

WORDS AND LANGUAGE

'Man is in disguise, covered by his tongue'
Hazrat Ali

Defining Cultural and Consensus Reality

Our consensus world view and understanding of reality is strongly influenced by the nature and structure of language, which imposes a “filter” on our perceptions and understanding:

We tacitly agree among ourselves to call a certain object a “tree.” We then forget that “tree” is an arbitrary concept that in no way reveals the true identity of this object. What, then, is a tree? A philosopher might call it ultimate truth; a botanist, a living organism; a physicist, a mass of atoms; an artist, a unique shape with distinctive coloring; a carpenter, a potential table. To a dog, however, it is merely an urinal. All descriptions, explanations, or analyses are but a looking from one side at that which has infinite dimensions. The true nature of the tree is more than anything that can be said about it. Similarly we tinker with time by dividing it into years, months, days, etc. This is convenient, but we need to remember that this “slicing” is artificial and arbitrary, the product of a discriminating mind, which discerns only the surface of things. Timelessness is unaccounted for. Thus we conceive a world that is conceptual, limited, and very far removed from actuality. (1)

As language has evolved, it has come to dominate how we communicate with each other. Yet oral and written communication are only a fraction of possible ways of communicating and sharing our ideas, thoughts and impressions of the world. “The art of true communication lies in tranquility and its delightful variety of spontaneous expressions.”

In many ancient languages the sound was closer to that to which it referred. Words had much more dynamic power. Today, at least in our Western languages, words have lost their proximity with the real. As we have become more taken by achievement and attainment, so our centres have become even more ejected into that world of end-gaining. Our language, being a brain activity, has followed our desires accordingly. You can see around you more and more objects to be acquired, and each object calls for a new sound to distinguish it from other objects. This is far indeed from those sounds which come out of, which express and point to, our essential nature. (2)

Language largely serves to define our consensus reality, partly by both including and eliminating certain aspects of phenomenal existence:

Learning as we do largely through books, we have been forced to think in sequences we designate as rational. This has led us to define existence and everything that makes it up in a dictionary way. It is the drawback of such a definition that its very precision robs a word of resonance. There is a complex series of echoes emitted by every word, just as a filaments of meaning stretch from fact to fact, making nonsense of our Cartesian clarity. The language of logic, like that of dictionaries and the constructions of mathematics, leads us to a truth which is of one kind, truth as particular, singular, arrived at by the elimination of alternatives. (3)

Our contemporary civilization is sometimes characterized as being under the hypnotic power of linear verbal communication and thinking. We forget that words and language can only capture and express a segment of total reality. "Our language is based on associative thinking, each word being coloured by all kinds of individual and subjective images, sensations and thoughts."

Naturally our thinkers write and speak words – and yet everything is ruthlessly excluded from their communication which might serve to remind us what is actually being communicated is not thought, but mere words. Language has become for us like water: a tasteless, odourless, colourless medium; and like fish we are only aware of its existence when for some reason we are suddenly deprived of it. We are effectively anaesthetized to words; and perhaps precisely for that very reason we have been more enslaved by them than any other culture in history. It is salutary to observe communities where even the simplest people seem capable of maintaining a certain ironic detachment from what they say or hear; where it is not immediately assumed that the broadcast or printed word should carry more weight than the spoken word, or the spoken more than the unspoken. (4)

A common Western cultural assumption, especially among intellectuals, is that all knowledge is available in books and through the medium of the written or spoken word. Although almost all cultures provide a degree of latitude and scope for thought, this is inevitably within a certain defined domain. "Variations in ideas and differences in opinion give the impression of freedom of thought and speech, which are of little use without the development of understanding."

Much of the disharmony and misunderstanding in the world is due to faulty understanding of human languages by others of different upbringings and cultural backgrounds. "Ordinary people are separated in understanding of each other by the fact that ordinary human communication is faulty, crude, dishonest and insincere." A traditional Sufi teaching story illustrates this contention:

Four men – a Persian, a Turk, an Arab, and a Greek – were standing in a village street. They were travelling companions, making for some distant place; but at this moment they were arguing over the spending of a single piece of money which was all they had among them.

"I want to buy *angur*," said the Persian.

"I want *uzum*," said the Turk.

"I want *inab*," said the Arab.

"No!" said the Greek, "we should buy *stafil*."

