Through language can we act on reality?

「我們能透過語言對現實有所行動嗎」

Recently there were some terrorist attacks in Europe. As a European citizen, I naturally talk about it, write about on social network. I felt two contradictory feelings. I felt bad because of lack of reaction to other attacks in other countries and I felt bad because of helplessness of my own words for Europe. There was a mixed feeling that people talked too much or not enough without influences and shed too much light on something by talking too much. Can people interfere with reality with what is only a sign? Can we act on reality through language? “To act” is “to produce a sensible effect”. It implies an object. “To act on something” is “to produce an action with a real influence” on this object, to modify this object. The topic questions the power of words on the world. Yet, we shouldn’t forget that reality is the set of existing being, among which language it-self is included. The problem would be to define reality on one side and language on the other as separated items. If the main function of language is to communicate, then human can act differently compared to a non-communication context. It means communication make that behaviors change, and consequently the world surrounding humans is modified. Yet, is there a DIRECT modification on reality? What would be this modification? A modulation? What are the functions of language? What kind of action is to talk?

1. Language versus reality
2. Language disconnected from reality and its reason

Usually we tend to oppose language to reality, as well as we oppose the abstract world to the concrete one. When Hamlet ironically answers “words, words, words…”to Polonius questions about his reading, he means that language has no importance. There cannot be any consequences from written or pronounced statements. The reason is that language is first a faculty. This faculty consists in using one specific language, speaking. It is a system of communication elaborated by humans. Language is what allow us to make other understand our own thinking and own desire. Through language we create a direct link between us, the world and the others. On the other side, reality is translated as what as a material existence. So it is not a concept, but a thing, a fact. Reality is opposed to illusion, invention, and appearance. Plato and materialist philosophies are in opposition. However, they would agree on the specific nature of reality. For the Athenian, reality is made of transformations, changes, and hence illusion. Language is imperfect tool to record change. Plato showed his distrust toward language in his dialogues, *Gorgias* and the *Sophist*. More recently, Materialist philosophy, by giving to matter the fundamental essence of nature, makes that language is nothing but a mechanical product of the mind, an epiphenomenon whose purpose is strictly exchanges. Reality is not words, but a fact given to our perception. Therefore, on one side, reality is what is primarily given to us, on the other side, language is a tool to signify reality. It seems the relation is well balanced and simple. It seems at first sight that the main function of language is to translate reality, not to modify or to distort reality.

1. The problem is heavier than expected

Yet, the problem is that there are many case of distortion that changed reality. There are advertisings that change our behavior, political manipulation that led to specific decisions. For instance, in 1954, Guatemalan coup d'état was a covert operation carried out by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) that deposed the democratically elected Guatemalan President Jacobo Árbenz and ended the Guatemalan Revolution of 1944–1954. Code-named Operation PBSUCCESS installed the military dictatorship of Carlos Castillo Armas, the first in a series of U.S.-backed authoritarian rulers in Guatemala. Guatemalan Revolution was disliked by the United States government, which was predisposed by the Cold War to see it as communist. The United Fruit Company (UFC), whose highly profitable business had been affected by the end to exploitative labor practices in Guatemala, engaged in an influential lobbying campaign to persuade the U.S. to overthrow the Guatemalan government. In fact, the U.S. government drew exaggerated conclusions about the extent of communist influence from the presence of a small number of communists among Árbenz's advisers. The use of propaganda radio played an important role in dis-information. In this case, we must question the role of language and its practical power.

1. The origin of the problem: the functions of language

Following Jackobson, we must investigate the various functions of language. Roman Jakobson defined six functions of language, according to which an effective act of verbal communication can be described. Each of the functions has an associated factor. The referential function: corresponds to the factor of Context and describes a situation, object or mental state. The descriptive statements of the referential function can consist of both definite descriptions and deictic words, e.g. "The autumn leaves have all fallen now." Similarly, the referential function is associated with an element whose true value is under questioning especially when the truth value is identical in both the real and assumptive universe. The poetic function: focuses on "the message for its own sake" (the code itself, and how it is used) and is the operative function in poetry as well as slogans. The emotive (alternatively called "expressive" or "affective") function: relates to the Addresser (sender) and is best exemplified by interjections and other sound changes that do not alter the denotative meaning of an utterance but do add information about the Addresser's (speaker's) internal state, e.g. "Wow, what a view!". The conative function: engages the Addressee (receiver) directly and is best illustrated by vocatives and imperatives, e.g. "Tom! Come inside and eat!". The phatic function: is language for the sake of interaction and is therefore associated with the Contact/Channel factor. The Phatic Function can be observed in greetings and casual discussions of the weather, particularly with strangers. It also provides the keys to open, maintain, verify or close the communication channel: "Hello?", "Ok?", "Hummm", "Bye"... The metalingual (alternatively called "metalinguistic" or "reflexive") function: is the use of language (what Jakobson calls "Code") to discuss or describe itself. The six functions largely overpass the simple idea of exchanges.

