

**Chapter - 5**  
***Language and Ontology***

## Language and Ontology

### Section I : Introductory

In the two foregone chapters, we have been engaged ourselves with a historical analysis of the movement primarily concerned with methodology which has been linguistic in character. The movement has witnessed two phases giving rise to two different methods altogether. The claim for the need of an ideal language is sustained by the fact that it leads us to perfect knowledge about the structure of reality which ordinary language cannot aspire to deliver. The basic presupposition behind this programme was the *idea that* language is relevant to ontology, i.e., language can reach up to reality.

Now, this is an idea which cannot be left at the level of conjecture. It needs to be seen if language and reality which are so different from each other can meet at any point, or whether, language can be related to reality.

Language may be studied from sociological, historical or anthropological points of view. All such studies trace the development of language through different stages. The history of the origin of language and its gradual development may be interesting. But it remains a fact that in course of all such investigations language is considered as performing the singular function of rendering communication possible. For all the studies language "is a means of communication, a system of marks or sounds which we use to convey thoughts and describe the world".<sup>1</sup>

The latter portion of the above quotation is worth noticing. What after all do we communicate? From a very naive point of view we communicate our experience of the world. Communication, which is taken to constitute the

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<sup>1</sup>Morris, M. "The Place of Language", Aristotelian Society, Vol. LXVII, 1993, p. 152.

major function of language, would be successful if the intention of the language used by the communicator is received without distortion by the person at the other end. The basic idea behind is this that language is a mirror of reality used by us to make others know what is actually mirrored. This concept of mirroring finds a philosophical exposition in Wittgenstein's picture theory of language. The basic presupposition of the theory is that language has a necessary translinguistic implication which may be explained in terms of an isomorphic relation with reality.

It is true that philosophers have attempted to display a structural affinity between language and reality ; but the idea is not at all free from difficulties .

The problem for the philosophers is that the linguistic and the extralinguistic are so different from each other that there seems to be no reason why the one should be hooked on to the other. Moreover , although we have a general idea about what language is, and also that there is a real consensus to that effect, nevertheless conceptions of reality differ widely among philosophers and non-philosophers . If we want to define reality in terms of the things that compose our world, there may be a conceivable relation between language and reality . But it is not necessary that there should obtain a relation between the two until we have proved that the relation is built in the very nature of language and reality. But this is something which is difficult to demonstrate . If the table I am writing on exists as a part of reality , then there is no understandable connection between language and the existence of the table. Language does not definitely enter into the constitution or the being of the table. In other words, the table keeps existing even if we do not express it linguistically. The being of the table is independent of its linguistic expression.

The point made above proceeds from the conviction that the world as we see is designated by the term 'reality'. But the world may be viewed and described from other points of views. The world, as Strawson has conceived, is a totality of particulars. This is not simply evidenced by experiences; in other words , it is not simply the case that we experience the world as composed of particulars. Strawson's contention is that we have no right to acknowledge anything but particulars in our ontology since such particulars alone are the objects of our referring expressions which we use in communicating our experiences to others, and successful communication on the basis of the use of such referring expressions by way of identification of particulars does authorise us to include particulars alone in our ontology.

It is a fact that we speak of particular things and persons by using referring expressions. A word so used serves to refer to a certain particular. But it may be remembered that Strawson does not regard referring as the inherent capacity of words. Words by themselves do not refer to things. In his essay "On Referring ", Strawson tells us : "'Mentioning' , or 'referring', is not something an expression does; it is something that someone can use an expression to do . Mentioning , or referring to, something is a characteristic of *a use* of an expression, just as 'being about' something , and truth-or-falsity, are characteristics of *a use* of a sentence ."<sup>2</sup>

Now the use of an expression which makes it intend an object is a subjective phenomenon. To use a phenomenological expression , a word has an 'intended reference' and the intention may be vacuous. The intended reference of a word does not guarantee that the reference is fulfilled in reality. Russell has been mistaken in believing that referential function of language

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<sup>2</sup>Strawson, P. F. : **Logico-Linguistic Papers**; Methuen, London and New York, 1974, p. 8.

is fulfilled in the existence of the thing which is being referred to. A word may be used to refer to an object ; but that is no reason why the existence of the object should be entailed by that use . If philosophers hold that language is still hooked on to reality , then they must go beyond the referring function of words and find out something in the nature of language itself which relates it to reality. Unfortunately , nothing of the sort is available. We do not know what element in language can connect it to reality.

