

CHAPTER-IV

THE NATURE OF LANGUAGE AND MEANINGLESSNESS

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Whatever may be the source for generation of meaningless expressions the distinction between meaningful and meaningless expression finds its way in philosophy. Whether the concept of meaninglessness find its way legitimately in philosophy depends upon whether meaningful-meaningless distinction is inherent in the nature of language. And to inquire into the fact whether this distinction is inherent in the nature of language we have to look into the general nature of language, inquire into its essential characteristics. Question arises in what sense the distinction between meaningfulness and meaninglessness is inherent in language. Unless we can settle whether language has some essential features and point out them, we cannot decide whether the judgement about meaningfulness or meaninglessness is externally imposed and is theory oriented, or whether it is inherent in the very nature of language. Let us discuss the general nature or characteristic features of language, features which apply to all languages, written or spoken and only those features which seem to be relevant for the problem in hand, the features which are responsible for deviation and novelty of

expressions, in spite of inherent fixity and rigidity of language.

(1) Language is primarily a system of phonetic symbol. Any sound that human larynx can produce has a conventionally significant phonetic element. The speech apparatus which is used in the articulation of language is same for all known communities. Human being has the capacity to produce distinctive sounds which everyone can recognize and reproduce. Although higher animals like chimpanzee have a suitable vocal apparatus they can produce only limited number of sound pattern. Language is not however a continuous flow of phonetic sequences. We divide patterning of phonetic sequences into symbolically significant entities such as words, phrases and so on. And these words are built up arbitrarily, there is no definite procedure of framing the word unit from the phonetics. The word is the meaningful and unanalyzable unit of language.

(2) Language consists not only of a collection of parts, words, phrases and so on but a set of rules for ordering those parts to generate sentences of a language or more properly to generate the meaningful sentences of language.

The grammatical rules of the language categorize words into different parts of speech and combine them systematically and produce indefinitely many sentences of endlessly varied forms and contents. This formal procedures are employed by the speaker of any language. May be that the grammar of one language is more simple than others but it would be meaningless if one says that one language is more grammatical than others. All grammars are equal - equal in the sense of being capable of producing infinite number of sentences from the fixed vocabulary. The following quotation I think would not be mismatched here :

... the grammar of a language is simply an orderly description of the way people in a given society talk of the sounds that people utter in various situations, and of the acts which accompany or follow the sounds.¹

Every language is adequate - adequate for expressing thoughts, feelings and making communication possible. A language contains two classes of words form classes and function words or more properly words which refer and words which

1. Bertrand Block and George L. Trager, Outline of Linguistic Analysis, Haverly Press, Baltimore, Md. 1942, p.6.

order other words. The form class consists of the words which can be defined by other words or substituted by other words or phrases in a sentence. For instance, the word 'father' can be defined by the properties of male parent of someone. But there are words like 'to', 'the' which cannot be defined or substituted in this way because they have no synonymous words. They have no synonymous words because they have no properties. But these type of words play an important role in language, they have highly explicit use in language. They can be defined only by the function they perform in language. Fries has called them function words.

(3) Another design feature of language is that it has a creative or productive aspect. Max Black terms this feature as 'synthetic resources' of language. This feature of language makes a language an open system. Chomsky also lays great stress on the creativity or 'open-endedness' of human language. The openness of language permits native speaker to construct and understand from a limited number of vocabulary infinitely many intelligible complex utterances that they have never been heard before - language users have the power to synthesize new linguistic compounds. The capacity of the language users to produce an infinite variety of new

sentences is of course rule-governed. We have to follow the grammatical rules for producing a new sentence that we never heard before. Generation and understanding the new expression is a 'rule-governed creation'. Creativity does not merely mean of course the production of the utterances that never occurred in the previous experience. It may mean the style and use of the utterances in a new context or situation. Without this feature of language human language would be very much like animal communication medium. (I am not mentioning animal language because whether animal communication system fulfils the criteria of language is a debatable issue).

(4) Although language is a symbolic system based on pure and arbitrary convention it is highly flexible in nature. It may change according to the changing needs of its users. Language may be creative also in this sense that the users are free (at least at a certain degree) to invent new words or old words with new meaning(s). Users are free to use metaphors and irony of different types for their purpose. This is because with too little given material we have to perform too many jobs perfectly. Thus to express the enormity of the blenish of murder which was perpetrated by Macbeth, Shakespeare writes "All the perfumes of Arabia cannot sweeten this little hand". It may be the case that this enormity of

the crime of Macbeth could not be properly expressed in the stereotyped language.

