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THEORY OF KNOWLEDGE ESSAY

Prescribed Title 7:

“The vocabulary we have does more than communicate our
knowledge; it shapes what we can know”

Evaluate this claim with reference to different areas of knowledge.

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Introduction:

Wittgenstein once said, "The limits of my language mean the limits of my world". Our knowledge of one language, i.e. our vocabulary, does more than express our thoughts; it shapes what we can know: it limits or enhances our learning and communication. Traditionally defined, vocabulary comprises all the words in a language, dictionary or lexicon. I shall refer to vocabulary as the range of words with their corresponding explanations, which forms part of a language user's knowledge. Such vocabulary not only aids the user in expressing himself, but it also shapes the way the individual attains and understands knowledge.

A user's vocabulary is composed of basic and complex words. Basic words represent simple ideas, such as *flower*, *tree* and *cloud*. Complex words, also called compound words, represent complex ideas that require the understanding of the basic words which compose their definition in order to be properly understood. Examples of complex words are: *capitalism*, *altruism* and *charity*. Given their complexity, compound words possess a range of correctness, as opposed to the natural correctness inherent to simple words. This is argued in one of Plato's dialogues, *Cratylus* (Plato, 320 B.C). The nature of words is discussed: do names have an intrinsic relation with the reality they symbolize (natural), or are they arbitrary (conventional)?.

It results that compound words cannot exist without their basic counterparts, such as *capitalism* and *capital*. Could somebody understand capitalism without the knowledge of capital? The construction of vocabulary and grammar seems to vary greatly between language and language, and nonetheless, words seem to have a natural origin to them, because no matter how different their phonemes are, different words in different languages seem to have the same meaning all the same. In a sense, words are like tools, only made of the different materials (Plato, 320 B.C).

The vocabulary and grammar is inherent to each user's knowledge and understanding. It follows that this vocabulary shapes what the individual can know and express, because if he is to explain something, he is bound to use his own (limited or broad) vocabulary. The understanding of other individuals is then affected by the understanding of the vocabulary used by the first. The problematic is the need of a coherent understanding of the shared vocabulary, i.e. a proper use of the tools at the communicator's disposition.

The sciences:

The sciences, like the arts, have very specific technical vocabulary to represent its concepts. Scientific vocabulary is usually universally accepted with little or no differences between languages. A scientific concept remains the same in other languages, no matter how its representation changes. e.g. Force or change of impulse over time, remains the same in every language, no matter how it is represented (*fuerza*, *kracht*, etc), as opposed to the every-day life meaning attributed to force, which can represent many things.

The correctness margin for scientific concepts is very narrow. Science explains the world using simple models. Each model is built upon seven fundamental concepts (length, mass,

time, current, temperature, intensity of light and quantity of mass). More complex phenomena is explained by combining various simple models. The arts are similar insofar as they are also divided in basic components, such as composition, color, etc. As a result of this, there is no space for error in scientific definitions, because scientific names and concepts are tools to express ideas or description of phenomena in an objective way.

It is very difficult to properly define the seven basic concepts of science. This lack of definitions may lead some people astray to think they are subjective rather than objective terms, however it is important to recognize that this seven terms, as well as the majority of the most fundamental basic words, lack a proper definition, for the mere fact there is nothing smaller upon which they were created (insofar as we know). Time is such an example. It does not matter if a Chinese person thinks of time as moving from up to down or if a US citizen thinks of it as displacing from back to forwards, or if both think of time as being continuous when in reality it might be discrete; time still represents the same basic scientific concept no matter the language. It therefore follows, that a user's vocabulary can only alter the user's notion of the concepts, but not its most natural and inherent objectiveness. A few exceptions would be the terms *atom* and *cell* whose definitions changed with the advancement of technology. They no longer represent the smallest living or mass units.

Literature:

According to Jean Piaget, the learning process consists of accommodation and assimilation. Little children learn by experience and repetition that a car is called a car, and a flower is called a flower. They assimilate this new knowledge and fit it into an already existing framework. Nonetheless, this can lead to faulty understanding by considering certain events unimportant, or misinterpreting the message of educators. Hence, equal words might have different meanings in the minds of different individuals. This becomes especially evident when two individuals from different time periods or different places are confronted. The vocabulary of the first individual limits his understanding because words have a different meaning for him have than the meaning conveyed by the other individual. The first individual might adopt, reject or fuse the meaning portrayed by the other into his already existing framework. When reading Shakespeare, for instance, one word can completely change the meaning of a sentence if not correctly understood. In order not to miss the message, literature is frequently discussed in groups. A more complete view on what a text is saying is attained by comparing your own perspective with that of other people who are reading the book.

We can claim to have a better insight on what an author was trying to convey, but we cannot claim to know what he or she really meant to say if we do not fully understand his or her vocabulary. The vocabulary is affected by the individual's interpretation of the words, which in turn, become affected when discussing a book in a group. The resulting enlarged vocabulary makes the words less precise and with a greater margin of correctness. The strive to give each word a more exact and definite meaning gets overrun by what could be called, a faulty use of the vocabulary for aesthetic reasons.

Languages:

Languages contrast with literature in the sense that different languages possess a more varying vocabulary and structure. Let us assume every person starts knowing a one and only language. That person has been raised with the vocabulary and grammar of that language, and most importantly, in the natural environment of that language, for languages are territory-based. Hence, that person's vocabulary refers to the typical elements of his own territory. If this happened to be Sweden, he might know more than five words for snow; whereas if he lived in Africa, he might know many words for rain, but no word for snow. The same applies to customs. Languages are the mirror of the culture and environment they belongs to.

If the above is true; a person, when confronted with a foreign language, will shape the new knowledge learned by first translating it into his own language, and given the diversity of vocabulary, the end result would be different than in the original language. The biggest obstacle lies in the meanings of words that at first glance seem to be the same in both languages, but do actually carry very different meanings. In a sense, the tools, which at a first glance seemed to carry the same meaning, become adapted to their language.

In 1948 George Orwell's 1984 proposed a scenario in which if someone's vocabulary was limited, so would be his thoughts, for people are unable to think things for which no words exist. Hence their vocabulary shapes the things they can know. Nonetheless, it is important to recognize that this argument is only valid insofar as the concepts encircled by the words defining them are also abolished. For instance, people would only be unable to think of freedom if the word didn't exist and everybody lived free or as slaves. Hence, the following argument:

Concepts that are unknown to an individual will be difficult for him to comprehend without enlarging his own vocabulary. As these words become familiar to the person in any foreign language, the individual will only be able to express them in the new language, not his original language. Therefore a language, by having a limited vocabulary and defined grammar, can restrain the way of thinking of many people, whereas a wider vocabulary and more flexible grammar can enhance it, being the major risk, nonetheless, to be misunderstood by other people.

Conclusion:

Although vocabulary is one of the many symbolic communication systems in existence, it plays a big role in the way we understand, interpret and reproduce knowledge. It is the mirror of our own perception of the world. This is why objective areas of knowledge, such as the sciences, are much less affected by the vocabulary we own, than subjective areas of knowledge, such as literature, and history where our interpretation of the words play a tremendous role in our understanding of what is written. The arts take middle ground given they have some defined terms, as well as others which are subject to interpretation. Since our vocabulary is constantly changing, we can conclude that what we know is shaped by how we understand our vocabulary, and that our vocabulary is shaped by what we know and what we learn, by our interactions with other people.

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