Two Reflections on the Cartesian Use of Language

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This paper reconfirms two essential features of language, or more specifically, what we may call the "Cartesian use of language," i.e. (a) the externality of language, and (b) the existence of fixed meanings attached to that external existence called language. For the second issue, we focus on the meaning of words. We also discuss some pragmatic implications of these features in the social arena.

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What appears to me to be deceiving and naive in reflections on and analyses of signs is that one supposes them to be always and already there, deposited on the figure of the world, or constituted by men (sic), and that one never investigates their being. What does it mean, the fact that there are signs and marks of language? One must pose the problem of the being of language as a task, in order not to fall back to a level of reflection which would be that of the 18th century, to the level of empiricism[1].

Contents

1 Introduction

This paper reconfirms two essential features of what we may call the "Cartesian use of language." One is related to the status of language in relation to human beings, and the other is related to the status of meanings portrayed by language in terms of language units, here especially in terms of words (we do not delve into the fine-grained "linguistic" distinction between units related to what is commonly called a word, such as the distinction between words and lexical items, etc.). I use the word "reconfirm," because what is to be addressed here is in no way new. Both features have been topics of debate for thousands of years[2], and are well understood (though not necessarily explicitly, and with a certain degree of ambiguity) among those who have addressed issues of language. Indeed, everyone accepts these features unconsciously and in going about daily life, as they are the very conditions upon which we can use this thing called language to mean something in the first place.

I nevertheless feel obliged to reconfirm what is obvious, because we recently hear, not infrequently, such claims as "I can only express myself

properly through my mother tongue as it's mine and in me" or "the meaning of a word changes in accordance with its use." To be fair, these statements are not problematic so long as they are understood as something the validity of which needs to be examined collectively. What we are observing recently, however, is that these unlearned claims are used to reject, outright, discussions about the status of language and the meaning of words. This has a rather serious – and very negative – practical implication. In the "post-truth"[3] era, rescuing the "proper" (i.e. Cartesia) use of language is of utmost importance. The very attitude with which these utterances are used to reject discussions about the proper use of language leads to strengthening "post-truth" phenomenon, the end result of which is totalitarianism. The arena of discussion over the Cartesian use of language should be rescued, and while fully acknowledging that the act of reconfirming the conditions upon which language can be used for meaningful discussion falls into the trap of circularity, it is still necessary and essential.

Such being the motivation behind writing this note, it is more a rush report of the ongoing destruction of language than a theoretical study of the fundamentals of the Cartesian use of language. The rest of this note is organised as follows. In Section 2, we observe that the externality of language is one of the essential conditions upon which language *itself* can make sense in the first place. Section 3 is devoted to reconfirming the fact that words have (a) fixed meaning(s). Section 4 discusses a few practical implications of these two features of language, especially from the point of view of education.

2   Externality

2.1   Of language

Language, including one's mother tongue, is external to the individual person. This crude fact is unwittingly exposed by the fact that the first language a person acquires is called, in English, one's "mother tongue," i.e. the language one acquires from one's mother (or, more accurately, one's parents). A language a person uses to think and to communicate with other people is acquired, and exists before one learns it, thus language is there outside before one acquires it. It has nothing to do with the fact that human beings have the innate ability to speak languages[4]. When a person thinks or communicates with another person using a language, s/he does not think or communicate by means of FOXP2 protein or language faculty, but by means of what we normally regard as a *language*, such as English, Japanese or Tetun. These are not written in one's genes. Language is a social reality – non-arguably the most important one – which only exists because there exist human beings but which is external to individuals[5].

Arendt's famous saying, i.e. "What is left? Only the mother tongue," does not mean that the mother tongue is internal and an integrated part of oneself. To confirm this, let us quote what she said:

> I have always consciously refused to lose my mother tongue... I write in English [now], but I have never lost a feeling of distance from it. There is a tremendous difference between your mother tongue and another language. For myself I can put it extremely simply: In German I know a rather large part of German poetry by heart; the poems are always somehow in the back of my mind... The German language is the essential thing that has remained and that I have consciously preserved... What is one to do? It wasn't the German language that went crazy... What is left? Only the mother tongue[6].

Here the mother tongue is assumed to be something that you may lose. As such, it is perceived as something external. Note also that Arendt refers to "a rather large part of German poetry." German poetry she knows "by heart" existed be-

fore she learned it by heart. This leads us to the recognition that not only language but also language expressions are external to us.

