

On language and reason | By Camille Kasavan

A Brief Study of the Language-Conscience Relationship

Reason is that which distinguishes the human from the animal; language does the same. As a means of communication, we know that language, with its finite structure and its abundance of varieties is at once necessary and impossible. The myth of the Tower of Babel, where the diversifying of languages from one to many creates the impossibility of building the Tower, showcases this innate impossibility of unity between specific languages; yet Language is present, in some form or other, in virtually every society. A child at birth is equipped to learn and emit any of the multitudes of sounds possible, and it is only through gradual learning that he learns to shed certain sounds and retain others. Once past a certain stage, a child's ability to acquire a new language naturally and without accent fades, and the older he gets, the more difficult it becomes. Language is a necessary part of life in society – he that finds himself deprived of it finds himself deprived of reason and freedom, as has been evidenced by the case of feral children found abandoned, existing without language and without reason or human emotion, surviving as an animal, no more. It would seem evident then that language is not merely an important but a crucial tool of society and the fully formed being – that language, in short, is necessary for reason and vice-versa. This would be ironclad if language always followed the rules of logic and rationality; however, there exist forms of language that seem to revoke this. On the one hand there exist certain indefinable *some things* that we feel more than we can define (hence the phrase, often used in excitement: “Words can't describe how it felt!”), and that are generally deemed *ineffable*; on the other hand, there exist experiments with language that, revolving around pure form and sound, seem to remove all traces of meaning. Can language exist then free of either syntax or semantics, subsisting only on one or the other? And, perhaps more importantly, are reason and language, language and reason, co-dependent? In short, does language exist independently from the conscience?

Language exists as a means of communication, a tool. Novelist and linguist Anthony Burgess defines it as “the link between a sound and a thought.” If this is true, and it would seem that it must be, then what would we do with those who would put thought over sound, or sound over thought? Language then can be viewed within three major different categories: as primarily a structure, in and of itself, as primarily meanings, in and of themselves, or as a melding of the two, forming a tool that allows the communication of ideas, and so of reason.

If language exists first and foremost as a structure, then one thing is prevalent: that *all* languages are fundamentally structure. Noam Chomsky's theory of generative grammar would prove the point: Chomsky's universal grammar, putting forward the very basic idea that all languages share at their base a fundamental form (although not necessarily the same fundamental form) suggests a universality and wholeness about language itself that strips it of its surface differences and makes it one. Language,

posits Chomsky, is one *structure* – the rest is minor. Although with the diversity of languages comes a certain diversity of structures, the fact remains that all languages exist within their own constructed form, not in any form of void. Language then, as one whole, logical, universal, *formal* structure would seem to exist then outside of humankind, within nature itself. If language exists as a formal structure, and formalism exists within nature, then language exists within nature, independently of the conscience. Or, existing parallel to the conscience, within nature, language, it might be said, does not, as with the conscience, attempt to transcend it, but subsides within it as a form. If language exists independently of the conscience, as a mere structure, one must begin to concede the fact that language and thought, language and meaning, are not necessarily entwined.

However, language as a concentration on form exists outside of the notion of a formal structure as well. Experiences with form, in poetry notably, would seem to put structure and syntax before meaning to such an extent that paradoxically the work itself may seem absurd and illogical. One finds these experiments within the works of poet Gertrude Stein for one, who sought to deconstruct language to its core, to put the focus back on words and structure and the necessary bones of language, concentrating on the shape and joints of sentences – determiners, pronouns, articles both definite and indefinite – that give life and meaning to nouns, adjectives and verbs. Her first poetry collection, *Tender Buttons*, showcases in its very title this structural separation from meaning. A button cannot be tender, we know that, and yet in associating the noun and the adjective, we get a feeling, and intangible understanding of something that is possible only in language.

Famously, Lewis Carroll's poem “Jabberwocky” puts form and structure, as well as sound, before overt meaning and ideas. The first and famous stanza in itself has given birth to multiple examinations. Carroll writes:

“Twas brillig, and the slithy toves

Did gyre and gimble in the wabe:

All mimsy were the borogoves,

And the mome raths outgrabe.”

There are eleven newly created words here, all of them replacing either nouns, adjectives, or verbs, and yet we get a sense, a strong sense even, of meaning. We can identify which words are adjectives (brillig, slithy), which are nouns (toves, wabe), which are verbs (gyre, gimble), all thanks to the placement of the words within the sentence, not the word itself. And yet, in spite of this, or perhaps even because of it, one achieves a greater sense of half-formed ideas behind the words, leaving analysis open to more focused and language based examination. There is a reason why

the poem and others like it have provoked so much interest – language is at its base a structure. To be able to use that structure, devoid of seeming meaning, and still give it substance is, in and of itself, the use and creation of language in its purest form.

Because structure and semantics, as tempting as it is to want to separate the two, are at their core enmeshed. “Jabberwocky” proves this to a certain extent; nowhere is it more evident than in Anthony Burgess' *A Clockwork Orange*. Burgess plays magic with words – he manages to take the *structure* of language, add to it his own specific words, always in the same category, and by consistency of use manages to attain the reader's comprehension. He uses preexisting conventions of language. For example, consider: “The Korova Milkbar was a milk-plus mesto.” There is only one invented word in this sentence, “mesto”, and we automatically attribute it to “Korova Milkbar,” letting us know that mesto is a certain kind of place; however, perhaps more interestingly, it is the addition of “milk-plus” that is striking – both are words that we know, but in using what is generally a noun (milk) as an adjective, combine with the “plus” which automatically suggests to us the idea of more, Burgess reinvents the way language can be used. In *Clockwork Orange*, we grasp instinctively the way words should fit together, and what the sentences mean. If then communication of thought can be achieved through a well melded crafting of syntax and semantics, and if syntax + semantics = language, then language exists as what we have viewed it from the beginning: representation of thought.

Language needs thought then, but does thought need language as well? Is language merely a representation of thought, or is language thought in and of itself? Can one *think* without language? In his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Ludwig Wittgenstein attempts to define what a logically constructed language can and can't be used to say. He posits that language, thought, and reality share a common structure entirely demonstrable in logical terms, and as a result comes to the final conclusion that “What we cannot speak about we must consign to silence.” Wittgenstein concedes the existence of certain things that cannot be said, names them “mystical”, and lets them lie. However, if there are – and there *are* – things “we cannot speak,” we must also accept that we can, however, conceive of them. These things that cannot be talked about, these *ineffable* things, prove at once and paradoxically the necessity of language towards thought. Because it is the absence of the language necessary to describe these “ineffables” that makes them present, and formulate them into thought. The language, even when it is not there, draws an outline around the thought, so that ultimately language is thought, and, perhaps more crucially, thought is language.