, this paper will present the nature of language and its functions.

What Language Is

The word "language" comes from the Latin word "Lingua", "tongue", and its original meaning is "that which is produced with the tongue". Most people generally accept that language means speech. But another meaning of language is that which carries a message from one human mind to another. If this definition is accepted, language involves not only speech but also writing, pictures and symbols that can be seen with eyes, like red traffic light, gestures, the movement of the hand or head to show an idea or feeling and expressions of the face or eyes, that may be called "body language" and sound made with the mechanical techniques, not by the voice, like a fire alarm. Many people hold that language and speech are one and the same thing because speech is the most common and widespread form of language.

Edward Sapir, the linguist, defines "Language is primarily a system of phonetic symbols for the expression of communicable thoughts and feeling". Most of the Linguists agree that there are some of the important characteristics of language and they are:

1. Language is primarily phonetic. Oral language precedes written language, not only in that the child almost always speaks a language for many months before he reads or writes it, but also in the process of language development itself. Written languages are transcriptions of oral language and written words are symbols of sound-symbols.
2. Language is a system. Language is not mere sound, not mere words and not mere meanings. It is an organization of sounds, words and meanings and language symbols are combined into a system which enables the variable needs of communication. Every language has a grammar that rules for forming words and making sentences.

* Lecturer, Dr., Department of Philosophy, Yadanabon University

3. Language is symbols. Language is not just marks and just babbling, but it symbolizes. A symbol is something that represents and stands for something else, and it is essential tool for communication.

4. Language is for expression. Human being tries to externalize his observations, his beliefs, his feelings, his ideas by means of language. Sometimes one knows what it is to feel that there is something he wants to say but not knows how to say it. In such cases, he tries to put that “it” into language, to press out what is latent in his mind. The word “express” literally means “to press out”.

5. Language is for the expression of communicable thought and feeling. Sometimes there are incommunicable, ineffable thoughts and feelings that cannot be defined by language. But the authors and orators are those who succeed in finding the language in which to express what had seemed inexpressible. Language is not being thought of as for the purpose of expressing just thought or just feeling. If language serves as communication needs, there must be a speech-community, that is, a group in which a given language is understood, a group whose members act similar in at least one important way in their speaking. Sometimes this fact is controversial fact by speaking of the “interpersonality of language”. A child may give secret names to things, and a person may invent his own shorthand for purposes of keeping a diary secret. Some scholars would hesitate to assign a group of signs which were known to only one person as a language, though one may insist that such a secret language serves communicative purposes because one communicates with himself by its means.

6. Language is for purely human. According to traditional legends, God had properly distinguished man from the other animal by giving to man the faculty of speech. Except human being, no other animal has a language but some of them have ways of communicating that may be assumed of as approximating language. All people know that dogs, cats and horses have ways of “telling them something”. Some scientists hold that the ants and other insects give and receive messages by means of their feelers, that bees emit certain meaningful odors perceptible to other bees, or dance in their hives in ways that give a meaning to their fellow – bees. Although the evidence is still doubtful, it is possible to teach some apes a few simple words. Some birds can learn to utter word-sounds, but they do not arrange the words to communicate and they only echo the sounds. Then non-human animals do not exchange messages of different time-space situation, for example, they cannot convey to the others certain messages of yesterday. Thus no non-human animals have a real language but all human animals do have and language is the gift of God for man.

7. Language is non-instinctive. Human infants babble instinctively, but they have to learn to babble sense. If a child could live in a speech- community, he would almost surely come in time to talk, but without a society in which to grow up, there is no reason to believe he would surely come to talk.

8. “Plurisituationality” is another characteristic of symbols. That is, a designated symbol means the same thing in a variety of situations and contexts. For example, the word “green” can be applied to a number of various objects in order to denote ways in which they are alike or nearly alike, though it does not designate absolutely the same quality in every usage. So “green light”, “green leaf”, “green eye”, “green economics” – the word “green” in these several usages refers to approximately the same colour and meaning. “Plurisituationality” is relative to the given language.

As everyone knows, the giving, recording and interpreting of information involve the use of language. Language can serve demands for expression of emotion and prescription of action or for the lubrication of human relationship and it can also serve superstition and magic. The real purpose of language is to take meaning and to transfer thought and ideas from one human heart to another. If language cannot do this, it will not be language but it will just be sounds, or signs, or meaningless gestures. For example, what first come to mind when one

speaks is the sounds he makes with his mouth and receives through his ears. The mouth and the ears can be seen by our perception and so they are thought as the first need when we think of making a speech. But what our perception cannot see is the brain that thinks of the message spoken by the mouth, and the other brain that receives and acts upon the message heard by the ear. It doesn't really become language until all four have come into play.