## **Section II : Language and Ontology:A note on Cornman**

In his article "Language and ontology", Cornman says that philosophers who believe that language refers to reality must begin with a theory of reference before he can speak of the ontological relevance of language . But he holds that the term 'refer' has a multiple sense; in many of them no ontological guess is permissible. Many terms which are overtly supposed to refer do not refer to entities. If every reference is fulfilled by an entity then there would be an endless multiplication of entities, however queer. In fact western philosophy is replete with instances in which words appearing as the grammatical subject has been supposed to refer to queer entities. This is a clear case of linguistic deception.

Cornman is fully aware of the different ways in which language deludes us into a false ontology. The problem of delusive ontology has been exposed by Ryle and also by A.J. Ayer in his book **language, Truth and Logic**. Cornman for similar reasons rules that an expression which refers does not necessarily refer to an existent entity. This ruling was needed for otherwise: "We would be ontologically committed merely by our language

and apparently committed to some very queer things ."<sup>3</sup>

Cornman apparently distinguishes between a term's reference and its denotation. Something may be referred to by a linguistic expression, but that does not mean that the thing thus referred to has existence. It may be said that on some occasions one existing thing is referred to by a linguistic expression , but anything that an expression refers to may not be existing. Cornman says, "...there are senses of 'refer ' for which it is true to say that an expression is a referring expression but that we are not entitled to infer from this that anything exists in any sense of 'exist'."<sup>4</sup>

Cornman illustrates this point with the help of the following examples in which there is a referring expression.

(A) 'Alaska' refers to the largest state of the United States.

(B) The word 'Pegasus' refers to the winged horse.

(C) The word 'loud' refers to a property of things.

If we consider the first two sentences, we may find it reasonable to say that what 'Alaska ' and 'Pegasus' refers to exists . But can we say that what the word 'loud ' refers to also exists in the same sense? It cannot refer to a sentence, since it cannot be substantiated for x in "What 'x' refers to exists ." Such type of substitution requires a noun ; but the word 'loud' is not a noun. Hence, it cannot entail existence of what it refers to.

Again , if we consider the first two sentences, we find a considerable difference, says Cornman. If we say that "What 'Alaska' refers to exists", we make a true statement. But if we say that "What ' Pegasus' refers to exists". we make a false statement.

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<sup>3</sup>Cornman, J. W, "Language and Ontology", in *The Linguistic Turn*, edited by Richard Rorty, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1967, p. 161.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., pp. 160-161.

On the basis of this analysis the following formulae emerge. Words may refer in at least three senses. They are :

(A<sub>1</sub>) X refers = "X refers to Y."

(B<sub>1</sub>) X refers = "What X refers to exists."

(C<sub>1</sub>) X refers = The sentence "What X refers to exists" is true.

Thus a term may have intended reference. In this sense we call it a referring expression. But it may be said that besides referring to something the linguistic expression in question does not make any claim that the thing refers to exist. When we believe that a word is simply a referring expression we do not make any ontological commitment. Further we may even say that the denoting expression denotes something having existence; i.e., what X refers to exists, but that may be a false assertion(B<sub>1</sub>). So in this case again there is no ontological commitment even if existence is implied here. We make ontological commitment if and only if it is true to say that X refers to does exist (C<sub>1</sub>). We can say that all and every referring expression does not have genuine ontological implication; only some may have. Davidson rightly remarks "Reference, however, drops out. It plays no essential role in explaining the relation between language and reality."<sup>5</sup>

But it is possible to give examples which will show that reference in the third sense(C<sub>1</sub>) mentioned above does involve us in ontological commitment; although that is not really the case. For example, 'Pegasus refers to Pegasus' is a true assertion. Should we, therefore, say that Pegasus is an existing animal? Meaning thus can take advantage of the theory and make ontology a linguistic concern.

