

TOK Assignment Semester 1

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Word Count: 2912

Directions:

**Pick a quote related to language and meaning, and discuss its significance.
The word limit for the essay is 3000 words.**

Chosen Quote:

“Thus, to speak a language is to commit ourselves to the double indeterminacy due to our reliance both on its formalism and on our own continued reconsideration of this formalism in its bearing on experience. For just as, owing to the ultimately tacit character of all our knowledge, we remain ever unable to say all that we know, so also, in view of the tacit character of meaning, we can never quite know what is implied in what we say.”

Michael Polanyi, Personal Knowledge. Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy, The University of Chicago Press (1958, 2015) Page 95.

I agree with Michael Polanyi's contention that language, the bridge we utilize for the transport of ideas from our mind to that of the other, is a very feeble, narrow and an unreliable bridge hanging across two very tall and faraway places. When you read the description of the said bridge, some might have pictured a bridge in the middle of the jungle, connecting people on either side of a valley or perhaps, you pictured a bridge connecting two large buildings in a metropolitan area. You could, if you were being imaginative, also have picture a literal bridge connecting the brains of two people. This should illustrate the point that I shall address later in this essay.

I shall begin by addressing the limitations of language and shed some light on its causes while building up on Jean-Jacques Lacan's insight into the matter and contrasting it with the view of the Buddhist Epistemologists. I will then go on to show why I do not hold Polanyi's view that all knowledge is ultimately tacit in nature and argue for a modified version of his theory which permits the necessary cases of Phenomenological and reflective personal knowledge. Then, I will consider and respond to arguments that challenge the credibility of scientific knowledge that arise against the backdrop of the possibly tacit nature of all knowledge. I will then evaluate the role of philosophers in preventing this crisis of the sciences. After that, I will, following Michael Foucault's footsteps, discuss how language and discourse structures are not just a challenge to our complete understanding of the world around us but also, how they are a threat to people who do not 'fit the norm' as is deemed by the formalistic structure of language. I will then discuss how biases and stereotypes may persist within society through the means of faulty language even though they have been proven untrue over time. I will formally elucidate the fallacy that lies beneath these propagating stereotypes and show how it is rooted in language while showing how intellectual vices are a major contributor to it. Then, I will discuss both the merits and demerits of intentionally vague texts read by the intellectual virtuous (for e.g., a pragmatic seeker of practical wisdom) and the intellectual vicious (for e.g., a demagogue) respectively by considering the views of Ernest Sosa and Martha Nussbaum. Finally, I will suggest ways to preserve the meaning for a longer time and how the art of honest debate (*vāda*) is an important aspect of it.

The flaw at the heart of Language – Lacan

Language is not an ideal system for communicating ideas since there is actual loss of valuable information when it is communicated across the bridge. The receiver (henceforth, audience) may not have the complete context (including but not limited to, the immediate context before the conveyed message, ideological and intellectual background of the conveyor (henceforth, speaker), personal experiences of the speaker which motivate their views) to understand the entire point and may just be left with a partial understanding, that is to say that the speaker meaning and the audience meaning may not match. This very real possibility is the main concern of this essay. Additionally, it is not the case that words always refer to the same thing or through the same signified. Jean-Jacques Lacan posited the foundational concept of the Signifier, Signified and the Referent in the Philosophy of Language. According to Lacan, the Signifier is private while the Signified and the Referent are public. Only you are aware of what the Signifier is for you so it is your own private history, to use Gilbert Ryle's words. As an analogy, if one were to be looking at the moon through a telescope, the moon would be the referent, the image on the lens would be the signified (since anyone can come and see it) and the image that is formed on the observer's retina is the signifier (private to the individual). The jump from the Signified to the Signifier is greatly reductive in nature, in the sense that it gets rid of the connections between the individuals' actual lived experience and the object of that experience.

It is also a possibility for the audience to know the referent of the speaker's talk while not realising what it is. Imagine a scenario where the speaker is talking about rap culture and he talks of 'HOV' (another name for Jay-Z or Sean Carter). The audience not whom HOV refers to, misses out on all of the later information even though they are aware who Jay-Z or Sean Carter is. That is to say, if the speaker had said the same things about Sean Carter, the audience would have been able to make the

connection that Sean Carter, the signified, refers to Jay-Z, the referent and they would have been able to grasp the information.

The converse is also possible. The audience might be uncertain as to what the speaker says when she (all pronouns are implied; it is just convenient to stick to one) says we must be ready to sacrifice our happiness for our ‘community’. The audience and speaker could have totally different ideas of how broad the word community really is. One might argue that we just aren’t specifying things well enough in these examples which is why we run into this problem. However, this is a fundamental issue at the core of language. This issue becomes even more pronounced when we consider movement through time. As Lacan points out, “The signifier slides over the signified.” Which is to say that what a word means today may not be the same in the upcoming century.