If one may make meaningless sounds with his mouth, another one will hear them through his ears, and transfer them to his brain, but they would not mean anything to him. Because in the first step his brain was not working when he produced the sounds. If one has a thought, but he does not open his mouth to speak it out, only the first step of language is completed. It is not language because of the lacking second step. Then one thinks and speaks, but the other one does not hear him. Steps three and four are out, and there is no real language. Again the other one hears, but his brain is asleep or busy with doing something else, there is still no real language. The true language is the full transfer of meaning from one brain to another, and co-operation between two or more human beings based upon that transfer.

How Did Language Come To Be?

There must have been a time when language emerged, as there must have been a time when men started using fire. As the special province of the god Thoth, language was prized by the Egyptians. According to the legend of Greece, Prometheus stole fire for the human race from the god Zeus. Both language and fire have been thought to be gifts of the gods and they are indeed the roots of human civilization. Harris and Jarrett refer a Biblical account of the origin of language follows:

“And out of the ground the Lord God formed every beast of the field, and every fowl of the air, and brought them unto Adam to see what he would call them: and whatsoever Adam called every living creature that was the name thereof. And Adam gave names to all cattle and to the fowl of the air, and to every beast of the field”¹

Then there is another story that supplements what is described in the Bible, but it is inconsistent with the Bible for it speaks of Eve participating in the naming ceremony.

“Eve, acting as Adam's secretary, took his dictation as he assigned the names. Two large birds first flew across the garden, and Adam said, “Write eagles”. Two great, named creatures came by and roared, just as if they were kings of beasts, and Adam said, “Write lions”. Two long-eared, braying creatures grinned and Adam ordered Eve to put down “donkeys”. Then two furry creatures lumbered by, and Adam said, “Write bears”. . . . “At that point Eve betrayed the quality that was to prove man's undoing. “Bears?” she asked, “how do you know that those are bears?” “Adam glared at the interruption and snorted, “Because they look like bears.”²

But it is not denoted that Adam named the non-living parts of nature nor it is that he created the large part of language that is in addition to names. Then it is not clear that whether Adam possessed any rule to guide him in his naming or whether he gave arbitrary names.

With respect to the sources of various languages in the world, it was supposed that all languages come from one, and that one was believed to be the ancient Hebrew of the Old Testament.

“And the whole earth was of one language, and of one speech. And it came to pass, as they journeyed from the east, that they found a plain in the land of Shinar, and they dwelt there. And they said one to another, Go to, let us make brick, and burn them thoroughly. And they had brick for stone, and slime had they for mortar. And they said, Go to, let us build us a city,

¹ Robert T Harris and Jame L Jarrett, *Language and Informal logic*, New York, Longmans, Green And Co, 1958, p-39

² Robert T Harris and Jame L Jarrett, *Language and Informal logic*, New York, Longmans, Green And Co, 1958, p-39-40

and a tower whose top may reach unto heaven; and let us make us a name, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth. And the Lord came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of men built. And the Lord said, Behold, the people is one, and they have all one language, and this they begin to do, and now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do. Go to, let us go down, and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another's speech. So the Lord scattered them abroad from thence upon the face of all the earth: and they left off to build the city. Therefore is the name of it called Babel, because the Lord did there confound the language of all the earth: and from thence did the Lord scatter them abroad upon the face of all the earth".³

By studying the Biblical story of the Tower of Babel, the three conclusions may be inferred that (1) the origin of language out of one language (2) the human race can possess the godlike power if it can speak a common language and (3) the confusion and impotency that derive from a multiplicity of tongues. Then there are two noted facts that one is that without language, there is no possibility of communication, of co-operation, of civilization itself, and the other is that the primitive people thought that it would be desirable to have a single language, so that all would be able to understand one another. But there are spoken in the world today between 5000 and 7000 different languages and human race lost a language that all men would speak and understand with their own pride.