2.2 Of language expressions

Let us compare the following expressions:

(a) TOILET
(b) TO LET
(c) TO⏐LET

The first, (a), means *toilet*, (b) *to let*. Now what does (c) mean? Here we understand that (c) means something, and to grasp what it means, we need to decide whether the gray vertical bar between "O" and "L" in (c) is an ink stain from the printing process or a faint and patchy "I." The fact that we need to refer to gray marks on paper (or a screen, etc.) to *understand* the meaning indicates that we make sense of language expressions because they consolidate themselves taking some form or another outside us.

If you say:

Freeze!

then the person who you talk to will most probably freeze. On the other hand, if you say:

Fleece!

then ... "the coat of wool that covers a sheep or a similar animal"?[7] This does not have the same effect as uttering "freeze"[8]. This fact again comes from the fact that the external form of language expressions are different.

Note that language expressions in these cases are external not only to the recipients of these expressions but also to those who utter them. If the utterer's intention (whatever it may be) is satisfied, it is not because s/he intended it but because s/he uttered these expressions. Language expressions can satisfy the intention of the utterer precisely because they are made explicit and placed outside the utterer.

We talk about the philosophy of Plato, for instance, through language expressions, externalised and recorded in some form or another.

They are accessible because they are made external.

3 Fixed meaning

3.1 Empirically

In the field of natural language processing (NLP), with the advent and massive expansion of corpus-based (or data-driven or empirical) methods, researchers sometimes cite Firth's famous claim[9]:

You shall know a word by the company it keeps[10].

Using contexts to extract word meanings in NLP culminated in the introduction of `word2vec`[11], which enabled such "semantic algebra" as:

Madrid − Spain + France = Paris

In the same manner, unfortunately, the following is also possible:

Doctor − Male + Female = Nurse[12]

We can immediately see that these two are different, i.e. the former reflects the relationships among the "meaning" of these words, while the latter reflects social bias rather than the meaning of the words. This indicates that we *know* that there is an area of meaning of words that is separate from their use. Of course, this in itself does not show that a word has some *fixed* meaning.

Separately, in daily – but supposedly *learned* – conversation, we often hear people say, rather casually, naively and happily, that the meaning of a word changes over time and according to the context, or that the meaning of a word depends on the situation of communication or on interpretation. In a recent PhD seminar, when we were talking about the concept of "self defence," one professor said that the meaning of a word changes in accordance with the context and its use. So I started talking about Japanese sweets, which clearly surprised him. This episode reveals two things. Firstly, those who claim that

the meaning of a word changes depending on context indeed assume that there is a fixed range of acceptable change – "I claim that the meaning can change, but within the fixed range of meaning." It is like saying "you are free, as long as you act within the range I accept." Second, the very form of the statement "the meaning of a word can change depending on context" *logically* presupposes the existence of the fixed meaning, which we will address later.

In general, that we can rather casually claim that the meaning of a word changes is supported by a belief:

> In English, phrases such as 'Paris' or 'Julius Caesar', which are usually formalised as constants, and predicate expessions such as 'is tired' or 'loves', have fixed meanings[13].

Note that this (perhaps unconscious) belief is reflected in the act of looking up dictionaries. When we encounter ambiguities in the meaning of a word, we refer to a dictionary and check the word's meaning. When we look up a dictionary, we assume not only that there is such a thing as word meaning but also that there is a fixed meaning.

3.2   Logically

When one says, for instance, "The meaning of 'apple' changes in accordance with its use or its context," one already assumes that there is such a thing as the *meaning* of "apple." This may change, empirically, but what is this "this"? We can talk about its change precisely because we assume its identity (an old philosophical issue).

Note that this is the logical requirement for talking about the meaning of a word in the first place, whether it is the change in the meaning or something else. Let me take another example. When one says "the meaning of 'bird' is prototypically represented," we already knew the meaning of the word. That we knew the meaning of the word is one of the necessary conditions for us to be able to talk about its mental representation.

That a word has a meaning and that this meaning has a fixed range at any given idiosynchronic state of language is a logical prerequisite for us to be able to talk about the meaning of a word[14], including, though paradoxical it may seem at first glance, the changes in the meaning of a word.

We have a related but different issue here. The meaning of some words are inherently deontic and universal. For these words, the change in the operational meaning is nothing to do with the change in their fixed, deontic meaning. What on the surface seems to be a change in the meaning reflects the simple fact that we are in the process of understanding and fully appreciating the meaning of these words. An example is "freedom." The draft revision to the Japanese constitution proposed by the Liberal Democratic Party[15], which is the governing party of Japan as of 2017 states:

> Responsibility accompanies freedom.

This statement is false, simply in terms of the meaning of freedom. Freedom includes such passive forms of freedom as freedom from torture. If we apply the LDP statement to the concept of freedom from torture, we end up with the following:

> If you do not take due responsibility, you may not be free from torture.