Opposition from the Buddhist Epistemologists

We shall consider a opposition to this from the Buddhist Epistemologists who had posited the concept of the *linga* and *lingin* which is quite similar to the idea of the Signifier and the Signified except for the fact that they did not have a specific doctrine that expressed the changing relationship between *linga* and *lingin*. For them, *lingin* had to logically follow from the *lingin* in a deterministic manner. So, if they were to be considered right, only one of the two problems Polanyi poses about language would hold up. It would only be language’s reliance on formalism (since the Buddhists deemed it to be unchanging). However, we can defend the Lacanian hypothesis by calling to a counter-example which shows that this phenomenon has happened before.

The spatial and temporal context play a major role. The Nazi symbol, or the *Swastika*, was being utilized for totally different religious purposes before the Nazis took it up. Since then, the connotations associated with the symbol have been greatly altered. However, spatially speaking, if one were to visit certain small towns in South-East Asia where the people may be oblivious to the Nazi use of their symbol, they would have a completely different idea of what the symbol stands for.

The prospect of non-tacit knowledge

While I agree with Polanyi’s major idea, I do not hold that it applies to all knowledge like Polanyi says. From Polanyi’s quote, it is quite clear that the propositions and arguments he puts forward are for knowledge that arises from conversation and argumentation however, in the end he concludes that all knowledge is ultimately tacit in nature. This, to me points out there is an hidden premise which while the quote does not explicitly state, must be assumed to reach the conclusion Polanyi does.

P1: Language-speakers commit themselves to indeterminacy because they are reliant on language’s formalism and their own continuous reconsideration of this formalism

(Hidden) P2: All Knowledge-seeking processes involve the use of language.

Modus ponendo ponens, C1: All Knowledge is ultimately tacit in character.

This hidden P2 is problematic. If we are to consider the 6 *pramanas* (means of knowing) according to Nyaya School in Indian Philosophy, we shall find that only one of them, *Śabda*, is conversational in nature insofar as it involves the use of language. It is clear that there are other means of knowing things other than merely engaging in arguments. Perhaps, one may not be able to do meaningfully convey that knowledge in a way that is perfectly determinate but that shall not mean that the observer (speaker) would be not able to attain meaningful knowledge for herself. I shall draw a distinction between collective knowledge-seeking endeavours and personal

knowledge-seeking endeavours here. In a personal knowledge seeking endeavour, one is not as concerned about advancing other's knowledge as she is for herself. One might engage in Phenomenological reflection by bracketing all of their contention about how the world should be and engage in the activity of epoché to just see the world for what it is and to truly understand and gain knowledge about the lived experience. Here, the person is not trying to categorize things they observe, they are not using language in a way that needs for there to be a jump from the signifier to the signified. They are just observing what is, in a descriptive and not normative manner and since this is all taking place within the personal history of the observer, there is no indeterminacy because of the language.

One may however skeptically argue that there is very limited knowledge that can be meaningfully gained without engaging in dialogue. I would agree with this. The majority of the modern scientific method is a collective knowledge-seeking endeavour. And as with any collective endeavour, a meaningful language is required to communicate and coordinate the progress that is being made amongst the individuals of the community. This is where the crisis of the sciences begins. Since the sciences have now gone into such depth in formulating theories that tell us about the world, we cannot observe most of the things we are now studying with merely the help of our senses or *pramanas*. We require special instruments and setups with professionals and scientists across the world, focusing on studying very specific and niche areas which together constitute the entirety of the scope of the natural sciences. There is a dire need for interdisciplinary work amongst the various sub-disciplines with the sciences so as to expand the boundaries of our understanding. However, the language would now pose a problem. Since every field within the sciences has been working on their specific object of studying for large time periods ranging from a couple centuries for the emerging sciences to millennia for some, they all have a long chain of connotations behind the terms that they utilize. However, if a cognitive scientist, a neuroscientist, and a psychologist were to come together to study the phenomenon that goes on behind our consciousness in much detail, they would require a consensus on what the word 'consciousness' or 'qualia' means. This is where philosophers come in to rescue the sciences from the crisis. Philosophers have been putting in the effort into clarifying the definitions of the terms that are of great interest to the sciences. The art of crafting good definitions (*lakṣaṇa*) is of key importance to philosophy and I believe it is a collection of *lakṣaṇas* that will help us attain more certainty on the information that we transmit and receive through the means of language. So, I would say that the skeptic is right and has a valid stance which should only inspire more philosophers to work on addressing the problem of uncertainty in language, at least the part of it that arises because of bad definitions, with good definitions.

Discourse Structures and Power

Language not only poses a challenge to our complete understanding of the world but it is also a threat. Language and Discourse structures, as Michael Foucault observes, have a tendency to be accepted by society and then made into norms with a false dichotomy. An example would be that of gender, traditional discourse structures had and propagated a dichotomy between either male and female. When this became the norm, the queers, those who didn't fit the norm, were excluded. In this way, the language exercised power. It was not us, the subjects, who changed the discourse structures but the other way around. This is because of the formalistic nature that is embedded deep into our language. Language, in this way, only amplifies the ideologies that are dominant at that time. This is again a hint at the fact that language changes quite a lot spatially and temporally.