In Plato's dialogue "Cratylus", Socrates discussed various theories of the origins of names. He tries to show how words often spring from roots and they are vocal imitations, onomatopoeic sounds. Then Socrates recognizes another theory, that "...names are conventional, and have a meaning to those who have agreed about them.... and that convention is the only principle, and whether you abide by our present convention, or make a new and opposite one, according to which you call small great and great small that, they would say, makes no difference, if you are only agreed".⁴

Socrates holds some truth in the convention theory, but also believes that names must originally be imitative in nature. Leonard Bloomfield said that the generalizations about language were not developed until the eighteenth century, when scholars ceased to view language as a direct gift of God, and put forth various theories as to its origins.

A famous linguist and Sanskrit scholar, Max Muller condensed the three major theory of the origin of language by the nicknames "bow-wow theory", "pooh-pooh theory", and "yo-he-ho theory", in the nineteenth century. According to the first, language began its beginning in imitations of the sounds made by animals, or of other sounds, as the game pingpong gets its name from the sound made by the ball hitting the table. The two primitive men, hearing the same natural sound, may have set out together to imitate it, agreeing on the imitation, then agreeing that the source of the natural sound should be called by their agreed imitation. For example, two men listening to a dog barking may have agreed on "bow-wow" as the nearest possible imitation of the dog's bark, and then continued to designate that particular dog, and finally all dogs, as "bow-wow". Then there may have been common assent of certain exclamations to signify certain feelings that "Ouch!" as a general sign of pain, "Oh!" of surprise. By this way, there may have come the standardization of definite sound to indicate definite actions or qualities, especially those involving some natural sound that could be somehow imitated like "splash", "crush" and "gurgle". But there is the complaint that those who imitate the sounds of sheep and other animals are not thereby naming those animals.

The second theory suggests that the first utterances were cries and groans and other instinctive expressions that were evoked by pain or intense feeling. The adherents of this theory generally hold these interjections for granted, without asking about the way in which

³ Ibid, p-40

⁴ Robert T Harris and Jame L Jarrett, Language and Informal logic, New York, Longmans, Green And Co, 1958, p-42

they have come into existence. Darwin, in the *Expression of the Emotions*, gives purely physiological reasons for some interjections, as when the feeling of contempt or disgust is accompanied by a tendency “to blow out of the mouth or nostrils, and this produces sounds like pooh or pish”. But the most spontaneous interjections often contain sounds which are not used in language proper and the impossibility properly to represent them by means of our ordinary alphabet. Then many interjections are more or less conventionalized and are learnt like any other words. The famous writer, Kipling wrote: “That man is no Afghan, for they weep “Ai! Ai!” Nor is he of Hindustan, for they weep “Oh! Ho!”. He weeps after the fashion of the white men, who say, “Ow! Ow!”. The yo-he-ho theory assumes the earliest language as initiating in work chants. Plato accepts the first theory and Democritus assumes that speech arose in emotional utterance. But Sapir criticized such theories are inadequate, for they lack the important problem, that of explaining the emergence of a genuine symbolic system out of whatever combination of expressive vocal sounds may have been the forerunner of the language.

The Danish Linguist, Otto Jespersen laid down the interesting opinion that language develops from song:

“The further back we go in the history of languages the greater is the number of irregularities that we find, not only in morphology and syntax, but also in vocabulary, the same thing is not always denoted in the same way, and instead of general terms as in our languages we find words with highly specialized and concrete meanings. The bigger and longer the words, the thinner the thoughts. The first framers of speech were not taciturn beings, but lively men and women babbling or singing merrily on for the mere pleasure of producing sounds with or without meaning, as an instrument for expressing thoughts their utterances were clumsy unwieldy and ineffectual, but they served to give vent to their emotions, and that was all they cared for. One string of syllables sung to some kind of melody may have been so characteristic of a certain individual, that it came to be repeated by others to signalize his approach, thus denoting and becoming a proper name for him- the most concrete of all words. Another song might serve to remind the tribes of some occasion when it was first intoned and might thus become an undifferentiated expression for what happened then. When a multitude of utterances of this kind had developed, each with some sort of special meaning, they might be combined in various clumsy ways and thus give rise to something that was more like the long intricate sentence- conglomerates which we find, for instance, in Eskimo.”⁵

Both the anthropological approach of Sapir and the philosophical approach of Earnst Cassirer insisted that the problem of language origin cannot be meaningfully separated from the psychological and epistemological questions of how man came to discriminate a variety of things and qualities in his environment. Then language is not only a means of communication, but also a way of transferring feelings already felt, observations already made, ideas already minted. The naming process may be an intimate part of human’s discriminating various aspects of his environment. For instance, a man, travelling in the desert and looking at the stars, knowing nothing of astronomy, sees a way in which certain stars go together not because they must inevitably make that configuration, but only because this is one way of seeing and he gives a name to his constellation as “the turtle”. Once the name is firmly attached, the name can beget the perception, imaginatively or actually, or the perception can call up the name. When one listens and reads, he goes from words to things and when he speaks and writes, he often looks at things to get the words.