This reveals the following essential fact about the meaning of "freedom":

> That responsibility does not accompany freedom is the *sine qua non* trait of the very meaning of the word "freedom," without which this word is nullified and we cannot talk about "freedom" at all.

So the statement "responsibility accompanies freedom" should not change the meaning of "freedom." If this abuse spreads, however, it may become impossible to talk about freedom. In such a situation, we are not talking about the changes in the meaning of "freedom" as it has nothing to

do with freedom. This is tantamount to killing freedom, and this is tantamount to killing the conditions which enable the Cartesian use of language.

4 Implications

4.1 Pedagogical

The fact that language and language expressions are external has some important implications for education. Theoretically, it means that the focus of education should shift from manipulating learners to providing them with a useful arrangement of language and language expressions so that they can use these things themselves. At this point, I can immediately imagine a contradiction from many educational scientists, claiming that this shift was already made long ago. In theory or what they think of as theory, this may be true, but in practice, it has only led to – at least in the author's immediate environment – an avalanche of such vague expressions as "you can proactively deepen your thought," which in fact ultimately *forces* the work of making this shift back on to learners in the worst kind of form of worst "self-responsibility." Worst, because no operational hints are provided to learners.

Technically, the fact that languages and language expressions are external means that educators should be more concerned with the forms of language expressions. Recently, a large scale project which aims at improving reading skills has revealed that our understanding of reading is very limited[16]. What the revelation in this project implies is that human beings do not know what forms of language expressions are "easy" to read in the first place. This perhaps is correlated with the fact that people tend to regard language, at least their mother tongue, as internal rather than external.

Another technical implication of the fact that language is external is that there can be a range of viewpoints in measuring the distance between a person and a language. Especially in English education in Japan, surface "fluency" seems to

be the dominant viewpoint for evaluating one's English ability. This concept has an affinity with the image of *internalising* languages. If we accept that language is external, on the other hand, we can measure, for instance, "ease" – how much energy is needed to keep reading a text for an hour or take part in a conversation for a certain amount of time, etc. – as a separate and independent feature of one's language ability.

4.2 Social

That language and language expressions are external to individuals and that words (and language expressions) have fixed meanings are important pillars for a democratic society.

Take, for instance, the constitution of a society. That it is externalised (in the case of the Japanese constitution, it is explicitly written down) *is* what makes the constitution relevant to a democratic society. Suppose that each and every individual has her/his internalised version of the constitution, and there is no constitution which can be referred to externally in the form of fixed language expressions. This is tantamount to having no constitution, and the end result is that those who have more resources for violence will prevail.

In addition to the requirement that a constitution should be external to individuals, its language expressions need to have fixed meanings. "Self-defence" does not mean Japanese sweets. All those people who talk about changes in the meaning are talking about, in a sense, measurement errors[17], implicitly assuming and relying on the existence of the fixed meaning of a word. True, there always are measurement errors, but all of us assume, if unconsciously (like the professor at the PhD seminar) the existence of fixed meaning.

The LDP's draft revisions to the Japanese constitution also states:

> Duties accompanies rights.

In commerce, when a lender lends an amount of money to a borrower, the lender obtains a right

and the borrower takes on a duty. But duty does not accompany rights in a single person. If this holds, newborn babies would have no right to survive, as they cannot undertake any duties. This, again, is the total effacement and obliteration of the very concept of "rights." We *should* be able to talk about the abuse of language in this and similar cases. It is nothing to do with the change in the meaning of a word through use.

5 Conclusions

As has repeatedly been pointed out in discussions on language, essential difficulties are logically and inevitably upon us when we talk about the nature of language in relation to its operation.

First, we need to resort to language to talk about language in use. One cannot see one's own eyes by using one's own eyes. As such, eyes constitute the essential infrastructure of seeing. Note here that eyes are not in themselves "seeing"; they are external to it. In a similar manner, one cannot think of language using language which is used for thinking. As such, language constitutes the essential infrastructure of thought. Here again, the operation of language is not in itself "thinking"; it is external to thinking.

I will leave the analogy with eyes here, and turn to a more fundamental issue. When one's eyesight deteriorates, one normally notices it. For one to be able to notice this does not depend on one's eyesight. When one's thought deteriorates, one may not be able to notice it, because for one to be able to notice the status of one's thought depends on one's competence to think, which is exactly what has deteriorated in this case. The deterioration of the use of language, as being so essentially linked with thought, also goes unnoticed in the same way as thought itself.

An unfortunate fact is that even when thought and language deteriorate and no thought with language becomes possible anymore, language – being external – remains, and language expressions continue to be uttered, under the pretense that they mean something. This may cause an essential disaster for thinking.