1. Transition

This implies that language cannot be reduced to communication. Communication is one of the function of language. It also means that there is no clear cut between language and reality. Language has a power to generate a reality. The question is what is the nature of power and what are its consequence.

1. Language and power
2. From sociology and history point of view (negative/positive)

No one believes in neutrality of words. We can always say that we didn’t mean something, yet saying something always leaves some traces. Is the action of producing words having a power instead of the words themselves? It depends in where is the level power. To be able to command to reality implies: a) a sociological power which command to human reality, b) a psychological power which dominate someone else spirit, c) a physical power which acts on object, d) or a spiritual power which consists in creating by the Verb (Genesis, Veda).

In fact, nobodies doubt that language is a remarkable tool of domination, especially in politic. For instance, the Nazis orchestrated a massive propaganda campaign to win the loyalty and cooperation of people. The Nazi Propaganda Ministry, directed by Dr. Joseph Goebbels, took control of all forms of communication in Germany: newspapers, magazines, books, public meetings, and rallies, art, music, movies, and radio.  The control of media and Hitler’s skill for radio speech were denounced by Hannah Arendt as one of the symptom of loss of democracy in *the Origin of Totalitarianism*. However, this phenomena, despite new dimensions, is not new in history of cultures. Rhetorical art consists in using all the resources of language to seduce, persuade, convince and convert people to one’s words. This was the case of the Greek Sophists. They taught the art of speaking and writing in the Western world prior to any other philosophical or rhetorical figure. The Sophists were notorious for their claims to teach virtue and excellence, and particularly for accepting fees for teaching. Now, a sophism became a specious argument for displaying ingenuity in reasoning or for deceiving someone. That is a sophist is considered a person who reasons with clever but fallacious and deceptive arguments. Everywhere where there are social groups (clan, cast, tribe, society, group, community, etc.) and thus social power, there is a possibility to command and thus there is manipulation through language.

The power of group leader is such that there is only one word to say and the word becomes action. Words can touch the heart, provoke, lead reaction. They can hurt, create violence as well as it can heal, or relieve. For example, “Ich bin ein Berliner”, when pronounced by president John Fitzgerald Kennedy in 1963 was a great morale boost for West Berliners, who lived in an enclave deep inside East Germany and feared a possible East German occupation. It aimed to underline the support of the United States for West Germany 22 months after Soviet-supported East Germany erected the Berlin Wall to prevent mass emigration to the West. The message was aimed as much at the Soviets as it was at Berliners and was a clear statement of U.S. policy in the wake of the construction of the Berlin Wall. Words have impact on masses. They indeed have also impact on individuals. Here, the impact is studied through the prism of psychology.

1. From psychology point of view

In psychology words are never insignificant as they can cure. Language has been an integral component of the psychoanalytic framework since its inception, as evidenced by the fact that Anna O. whose treatment by Freud via the cathartic method influenced the later development of psychoanalytic therapy. Freud referred to the method of treatment as the "talking cure". It is impossible to escape from the power of words as words are in fact performative and silence is always meaningful. Watzlawick’s first axiom ‘*One cannot* not *communicate’* is the best expression of it. Every behavior is a form of communication. Because behavior does not have a counterpart (there is no anti-behavior), it is impossible not to communicate. Even if communication is being avoided, that is a form of communication. “Symptom strategy” is ascribing our silence to something beyond our control and makes no communication impossible. Examples of symptom strategy are sleepiness, headaches, and drunkenness. Even facial expressions, digital communication, and being silent can be analyzed as communication by a receiver.

Let’s end with a last example. We are sensitive to shame, calumny and praise because we identify ourselves to the content of sentence made by other. This psychological fact was also analyzed by philosophers. There is no question of power and language if there is no otherness.