The vocabulary of a person is a fairly reliable index of the extent of his interests. Every job has its own terminology, and vocabularies of different languages vary according to the

⁵ Robert T Harris and Jame L Jarrett, *Language and Informal logic*, New York, Longmans, Green And Co, 1958, p-43

needs and unique interests of their own users. In Arabic there are some five to six thousands terms used to describe camels, but some languages have no terms for camels at all. George Santayana wrote:

“Looking at the moon one man may call it simply a light in the sky; another, prone to dreaming awake, may call it a virgin goddess; a more observant person, remembering that this luminary is given to waxing and waning, may call it the crescent; and a fourth, a full-fledged astronomer, may say (taking the esthetic essence before him merely for a sign) that it is an extinct and opaque spheroidal satellite of the earth, reflecting the light of the sun from a part of its surface. All these descriptions envisage the same object— otherwise no relevance, conflict, or progress could obtain among them”.⁶

The sketch of the origin of language is may be true or it may not be because the earliest speakers did not leave any gramophone records. All scholars can only guess what went on, from the primitive man left the records as pictures, scribbled on the wall of caves and written messages, which really put down speech in lasting form. But before human beings possessed writing faculty, they had been speaking for many thousands of years, slowly and painfully building up their speech, and of that long building-up process there is no record. Most of the scholars agree that the earliest written records of language are in Sumerian, a tongue spoken in Masopotamia (today what call Iraq) about six thousand years ago. Besides Sumerian, the other oldest languages are Akkadian (the language of the Babylonians and Assyrians), Egyptian, Hebrew, Chinese and Sanskrit. Greek and Latin came much later, within the first thousand years before Christ, and most of the tongues spoken today are very young indeed, within the last two thousand years after the time of Christ.

Some scholars believe that the human race sprang up in a single spot, and grew at first a single language developed and then as human beings wandered off in different directions, this once common language changed gradually, until it finally developed into the enormous number of different tongues spoken today. As the evidence, some linguists find the similarities in certain words in the most remote corners of the earth and among people of the most different racial stocks. Words like “Papa” and “Mama” appear in many languages with the same meaning. For instance, the Chinese word for “mother” is “ma”, even Chinese is not expected to have any relationship with the languages of the West. In most parts of Europe, as well as in North Africa, Arabia and southern India, the use of “puss” or similar sounds (bis, pss, pusei, piso) to call a cat is found. But whether all languages can be traced back to a single one, and all people to a single address, is still a problematic issue.

Another important problem of language is our subject-predicate type of language that influences our thinking. That is, to say “The sky is blue” is to distinguish a subject, a substance, “sky” and to attribute to it a quality, a predicate, “blue”. Since our language so easily fits this way of thinking, it may seem that it is inevitable for anyone so to think. But in some languages, the classification of nouns and adjectives is difficult or impossible, and in some societies, there is no real concept of causality, so no words to designate the causal relations. Paul Henle showed that in languages constructed in certain ways it would be literally impossible to think of certain matters that seem ordinary to us. Although there are very difficult and controversial problems in language, most scholars accept that language arises as men learn more and more complex ways of abstracting from and discriminating within the environment, and languages closely reflect the interests of groups of people and individual persons.

The Meaning of Meaning

⁶ Robert T Harris and Jame L Jarrett, *Language and Informal logic*, New York, Longmans, Green And Co, 1958, p-45

There are many problems in languages: How did languages come to be? What are they for? How do they differ? , How do they function? Philosophy concerns more with the nature of linguistic meaning. According to Etymology, language, a word that comes from Latin “lingua” means “tongue” is generally accepted as speech. Speech is made up of sentences.

Sentences are made up of words and words are made up of sounds. It is, however, possible that a sentence made up of only one word, like “Sorry!”, and a word made up of only one sound, like “a” in “a book”, the most part words consist of several connected sounds, and sentences of several connected words. The main purpose of speech is to get meanings across and sentences, words and sounds are the apparatus for this function. There are four basic elements of speech that sounds, words, the arrangement of words into groups or sentences, and ending or other change in words that add something to the original meaning of words, for example, the change of “a” to “e” in “man”, “men”, and “g” to “d” in “god”, “dog”.