Science is harmed, but not destroyed, by forgery of data and plagiarism. However, it *is* destroyed, and destroyed completely, when claims based on forged data are accepted as a proper part of scientific activities. Laws are not destroyed by being violated. They are destroyed when people start regarding violations of law as a normal part of social life. Analogously, language is not destroyed by the abuse of language, but it is destroyed when people can no longer distinguish the Cartesian use of language from the abuse of language. The destruction will be complete and thorough, as we will not be able to notice that language was already destroyed.

Those who produce, without reflection, such utterances as "I can only express myself properly through my mother tongue as it's mine and in me" or "the meaning of a word changes in accordance with its use" contribute to increasing the possibility of this total destruction of language. It is time, indeed high time, that we stopped producing these now meaningless utterances, relying on the unnoticed illusion that language as an infrastructure of thought will always and inevitably remain intact even if we do nothing to preserve it. It will not; we are observing ominous signs all over the world.

We close this note by citing a famous saying by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe:

> No one is more of a slave than he (sic) who thinks himself (sic) free without being so.

Acknowledgement

Notes

1) Foucault, Michel (Johnston, J. trans.) "The order of things," In: *Foucault Live.* New York: Semiotext(e), 1990, p. 8-9. The interview was with Raymond Bellour and the text was first published in *Les Lettres Françaises*, March 31, 1966.

2) We can immediately think of the Bible for the first topic, and Plato's *Cratylus* for the second, which is accessible at: http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/1616/pg1616.txt. (Access: 20 November 2017)

3) The word is defined as "relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief." See https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/word-of-the-year/word-of-the-year-2016. (Access: 20 November 2017)

4) For FOXP2, see Lai, C. S., Fisher, S. E., Hurst, J. A., Vargha-Khadem, F. and Monaco, A. P. "A forkhead-domain gene is mutated in a severe speech and language disorder," *Nature*, 413(6855), 2001, p. 519–523. doi:10.1038/35097076 For the human language faculty, see Chomsky, N. *Reflections on Language.* Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 1976.

5) For social reality, see Searle, J. *The Construction of Social Reality.* New York: Free Press, 1997. See also Iwai, K. *Shihon Shugi kara Shimin Shugi e.* Tokyo: Shinshokan, 2006.

6) Arendt, H. "Was bleibt? Es bleibt die Mutterprache," in her interview with Günter Gaus, 1964. The citation is from Bond, N. and Ginsburgh, V. "Language and emotion," In: Ginsburgh, V. and Weber, S. (eds.) *The Palgrave Handbook of Economics and Language.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, p. 244.

7) The first definition given to "fleece" as a noun at http://www.dictionary.com/browse/fleece. (Access: 20 November 2017)

8) Incidentally, most native Japanese speakers cannot distinguish the pronounciation of "l" and "r."

9) For instance, Hisamitsui, T. and Niwa, Y. "A measure of term representativeness based on the number of co-occurring salient words," *COLING 2002*, p. 1–7.

10) Firth, J. A. "A synopsis of linguistic theory 1930–1955," In: *Studies in Linguistic Analysis.* Oxford: Philological Society.

11) Mikolov, T. et al. "Distributed representations of words and phrases and their compositionality," *NIPS 2013.*

12) An example cited in the Q&A session for Steedman, M. "On distributional semantics," invited talk at the Australian Language Technology Association 2016 Workshop.

13) Halbach, V. *The Logic Manual.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013. p. 94. Note that this discussion holds for other languages if cited words and phrases are duly changed.

14) The claim that it does not hold for individual utterances is invalid, because the moment we start talking about the meaning of a word we are no longer talking about a particular utterance.

15) Incidentally, the Liberal Democratic Party is like the Holy Roman Empire. It is neither liberal nor democratic, and may not even be a party in its proper sense any more, for that matter.

16) https://www.s4e.jp/ (in Japanese) (Access: 20 November 2017)

17) This seems to be the case for most of those who talk about changes in the meaning. Quite apart from measurement errors, there is a logical aspect in it, which cannot be explored here due to the limitation of space.

言語のデカルト的使用を可能にする二つの属性について

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　本論考では，言語の―より正確に言うならば言語のデカルト的使用を可能にする言語という存在の―基本的な属性のうち二つを再確認する。第一は，言語が人や思考にとって外在的なものであることであり，第二は，言葉には定まった意味があることである。第二点の検討においては単語の意味を中心に考える。最後に、これらが―と同時にこうしたことを現在言わなくてはならないこと自体が―現実的に含意することを，特に教育を想定して，何点か指摘する。

キーワード：言語のデカルト的使用，言語の外部性，単語の意味の義務性