It appears that in the opinion of Cornman when an expression denotes,

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<sup>5</sup>Davidson, Donald, **Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation**, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1984, p. 225.

we are not entitled to infer that something denoted exists. An expression denotes when a sentence of the form 'What P refers to exists' is true.

Even if the sentence "X refers to Y" is true, we are not ontologically committed to Y. We do not say that Y exists. But can we not say that the sentence 'Pegasus refers to a winged horse' is true in a certain sense of 'refer'? If we thus commit ourselves to say that what *Pegasus* refers to exists, then we shall have to admit of the existence of imaginary entities in the Meinong's sense. Corman seeks to solve this problem by suggesting that when we say that the sentence '*Pegasus* refers to a winged horse' is true, we simply mean to say that the sentence is meaningful. So on the ground that a sentence is meaningful, we do not commit ourselves ontologically to anything. Let us round up with a remark from Donald Davidson. He says that in semantics the function of referential expression is useless, since the semantic features of language are concerned with public activities. He says, "The semantic features of language are public features....since every speaker must, in some dim sense at least, know this, he cannot even intend to use his words with a unique reference, for he knows that there is no way for his words to convey this reference to another."<sup>6</sup> He then concludes, "We do not need the concept of reference; neither do we need reference itself, whatever that may be. For if there is one way of assigning entities to expressions ( a way of characterizing 'satisfaction') that yields acceptable results with respect to the truth conditions of sentences, there will be endless other ways that do as well. There is no reason, then, to call any one of these semantical relations 'reference' or 'satisfaction'."<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 225.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 224

It is not the case that reality or the world should be defined as the totality of particulars. One can also describe reality as totality of facts as Wittgenstein does in the **Tractatus**. For Wittgenstein it is reasonable to talk about a world which is negotiable in terms of linguistic description. To him the limit of the language is the limit of the world. The world is described by Wittgenstein as the totality of facts and not of things because facts are definable only with reference to sentences. A fact is thus, by definition, what makes a sentence true.

The concepts of description as an alternative to *reference* as given by Wittgenstein goes a long way in solving the difficulty besetting the earlier thesis. We have seen that there is nothing in a referring expression which entails the existence of an object referred to by it. For Wittgenstein, there must be a connection between language and reality, since reality, by definition, is such that it makes a sentence true. He could establish the connection because he opened the issue by defining the world as the totality of facts. Like the early Wittgenstein, Strawson too says that the world is the totality of particulars, but unlike Wittgenstein Strawson admits the connection between language and reality. On Strawson's ground description of the world as composed of particular things and persons, no such correspondence could be shown, and far less established, because there is nothing in the nature of a particular that necessitates a response to words. The characterisation of the world as the totality of 'facts' ensures correspondence between the domain of language and the realm of reality.

### Section III : Remarks

Should we leave it , therefore, to the philosopher's choice whether to describe the world as the totality of particulars or the totality of facts? If this be so, then establishing the relation between language and reality would require us to decide upon a philosophical thesis. The supposed relation between language and reality is thus not without a presupposition or a pre-philosophical one.

However , the conception of reality may not remain confined to the empirical. In other words , 'reality' may not be defined in terms of the world we live in. The conception of reality offered by Bradley , for example, is not the conception of the world in space and time ; it is rather the conception of something non-spatial and non- temporal, its only distinguishing feature is that it is free from contradiction. It gives us a conception of super- empirical reality. Incidentally it may be noted that the concept of Absolute or **Brahman** in Indian philosophy also presents us with the *picture* of a super-empirical reality . The **Advaita** conception of reality as **Brahman** is not only a transcendent entity ; it is also described as being beyond verbal description. It is indescribable . We shall not enter into an examination of the doctrine. The only point that we would like to press is that if **Brahman** is really ineffable, then the question of there being a relation between language and reality does not arise at all.