Another traveller passing, a linguist, said, "Give the coin to me. I undertake to satisfy the desires of all of you." At first they would not trust him. Ultimately they let him have the coin. He went to the shop of a fruit seller and bought four small bunches of grapes.

"This is my *angur*," said the Persian.

"But this is what I call *uzum*," said the Turk.

"You have brought me *inab*," said the Arab.

"No!" said the Greek, this is my language is *stafil*."

The grapes were shared out among them, and each realized that the disharmony had been due to his faulty understanding of the language of the others. (5)

Subjective and Restrictive Nature

Words have a strong associative and conditioning power that can distort normal human thinking processes and communication with others. The languages we use to communicate thoughts and ideas are much more limited and subjective than we realize. Although people have a firm belief that they speak the same language and understand one another, this conviction has virtually no foundation whatever as the meaning of words alters according to the background and experiences of the people using them:

The language in which contemporary men speak is so imperfect that whatever they speak about they can never be sure that they call the same ideas by the same words. On the contrary, one can say almost certainly that they understand every word differently and, while appearing to speak about the same subject, in practice speak about quite different things. Moreover, for every man the meaning of his own words and the meaning which he puts into them changes in accordance with his own thoughts and moods, with the images which he associates at the moment with the words. (6)

Words, ideas and concepts have a useful and necessary function in human life but it is important to understand their limitations as vehicles of comprehensive understanding. "When we point to the moon with a finger, others are apt to take the finger for the moon. Yet without the finger the moon is not recognized, and when the moon is recognized the finger can be thrown away."

Man makes many tools and uses them effectively in various fields of his activity, but he is always exposing himself to the tyranny of the tools he has made. The result is that he is no more master of himself but an abject slave

to his surroundings, and the worst thing is that he is not conscious of this fact. This is especially noticeable in the realm of thought. He has created many valuable concepts by which he has learnt to handle realities. But he now takes concepts for realities, thought for experience, systems for life. He forgets that concepts are his own creations, and by no means exhaust reality. (7)

Certain words have strong associations which can evoke immediate conditioned reactions in most people:

The word 'fear' is powerful. As soon as you pronounce it, it stimulates a neurochemical change. So give up the concept of fear and you'll be left facing the perception, the sensation. When you name something you go away from it in its nakedness and endow it with the accoutrements of memory. (8)

Human beings are always trying to bring the "unknown" back to the comfortable realm of the "known" and familiar. Assigning names to things conveys the impression that their meaning is understood:

As a rule, when people realize that they do not understand a thing they try *to find a name* for what they do not 'understand,' and when they find a name they say 'I understand.' But to 'find a name' does not mean to 'understand.' Unfortunately, people are usually satisfied with names. A man who knows a great many names, that is, a great many words, is deemed to understand a great deal – again excepting, of course, any sphere of practical activity wherein his ignorance very soon becomes evident. (9)

The mechanical use of words without an understanding of their inner significance can actually act as a barrier to higher understanding. Words can create their own prison with their seeming certitude and precision as they "freeze" living human experience within their own strictly defined limits. "A word is absolute and, within a closed system, can be defined precisely. Moreover, words can be ordered according to an inflexible and absolute set of laws called logic, which rigorously excludes all contradictions and all uncertainty."

Even proverbs and wise sayings, when repeated automatically and without genuine insight, become "worn out" and serve as mere hollow truisms. And sayings, dictums and proverbs, which appear "wise" but belong to a society or culture long past, are often irrelevant and even misleading to the people of today.

Words can take on a life of their own, creating an abstract world based on its own internal logic and consistency. Yet ultimately, words can never express the fullness of reality and the mystery of existence:

Words reveal, but they also hide. Some of the most famous words spoken in this, or any century were $E = mc^2$. These words and the idea that gave them life reveal relationships that were not recognized before, and brought a whole new world into being. Underlying them and supporting them was a host of other words or formulas and equations supported and integrated one with the other, like a cathedral made of thought. But for all its beauty and functionality this is still a verbal and thought structure. It is still a veil that transforms the clear light of knowing the way a stained-glass window transforms the light of the sun. In time a new idea and a new world will come into being that will melt down even this elaborate structure and take its place. (10)

Instruments of Rational and Symbolic Communication

Words and language are one of the most inventive creations of humankind, yet they contain both a great gift and the possibility of dangerous misuse. “When considering words we should dwell not only on their binding, limiting, and restrictive nature but also on their liberating, creative and opening power as well.” When words, language and thought are properly understood and employed, the possibility of higher perception and consciousness emerges. “Within mankind is a ‘treasure’ which is inside a house (fixed thinking patterns) which has to be broken down before it can be found.”

