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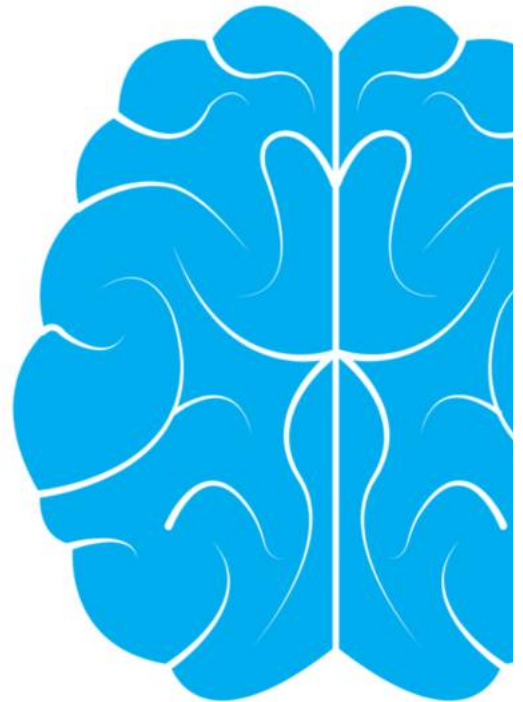
Language Notes

Post 6/17

TOK NOTES

WOKs: Language, Sense Perception, Emotion,
Reason, Imagination, Faith, Intuition and
Memory

AOKs: Arts, Ethics, History, Human Sciences,
Indigenous Knowledge Systems, Mathematics,
Natural Sciences, and Religious Knowledge
Systems



ToK Notes

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Language Quotes

- "How often misused words generate misleading thoughts" (Herbert Spencer)
- "The limits of my language stand for the limits of my world" (Ludwig Wittgenstein)
- "If thought corrupts language, language can also corrupt thought." (George Orwell)
- "Language was given to man to disguise his thoughts." (Talleyrand)
- "Who does not know another language, does not know his own." (Goethe)
- "Language was the real innovation in our biological evolution; everything since has just made our words travel faster or last longer." (Steven Pinker)
- "Man is the animal that speaks. Understanding language is thus the key to understanding man." (Thomas Szasz)

Language Definitions

As with just about anything we come across in ToK, language can be defined in multiple ways.

- “Language is **the expression of ideas by means of speech-sounds** combined into words. Words are combined into sentences, this combination answering to that of ideas into thoughts” (Henry Sweet, English phonetician and Language scholar)
- “A language is **a system of arbitrary vocal symbols** by means of which a social group cooperates” (Bernard Bloch and George L. Trager, American Linguists)
- “The **method of human communication, either spoken or written**, consisting of the use of words in a structured and conventional way” (Current Oxford Dictionary Definition).
- “The system of **words or signs that people use to express thoughts and feelings** to each other” (Merriam Webster Definition).



While definitions of language may differ, there are many characteristics of language that remain universal.

Characteristics of Language

- The ability to use and understand language is **specific to humans**. There are no other living organism that possess the ability to communicate through the use of language.
- Language is governed by sets of rules. In order for a language to be effective, everyone must be able to understand it. Thus the need for rules. However the application of those rules are infinite. Noam Chomsky once said: *“Language is a process of free creation; its laws and principles are fixed, but the manner in which the principles of generation are used is free and infinitely varied. Even the interpretation and use of words involves a process of free creation.”*
- Language is constantly changing. As there is always need to describe new ideas and feeling, the rules of language as well as the words used in language is constantly changing.
- Language is sent and received. All language is rendered useless, unless it has an audience . *“All speech, written or spoken, is a dead language, until it finds a willing and prepared hearer.”* B Yeats (Irish Poet)



Symbolic Representation of Language

- One reason why language is so effective, is because of its symbolic nature. Sounds and images relate to things or ideas to which there is no necessary connection. For example, there is no real reason why a .
- A great example of this is the use of male and female images to represent male and female restrooms.
- The two images on the right do not have any actual meaning. They are just an image of what we interpret as a male and a female. But when placed on a bathroom door, it indicates male and female restrooms.
- It is not the actual sign or symbol that creates the meaning, but instead the connection that we have relating that image to it's connotation.



Four Theories of Language

1. Definition Theory

This theory states that all words must be defined by a commonly accepted meaning.

Problems with this theory:

- Is it possible to properly define a word? Or all individual words for that matter?
- Who has the power and ability to define and create an accepted meaning of all words?

2. Denotation Theory

This theory states that all words must have meaning and must refer to something that exists.

Problems with this theory:

- What about words that do not necessarily exists, such as words linked to emotion or feelings?
- How about things that people do not necessarily agree exist? Such as god or unicorns.

3. Image Theory

This theory states that the meaning of a word is the mental image it creates.