(5) Language is by its very nature and essence, metaphorical. It is very difficult to express abstract and complex thoughts and ideas without metaphor. Metaphor has a kind of artistic or decorative success. Artistic ingenuity and originality is manifested in the creation of metaphors. It breaks the literal convention and discover a new world within the known world. Man thinks so diversely that sometimes he is unable to express his subtle thinking literally. J.L. Austin says the metaphorical use of language as 'parasitic' uses of language. Metaphor has not only artistic or decorative use, our ordinary language is also full of metaphors. The phrase 'high status' which we use in our ordinary language is a metaphorical expression. Similar is the case with 'hand of a clock'.

(6) Language makes men free from the immediate present. Language permits us to say something that have never happened and indeed that might never happen. It makes imagination possible. Language not only describe the reality passively, it rather creates the reality by its practices and imagination. Language performs the double task - the task of reporting the fact and also as the expression of feeling.

imagination and emotion. The creation of new meanings and therefore the new knowledge is the property of human language.

(7) Language is a social institution established for the purpose of communication, communication between different individuals or social groups. Every institution must have some common rules and conventions. Every member of the institution must conform to these rules and conventions for their common interest. So if communication is to take place, the participants must share the common conventions, agreed ways of behaving to cooperate with each other. Otherwise the very concept of communication would make no sense at all.

(8) Language is highly compositional in nature. The principle of compositionality states that the meaning of a complex expression is determined by the meanings of its component parts and the way of their combination. For example, the meaning of the sentence "The beauty of her face is like the beauty of moon" depends on the meaning of the component parts which are 'the', 'beauty', 'of', 'her', 'face', 'is' and the 'like', which belongs to different linguistic classes like noun, verb, adjective, adverb, article and so on. Language also possesses some specific rules for combining different words which belong to different linguistic classes into a sentence. According to many linguists and philosophers

sentence is the only bearer of meaning.

This compositional nature of language is sometimes compared with the numerical system of mathematics. We learn only few basic numerals and compose infinite number out of these basic numerals. For example, learning the numbers 2, 3, 4, 6 and 7 we can construct the infinite number of numerical unit like 23467, 32467, 43267, 24367, 63427, 72436 and so on by their infinite possible combination. But the difference between the two systems in regard to their compositionality lies in the fact that every combination of numeral makes a meaningful numerical unit but every combination of words or phrases would not make a meaningful unit of language i.e. the sentence. This is because mathematics is independent of reality. It is full of abstractions. While the language is highly related with reality. So we cannot accept any combination of symbol. Certain manner of combination of words are permissible while the others are not. There are so many restrictions on language, may be it logical, epistemological, metaphysical or conventional restrictions. It seems to me that the problem of meaningfulness and meaninglessness has something to do with this compositional nature of language. Compositional pattern sometimes goes wrong. It goes wrong in several ways, some of them may be drastic than others. Plainly the rules of grammar can

determine which combination of words are legitimate or makes sense and which combination of words are nonsensical or senseless, i.e. the combination of words are being excluded from the language and withdrawn from circulation.¹ Language is filled with the questions of acceptability - acceptability of the sequences of the words or phrases. Sometimes we are misled by the grammatical confusion and make wrong combination of words due to the wrong grammatical analogy. And "philosophical problems arise" says Wittgenstein "when language goes on holiday".² Wittgenstein gives various instances which are the result of such grammatical confusions.

- (1) Time flows
- (2) I feel the depth of water is n feet
- (3) Thinking takes place in our mind
- (4) I can not have his toothache.

These sentences are the result of wrong grammatical analogy, some of them may be called as nonsensical and the others result from looking them out of context. We know "River flows" is a perfectly grammatical sentence. This leads us to make up sentences like "Time flows". And think that this sentence also makes sense literally. Sometimes we superimpose the form of one sentence to make another sentence with different content.

1 Ludwig Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations. Basil Blackwell, Oxford 1976, Sect 500.

2 Ibid, Section 38.

May be that the sentence "Time flows" has some metaphorical use but literally it makes no sense at all.

The sentence "I feel that the depth of water is n feet" combines well-known words but in a deviant way. We know what 'I feel' means and we also know what 'the depth of water is n feet' means but we don't understand them in combination without any specific explanation. The grammar of the sentence has to be explained to make sense. One can explain this expression in this way as it is illustrated by Wittgenstein, "when I have a certain feeling of tension in my hands, the words 'three feet' spring up in my hand".¹ And the meaning of the sentence "I feel the depth of the water is n feet" is just the explanation one gives to it and nothing more.

Thus it follows that meaningless expressions are not always artificially produced for specific purposes - the purpose of giving an example of meaningless expression or making a joke. The possibility of expressions being meaningless is sometimes inherent in the very nature of language. Meaningless expressions sometimes generate due to the vagueness involved in the natural language, from the inherent flexibility of language.

1 Ludwig Wittgenstein, The Blue and Brown Book, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1978, p.11.