1. The fundamental reason, from philosophy point of view

It means that signs define a subject and we tend naturally to believe in the picture of ourselves given by other. Sartre uses the term being-for-others to describe the interpersonal dimension of being, which acknowledges the existence of 'Others' and how we encounter them within the world at large. Indeed, an individual is rarely alone in the world and is constantly confronted by the existence of 'the Other' in body or mind. Although Sartre considers that 'other people are basically the most important means we have in ourselves for our own knowledge of ourselves. By figuring in a world of others, the basis of human relations is responsible for losing control and understanding of my own being. The concept of being-for-others involves a complex interplay of objectivity and subjectivity; as a result, Sartre's pessimistic conclusion is that our primary relationships with others are based on conflict: resulting in the maxim 'Hell is other people.' Without this identification process calumny and praise would have no effect on us. So there is a ‘magic’ dimension of language, a dimension that makes of language a spell: it has the power to give birth to representation different from reality for the world and for oneself. It has the power of illusion and definition.

1. Language is reality
2. The linguist lesson

If there is a power of words, then it means that words have a relation with reality. Yet, modern linguistic with Ferdinand de Saussure investigated language as a structured system of linguistic signs or linguistic units that organize the mass of confused thoughts that fill our minds. De Saussure explained the idea grounding his theory of language being made up of linguistic units that are composed of two parts – a concept or meaning and a sound-image – respectively, ‘the signified’ and ‘signifier’. Saussure also explains that the combination of ‘the signifier’ and ‘the signified’ is arbitrary; i.e., any ‘signifier’ or ‘sound-image’ – any string of language sounds – can be created to signify a particular concept. He taught us that relation between significant and signifier in the sign is arbitrary. This means that words have no attach to reality. The word is not the thing. Language is an intermediate between sensible and intelligible. It is first a matter of perception and intellection through otherness, not a matter of reality.

1. The structuralism answer

Language is a place of transition where thoughts can express themselves. Critiquing our commonsense ideal of a pure language that would transparently encode pre-existing thoughts, Merleau-Ponty argues that instituted language (the conventional system of language as an established set of meanings and rules) is derivative from a more primordial function of language as genuinely creative, expressive, and communicative. The fact that we can express our thoughts makes that language is above the concrete reality. We think of the world as a set of relations and differences between words. Signs function diacritically, through their lateral relations and differentiations, rather than through a one-to-one correspondence with a conventionally established meaning. Ultimately, signification happens through the differences between terms in a referential system that lacks any fixed or positive terms. The ultimate context for the operation of language is effective communication with others, by which new thoughts can be expressed and meanings shared. Language is in fact transcendent and somehow creates reality. The recurrence of the word ‘blue’ is on this point an object lesson. In 19th century, the scholar William Gladstone, noticed that, in the *Odyssey,*Homer describes the ocean as "wine-dark", but he never uses the word 'blue'. A few years later, a philologist called Lazarus Geiger decided to follow up on this discovery, and analyzed ancient Icelandic, Hindu, Chinese, Arabic and Hebrew texts, to find no mention of the word blue. Recently, Jules Davidoff, a psychologist from Goldsmiths University of London, worked with the Himba tribe from Namibia. In their language, there is no word for blue and no real distinction between green and blue. To test whether that meant they couldn't actually see blue, he showed them a circle with 11 green squares and one obvious blue square. But the Himba tribe struggled to tell Davidoff which of the squares was a different color to the others. It seems that reality is perceived and organized through words. Words are perception of reality.

Conclusion.

To speak about language and reality is in fact to speak of language and perception. The answer depends on what we define as real. Language seems unreal as it is made of signs disconnected from material things. Yet language has the power of manipulation and the power to make things happened. It makes that what we name reality is an endless becoming. So, language is in a way a producer of reality. It has the power of definition of what real is and what individuals are. Words and things are separated and the reason is that words transcend reality. If language can act on reality, then how many voices do we need to get some changes?

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最近在歐洲有一些恐怖攻擊。作為一名歐洲公民，我很自然地會去討論它，在社交網站上面去發表相關的文章。我感受到兩種互相矛盾的情感。我因為對於發生在其他國家的恐攻並沒有同樣的反應而感到罪惡，也因為我自己的文字對於歐洲現狀的無用而覺得無力。這裡有種混雜的情感，人們沒有影響力的狀況下說太多或說的不夠，或者是因為說得太多而透漏不該透漏的東西。人們可以用只不過是符號的東西干涉現實嗎？我們能透過語言對現實有所行動嗎？「行動」就是去「產生可被認知的效果」。它意味著物件的存在。「對什麼東西有所行動」就是去對這個物件「進行一個具有真正影響力的行為」，去改變這個物件。題目質疑了文字在這個世界上的影響力。但是，我們不能忘了現實就是一個包含了所有存在的集合，語言本身也被包含在這之中。問題存在於要用不同的方法在一邊去定義現實而在另一邊要去定義語言。如果語言的主要功能是交流，那麼和沒有交流的狀況相比人類能夠有不同的行為。這代表了交流能給改變行為，並且連帶地改變圍繞著人類的世界。但是，這算是對現實的直接改動嗎？這會是一個什麼樣的改動？一種調配嗎？語言的功能有哪些？什麼樣子的行為是去說？