Mario Pei wrote:

“Words only stand for thoughts. They are not the thoughts themselves. This is proved by the fact that different languages have different words for the same thing. Words are symbols of thoughts”.⁷

In order to communicate with one another, humans use words which mean something and they must not mean so much or so little. But sometimes some words are meaningless, ambiguous, vague or incorrect in some conditions. The word is meaningless when it is unknown, when one cannot comprehend what it signifies, and when one does not see what its user attempts to say by means of it. The word is ambiguous when it means more than one thing and it has no clear signal of which meaning is intent. And the word is vague when it means something that is hazy.

William James stated that how the ambiguity of a word is crucial as follows:

“....The corpus of the dispute was a squirrel- a live squirrel supposed to be clinging to one side of a tree trunk; while over against the tree’s opposite side a human being was imagined to stand. This human witness tries to get sight of the squirrel by moving rapidly around the tree, but no matter how fast he goes, the squirrel moves as fast in the opposite direction, and always keeps the tree between himself and the man, so that never a glimpse of him is caught. The resultant metaphysical problem now is this: Does the man go round the squirrel or not? He goes round the tree, sure enough, and the squirrel is on the tree; but does he go round the squirrel?Mindful of the scholastic adage that whatever you meet a contradiction you must make a distinction, I immediately sought and found one, as follows: “Which party is right,” I said, “depends on what you practically mean by “going round” the squirrel. If you mean passing from the north of him to the east, then to the south, then to the west, and then to the north of him again, obviously the man does go round him, for he occupies these successive positions. But if on the contrary you mean being first in front of him, then on his left, and finally in front again, it is quite obvious that the man fails to go round him for by compensating movements the squirrel makes, he keeps his belly turned toward the man all the time, and his back turned away. Make the distinction, and there is no occasion for any further dispute. You are both right and both wrong, according as you conceive the verb “to go round” in one practical fashion or the other.”⁸

Meaning is ambiguous. Charles Morris, a leader in the field of semiotic, rejects the word “meaning” as not having the precision necessary for scientific analysis. Then Alston exemplifies the use of the word “mean” and its cognates to discuss about the confusion of the meaning of the word as follows:

“1. That is no mean accomplishment. (insignificant)

⁷ Mario Pei , All About Language, London, William Clowes and Sons, Limited, 1956, p-39

⁸ Robert T Harris and Jame L Jarrett, Language and Informal logic, New York, Longmans, Green And Co, 1958, p-93-94.

2. He was so mean to me. (cruel)
3. I mean to help him if I can. (intend)
4. The passage of this bill will mean the end of second class citizenship for vast area of our population. (result in)
5. Once again life has meaning for me. (significance)
6. What is the meaning of this? (explanation)
7. He just lost his job. That means that he will have to start writing letters of application all over again. (implies)⁹

According to Alston, there are three types of theories of meaning, namely, referential, ideational and behavioral theories. The referential theory identifies the meaning of an expression with that to which it refers or with the referential connection, the ideational theory with the ideas with which it is associated and the behavioral theory with the stimuli that evoke its utterance and the responses that it in turn evokes. In short, the referential theory of meaning hinges on the basic insight that language is used to talk about things, and the ideational and behavioral theories depend upon the basic insight that the words have the meaning they do only because of what human beings do when they use language. These theories emphasize aspects of what goes on in communication, in an effort to obtain the lectures that give linguistic units and the meaning they have.

Conclusion

Every human being uses at least one language. Although there are some clans who have no written language, there are no clans who have not spoken language. In everyday life, without language there is no understanding among people, and without understanding there is no chance of their being able to work together. If language that humans use to communicate each other, and transfer their thoughts to one another and to convey them from the mind of one man to that of another disappears, human race will sink back into barbarism or savagery, because of the lacking of the means of communication and transferring. But unfortunately, language, the nucleus of human civilization and thought, is not perfect and its ambiguity and vagueness make the philosophical crises and the pitfalls on the road to the truth. Human beings, thus, must formulate the ideal language that has one meaning for one word, whereby they will continue unfinished construction of Tower of Babel for human dignity.

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⁹ William P Alston, *Philosophy of Language*, New York, Prentice-Hall, INC, 1964 , p-10

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