Since language has a tendency to cause ‘otherness’ by excluding those who do not fit in its formalistic nature, it provides a fertile ground for breeding stereotypes and biases that persist in the society even after they’ve been proved to be untrue.

We know, from the substitution of similar concepts, that:

P1: A=B

P2: It is A

Modus ponendo ponens, C1: It is B

A fallacious version (Fallacy of substitution of concepts) of this is as follows:

P1: A=B

P2: I believe that A

Modus ponendo ponens, C1: I believe is B

The later is similar to the type of reasoning that lies behind how stereotypes function and propagate within society at large. Since, the principle of substitution of similar concepts does not apply for emotivist statements, the reasoning is incorrect. Given that Bruce Wayne = Batman, the premise “That is Bruce Wayne” leads to the conclusion “That is Batman.”

However, given the same condition of equality, the premise “I believe that is Bruce Wayne” does not yield the conclusion “I believe that is Batman” because although both terms refer to the same referent in real world, they tread different mental tracks through different signifieds. One might not be aware that Bruce Wayne and Batman are the same and thus a statement that talks about his beliefs cannot always directly be true unless it is also given that the subject about whom the emotivist statement exists is aware of the condition of equality.

Here, if A were to be a minority community within the society at a time t and if B were to be the same community at time t' where, $t' > t$, we would be wrong to hold the belief still if it hasn't been tested again. However, because of the nature of language, this sort of categorization seems fine and even natural. Because of this innate nature for ‘othering’ that lies within language’s foundations, stereotypes propagates and we stay far from conviviality.

Intellectual vices are a major part contributor to stereotype propagation since those who are intellectually vicious do not stop to examine their own beliefs before spreading them through their actions. Their unscrupulousness hurts the social order.

Aphorisms – Seekers of Wisdom vs. Demagogues

Intentionally vague and short texts such as aphorisms and even parables are popular literary style of writing especially amongst Philosophers from the East and some on the continent.

Intentionally vague texts let the reader, if led by intellectual virtues, find their own meaning in a pragmatic manner so that they can help themselves. In this case, the aphorism (for example) just gives the primary push to the thinker to use an exploratory device (their mind) to reach a higher understanding which is individualistic and suited for themselves.

On the other hand, a demagogue or someone with intellectual malice as their intent might use such vague texts to support their own arguments even though their arguments may be unsound. It could be used as a means to garner support from people who may not be as scrupulous in their

analysis of the demagogue. This is not just limited to aphorisms, time and time again, demagogue shave taken or said to have taken inspirations from great authors and radicalized their ideology to an extent which perhaps the author might not approve of. Take the example of Adolf Hitler taking the Darwinian theory to its extreme. Who is morally culpable in this case?

I would argue that those who know that they are considered to be an expert or an honoured guru, to have the epistemic discreteness to make sure that it be as difficult as possible to find another meaning than the author's own ideology within the work. This aligns with Indian Philosophy where the Guru who provides Aptavachana Śabda is often highly revered and must be very clear with what he wants to say to avoid people taking his episteme for their action, making him at least morally culpable in part. But, for those readers who are engaging in an intentionally misreading of the text to meet their point, in this case, the burden should be more towards the reader and those who does the action.

However, in today's world with very easy access to social media and the ability to go viral overnight for a take/opinion on something which you are not an expert, is worrying. These new individuals do not have the same amount of Knowledge nor Intellectual Virtues but they have now gotten the amount of Epistemic Authority because of their reach that they can do anything. In my view, if someone misuses this chance at being the Epistemic Authority by not respecting the responsibility, they shall be morally culpable for any action that results from their misuse of the platform to spread their Intellectual Vices.

Donna Haraway's idea that all readings are mis-readings, re-readings or partial readings and the fallacy of presentism have a great significance on judging the moral culpability of the author for the actions that their text inspired, perhaps years after their demise. Since, we can never truly know what the author's intended meaning truly was nor can we truly grasp or relate to the historical context completely in which the text was written, we can also never completely understand a text written in the past. This is a rigid implication that we gain from our theory but one that I accept.

We can however try to preserve the meaning for a longer time by engaging in the art of honest debate (*vāda*) at meetings such as bookclubs which have been established by the author, to come and discuss and clarify the meaning of the text and if it needs adjustment for the modern world. This shall keep the theory alive as well.

Conclusion

I gave arguments, garnering support from Lacan and Foucault, which showed my support for Polanyi's contention. However, I disagree with Polanyi on the ground that his idea applies to all knowledge, even the kind that is a result of the personal knowledge-seeking endeavour. I think discussed the Epistemological responsibility that rests with those who are in a position of authority.