Problems with this theory:

- As people perceive events differently (related to sense perception) not everyone will have the same mental image in their head.

4. Practice Theory

This theory states that the meaning of a word is something you must learn how to use correctly.

Problems with this theory:

- Who determines how to use language correctly?

Issues of Language

1. Language is ambiguous

Vague Language:

For Example:

- John cycled **very far**
- She makes **a lot of** money.
- Zach and Sarah are **close**

In the sentences above, the words that are bolded are vague. It is impossible to determine **how far** John cycled or **how much** she makes.

- We can only know the true meaning of these words if given context or explanation.

Words with second meanings:

The true primary meaning of a word is called it's **denotation**.

While the secondary meaning of the word is called it's **connotation**.

- People always have different connotations of words because of their experiences with it. For example, a teacher might have negative connotations of the word "marking" as they associate it with work. While someone is an athlete might have positive connotations of the word as it refers to *marking* someone on defense.

Figurative Language:

The use of figurative language is a great example of how language can be ambiguous. Think of the phrase "*We killed that school at the game yesterday*".

- Many people could infer the use of figurative language in this sentence, and understand the use of the metaphor.
- However there is no indication that figurative language is being used, and for someone who is still learning for example, could interpret the sentence *literally*.

Sarcasm:

The use of sarcasm is becoming ever more common in today's language. For example:

- "You seem happy today"
- "Nice weather, eh?"
- "That was really helpful"
- "This is sooo much fun!"

All of these phrases could be interpreted in two ways: the literal way or in a sarcastic way.

Take the phrase "*That was really helpful*" for example. How could one know whether this phrase is literal or sarcastic? They couldn't. The language is **ambiguous**.

- The only way that we could understand the true meaning of this phrase would be if we had more context or understanding.

2. Language Requires Knowledge and Context

This closely relates the ambiguity of language.

- In order to fully understand language you must be **knowledgeable** about the rules and lexis of a language.
- In order to understand language context is always required. This is evidence by the examples above.
- For example in the sarcasm section, there was the sentence "*That was really helpful*". It is impossible to understand if this sentence is literal or sarcastic. Only with **context** can someone fully understand the meaning of this sentence.



3. Language is constantly changing and evolving

Language is constantly changing and evolving and there are many reasons for this:

- Interaction with other languages. As the world is becoming more globalized, languages are being shared and mixed. Many words of the English language have Greek and Latin roots. It can be seen that civilizations that are isolated see slow language growth.
- As society advances, new ideas and objects are constantly being invented, therefore changing language. The shortening of language (omg, ttyl, etc.) as well as the addition of new words (selfie, yolo, etc.)

Sources

Alttext. Lojban Cartoon. <https://m.xkcd.com/191/>



Say something
interesting...

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2 Comments



scott bird

I believe Theory 2 should read 'Denotation' rather than 'Detonation' but I do like the language point that even that draws out - see if the students are actively participating or not. The 4th theory - Practice theory - is a hot one in the world of second language teaching where I come from - who has the right to be so prescriptive? Yet, look at all the international language testing systems and the prescription that they demand despite listening to professors who say the opposite about English: as a lingua franca in the world today it is quite naturally evolving and is taking on new forms of speech ... but that won't help those students in those international tests like IELTS and TOEFL. Those institutions won't evolve for some time.

on Jan 29, 2017 [Reply](#)



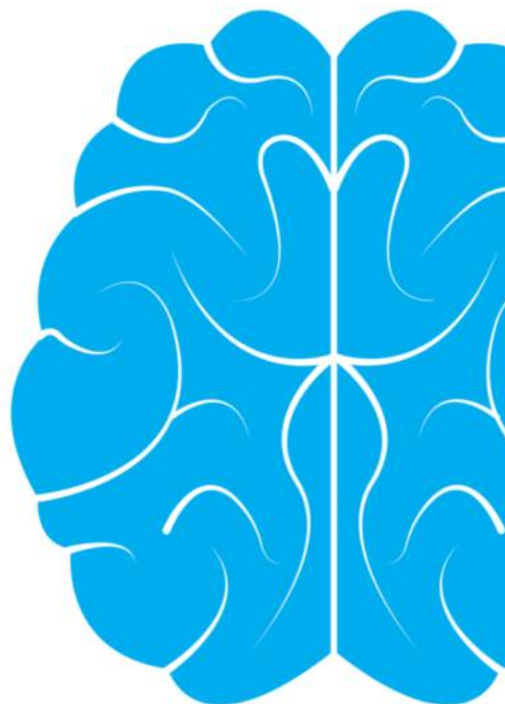
Tim Woods

Thanks Scott. Just fixed that. Thanks for those insights.

on Jan 29, 2017 [Reply](#)

TOK NOTES

Memory



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Tim Woods

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