1. 語言與現實

通常我們習於對比語言與現實，就像我們對比抽象世界與具體世界(莎士比亞, 哈姆雷特, 「文字、文字、文字)。原因是語言首先是能力。這個能力由一種語言組成，說話。這是個由人類發展的交流系統。語言是讓他人了解我們的想法與願望的工具。透過語言我們在我們與世界和他人之間建立一條直接的聯繫。而在另外一面，現實被看作是物質的存在。所以他不是一個概念，而是一樣東西，一個事實。現實與幻象、發明或是表像(柏拉圖)是相反的。現實並非文字，而是從感知獲得的證據。因此從一個角度來看，現實主要是被給予我們的，而從另外一個角度，語言是用來象徵現實的工具。這個關係看起來既平衡又簡單。從第一眼看起來語言的主要功能似乎是表達現實，而非改變或扭曲現實。

但是，問題在於存在事實上許多扭曲的案例改變了現實。有些廣告改變了我們的行為，政治操作導向特定的決定(1954年瓜地馬拉的PBSSUCCESS行動)。所以我們必須先質疑語言的各種不同功能。(雅各布森)

1. 語言與力量

沒有人相信文字是中立的。我們總是說我們並不是那個意思，但是再說些什麼的時候總是會留下一些蛛絲馬跡。產生文字的行為是否才是力量的來源而非文字本身？這取決於力量的層級。要能夠號令現實隱含著：a) 一個能夠號令人類的社會力量、b) 一個支配他人精神的心理力量、c)足以影像物件的物理力量、d)由動詞構成來創造的靈性力量(創世紀、吠陀)。事實上沒有人質疑語言是個出色的支配工具，尤其是在政治當中(希特勒對媒體的使用)。修辭學油使用語言的各種資源組成，包括誘惑、勸說、說服、用語言轉變人類(詭辯家)。任何一個存在社會團體的地方(氏族、部落、社會、團體、社群…等等)就有社會力量，就存在使用語言來支配或操縱的機會。團體領導人的力量就在於他只要說一個字，文字就會化為現實行動。文字能感動人心、挑釁或引發反應。他們可以傷害及創造暴力但同時也能治癒或緩解(“我是柏林人”, 甘迺迪)。在心理學中文字從來都不是不重要的東西，他可以治療(弗洛依德，或是安慰劑效應)。要逃離文字的力量是不可能的因為文字事實上是一種表現而且甚至沉默也帶有意義(瓦茲拉威克)。讓我們最後用一個例子作結。我們對羞恥、誹謗及讚美很敏感因為我們用他人句子中帶有的意義來認同我們自己。這代表符號定義一個主體而且我們很自然地去相信由他人給我們的形象(沙特)。如果沒有這個認同的過程，誹謗及讚美對我們應該毫無效果。所以語言有一種魔法般的層面，一個讓語言變成咒語的層面。他具有虛幻及定義的力量。

1. 語言就是現實

如果文字具有力量，這代表了文字與現實之間具有某種關係。但是，由索緒爾開創的現代語言學告訴我們象徵物及其所指之間的關係是隨意產生的。這代表文字並非黏在現實上的。文字不是東西。語言是介於可感知與可認知之間的中間物。這是一個思想能夠表達自己的轉乘站(龐帝)。我們能夠表達我們想法的事實使得語言位於具體現實之上。語言是超越並某種程度上創造現實的(藍色的例子)。我們把世界想成是一個充滿著不同文字之間的關係得集合(結構主義。德希達)。

結論

去談論語言與現實實際上就是去談論語言與知覺。答案取決於我們如何去定義真實。語言看起來好像不真實因為他是由與實際物體脫節的象徵所構成。但是語言具有操作的力量以及讓事情發生的力量。他讓我們稱之為現實的東西無盡地生成。所以語言是現實的生產者。他具有定義什麼是真實以及什麼是個體的力量。文字與東西是不同的，原因就在文字超越現實。如果語言能夠對現實有所行動，那麼我們需要多少聲音才能得到一些改變？