It seems that much should depend on our decision as to how *reality* is to be defined. It is after all a linguistic decision., as J. N. Mohanty prefers to look at it . He discovers an anomaly in the whole procedure. He asks : "how can we discuss the relation between language and reality , if giving a meaning

to 'reality' 'is a matter of linguistic decision?'"<sup>8</sup>

It may not be a linguistic decision as Mohanty thinks. Yet it is a philosophical decision nonetheless. But this does not lessen the gravity of the problem, because there are alternative standpoints in philosophy and alternative philosophical ideas regarding the nature of reality. Whether there is any relation between language and reality would depend on the decision we take in favour of one conception of reality rather than another.

Language, it seems, is not hooked on to reality by itself. It is made to hook on to reality by the person who uses it. If this connection between language and reality is interpreted as made possible by the use of referring expression, it still remains questionable if the connection which is established by usage guarantees the existence of the object thus referred to. Again, if we consider Wittgenstein's way of establishing correspondence between language and reality, we find that the process involves a logical difficulty. The world as the totality of facts is supposed to be *pictured* by language only because the world is defined as whatever makes a sentence true and a sentence must be true because the world must be such that it is describable in language. Thus the basic premise of Wittgenstein's contention is that it is reasonable to speak of a world which we can describe in language. If this be so then naturally there is a world which would correspond to the descriptive sentence. It appears that from the very nature of the world, as conceived by Wittgenstein, there is a necessary correspondence or a relation of picturing between language and reality. It is, as J. N. Mohanty says, an analytic consequence of the way the thesis is made to look upon reality as consisting of facts. Mohanty remarks: "Certainly if you look upon the world to consist

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<sup>8</sup>Mohanty, J. N. "Language and Reality", included in Language and Reality, edited by J. Mehata, p. 2

not in fact but in events, things and persons, you cannot contend that language pictures them....."<sup>9</sup>

Despite all these surmises language may yet be meaningful; of course when meaning is determined by rules of sentence formation. It is an immanent function of language. There is no reason why a meaningful sentence should be hooked on to reality. Nevertheless, there is a point in the thesis that an examination of the structure of a sentence should give us an idea regarding the structure of reality. This correspondence is there because language, first of all, is not an isolated phenomenon of human life. Language is used to express both our internal experience and our experience of the world. There are thinkers, Heidegger for example, who conceives language in the temporal mode. This is a Kantian insight, that time is the *a priori* for both our outer and inner experiences. There cannot be the one without the other. The Nyāya thinker institutes an entailment between *jneyatva* (knowability) and *vācyaivāc* (speakability or describability). A correspondence between language and reality is conceivable only on the hypothesis that we have an experience of the world - an experience which is expressible in language. The correspondence is thus explained on a prior ontological commitment. Consequently, there may be a structural affinity between language and reality. But on this explanation there seems to be nothing great in saying that language reaches up to reality, since language is designed to reach up to reality which we already know non-linguistically.

Does it require us to conclude that there is no sense in speaking of language as an object of philosophical analysis which may be undertaken as a way of knowing the structure of reality? Perhaps not, because the use of

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<sup>9</sup>Ibid., p. 2.

language as an aspect of human conduct is significant in the context of our knowledge or experience of reality. This reality is ordinary and empirical. The structure of such empirical reality determines the structure of our language. Language must not be structured in any other way. If on the basis of the apparent structure of our sentences one is required to postulate the existence of non-empirical entities then the structure of language shall have to be looked at with suspicion and requires to be corrected. It is precisely at this point that language becomes relevant for our study of the structure of reality. The structure of any language which points to superempirical entities must be corrected. Language is relevant to philosophy on this particular account. On this thesis the so called metaphysical reality is not kept beyond language, but it is rejected as fictitious. But even if metaphysical reality is beyond language or is fictitious, it cannot be reflected in the structure of genuine language. It is language, in other words, which leads us to an ontology, which is empiricistic and protects us from being misled into a false super-empirical ontology.