

The Language Labyrinth

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Discarding the traditional definition of the language as vehicle of thought, linguists and philosophers of language, these days, rather hold that language and thought are interwoven with each other. While L S Vygotsky, the Russian psycholinguist dubbed words as 'unit(s) of verbal thought', another school promoted a theory known as Sapir-Whorf hypothesis which maintains that language shapes our experience and determines our perception of the world around. The latter view has not been shared by a large section of linguists and sociologists; but emphasis on the role of language in understanding forms of human interaction has gained in strength. John Searle of California University, who is regarded as a philosopher of language, insists on the 'crucial' role of language in making sense of human relations and observes that those relations would have been 'impossible without language.' According to Searle, words such as love and hate, do not just describe our mental attitudes or experiences. They are 'verbal categories' which contain within themselves concepts which are 'a part of the experience'.

Language, today, is considered central to any socio-cultural or political discourse; even as the role and function of language has come under scanner, thanks to the perspective provided by Swiss linguist Ferdinand Saussure and Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, among others. It is interesting that Sukumar Roy, a Bengali poet, best known for his brilliant nonsense rhymes, wrote an article on the 'oppressive' nature of language in the second decade of the last century. And during the same time, Saussure and Wittgenstein shook our long-cherished notion of language by pointing out that words have no intrinsic meanings of their own. They are arbitrary signs which acquire meanings from the context in which they are used. A section of ancient Indian philosophy had earlier held that there is no natural relationship between a word and its meaning. The new theory added that meaning derives from the context and is attributed to a word by us who use the language. While Saussure specified context as the particular social convention that characterises every society, Wittgenstein called in question the very ability of language to express all our thoughts and feelings. For Wittgenstein, what we call meaning is the 'problematic' about the world.

Wittgenstein's view of language continues to leave a profound impact on the current-day philosophical thinking which attaches greater importance to language in human discourse and at the same time looks at its role critically. Words, we have come to understand, are not always very transparent. As Wittgenstein cautioned us, they do not also have the potential to express all human experiences. Moreover, words are not as innocuous as they appear to be. They do not only describe but also hide facts and serve as a potent tool at the hands of the powers that be.

History confirms the view that colonialism and imperialism purposefully used language to establish their hegemony over the 'native' population of the occupied territories. Gauri Viswanathan has brilliantly shown how the introduction of the English language and education in India by the British East India Company served as a 'mask of conquest'. The same device was employed in other parts of the world, particularly in South America and Africa by the Spanish, Portuguese

and British conquerors. The colonisers not only imposed their language and culture on the colonised; they used words, the meaningful units of language, to distort facts and cover up their exploitative strategies. Language played a significant role in this process.

Euphemism, a linguistic rhetoric, intended to describe a crude fact by way of a milder word or phrase—was ingeniously used by the colonisers to hide their outrageous acts. As described by Joseph Conrad in his story 'An Outpost of Progress' (1897), they coined a word 'fetish' to rename the storehouses meant for plundered goods and tried to sanctify their invasion by calling themselves 'pilgrims'. One may find more such examples in George Orwell's novels. Raja M in an article in the *Statesman* (May 1, 1999) quotes Orwell to note that such euphemisms were 'designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable.' During the second World War, the Nazis used this device to justify the genocide of the Jews as the 'Final Solution'. In recent times, a spokesperson at a NATO press conference (1999) chose the expression 'collateral damages' to give an account of the casualties caused by NATO bombings in the erstwhile Yugoslavia. One may also recall that Bill Clinton, charged with sexual abuse, finally coughed up an adjective 'inappropriate' to explain away his alleged offensive behaviour.

Language, which is hailed as an essentially human attribute, is therefore neither neutral nor objective as it is often made out to be. Apparently innocent words may serve to mask or distort unpleasant facts and thus deceive one section of people by another one. 'Globalisation' and 'liberalisation' seem to be the most glaring contributions to this deceptive vocabulary in the present-day context. The concept of globalisation has an historical aura around it. What Goethe or Rabindranath envisaged was the globalisation of culture—a happy combination of the best of the East and the West. And now the same term is being floated to garb the policy of neo-imperialism which is likely to lead to globalisation of poverty and hunger. With the food-crisis and unemployment gripping the world, the process has, in fact, already set in. What passes for liberalisation in the economy of globalisation has overturned the familiar connotation of the word. Placed in a particular context, a word evokes, as Chomsky puts it, a 'mental image'. It may be of beauty or cruelty depending on the context. The word 'liberal', for example, is usually associated with such qualities as generousness or broad-mindedness. This term is being deliberately used to wrap up the face that the kind of economic liberalisation that globalisation prescribes is bound to add to the marginalisation of a large part of the global population.

What is most intriguing is that one cannot totally avoid or reject such deceptive terms while challenging the politics of globalisation and the accompanying economic order. Language thus seems to be a trap people are all boxed into. It is a systematic network that encircles our entire mental universe. People cannot do without language and once they have recourse to it, they get entangled in its labyrinth. The recent development-debate has also run into the same predicament. A critique of the ongoing development process cannot but draw on specific terms which the advocates of this destructive mode of development have improvised to dish out development as something progressive and palatable. Language plays its tricky game of deception by posing destruction as 'development', savagery as 'solution'.

It is, of course, no use blaming language as such. Language has no life of its own. It throbs with life and changes its form and colour through human use. And human beings have used or exploited it to express the finest feelings and cover up the most heinous crimes as well. Language which is actually a system of arbitrary signs, has been made to play an atrocious role at human hands. Language, by itself, cannot revolt. Should the fight against globalisation entail a project to develop an alternative vocabulary? The idea may not be totally utopian. Untouchables in India, once renamed 'Harijans' by Gandhi, have now almost rejected this tag and they prefer to introduce themselves as dalits or depressed classes. Similarly, American-Indian has thrown out 'Red Indian' which is now viewed as an offensive term.

References :

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4. John Searle in Bryan Magee ed. *Men of Ideas*, 1978.
5. Noam Chomsky, *Reflections on Language*, 1976.