It is important to distinguish between the useful function of words as a mode of communication and their distorting influence as a means of superficial understanding, conditioning and enslavement:

Q: Words are needed for communication.

A: For exchange of information – yes. But real communication between people is not verbal. For establishing and maintaining relationship affectionate awareness expressed in direct action is required. Not what you say, but what you do is what matters. Words are made by the mind and are meaningful only on the level of the mind. The word ‘bread’: neither can you eat or live by it. It merely conveys an idea. It acquires meaning only with the actual eating . . . Words have their limited usefulness, but we put no limits to them and bring ourselves to the brink of disaster. Our noble ideas are finely balanced by ignoble actions. We talk of God, Truth and Love, but instead of direct experience we have definitions. Instead of enlarging and deepening action we chisel our definitions. And we imagine that we know what we can define! (11)

When rightly used words have the power to transform human lives. But it is necessary to realize both the limitations and possibilities of words and language. “The mind shapes the language and the language shapes the mind. Both are tools, use them but don’t misuse them.”

Q: I often find myself saying the wrong thing at the wrong time. How can I come to ‘right speech’?

A: In right speech there is no psychological involvement. Language, speaking, thinking, that are free from the ego, are complete in themselves, autonomous and spontaneous. Right speech makes no comparisons and does not refer to a speaker. It is purely factual. Attention is a spontaneous action of the brain and it recognizes forms and names them. Psychological language on the other hand is always a qualification. It either refers to a centre or makes comparisons between objects. For example, you may be taken by the beauty of a painting. But you must also feel the reflex to interpret it, own it, and so on. Take note of these reflexes that interfere with pure observation. When personal thinking comes in, you are no longer open to beauty. Use words, thinking, in the right way. In using them in a right way you come to clarity. As long as you live on the plane of believing you are an individual entity, you fix the words on the level of this experience and their symbolic function as pointers to stillness is not realized. Real apperception can only take place in the complete annihilation of the pseudo-entity. When you speak and listen from your wholeness without evaluation and comparison, then the words are not fixed and dissolve in this completeness. (12)

Language is linear, dualistic and sequential, an activity of the rational, logical left hemisphere of the brain. Words and language can only suggest or point to the greater spiritual dimensions of existence. The Zen analogy of “the finger and the moon” aptly illustrates the relationship between language and sensation, symbol and reality.

Words are essentially symbols, representations by convention and habit, which we impose on reality. “Things just happen to be as they are, but we want to build them into a pattern, laid down by the structure of our language. So strong is this habit that we tend to deny reality to what cannot be verbalized.”

The moment you start talking you create a verbal universe, a universe of words, ideas, concepts and abstractions, interwoven and interdependent, most wonderfully generating, supporting and explaining each other and yet all without essence or substance, mere creations of the mind. Words create words, reality is silent.

Q: When you talk I hear you. Is it not a fact?

A: That you hear is a fact. What you hear – is not. The fact can be experienced, and in that sense the sound of the word and the mental ripples it causes are experienced. There is no other reality behind it. Its meaning is purely conventional, to be remembered; a language can be easily forgotten, unless practised.

Q: If words have no reality in them why talk at all?

A: They serve their limited purpose of inter-personal communication. Words do not convey facts, they signal them. Once you are beyond the person, you need no words.

Q: What can take me beyond the person? How to go beyond consciousness?

A: Words and questions come from the mind and hold you there. To go beyond the mind you must be silent and quiet. Peace and silence, silence and peace – that is the way beyond. Stop asking questions. (13)

In many spiritual traditions we are cautioned not to take language, words, names and concepts as reality itself, and understand that truth is immensely greater than anything that can be said about it. “Reality is that which transcends dualistic understanding of subject and object, self and not-self.”

Q: Human beings seem to have a gift of language. What is language?

A: Expressing oneself through symbols. The symbol is not what is symbolized. You use concepts, but when you take the concept for the actual thing symbolized, you are not always able to see where the concept points. The concept points to something. Before you use concepts, put yourself in a situation of pure perception; observe birds, observe fish, without thinking, only see them, their shapes, colors, movements, their relation to other fish, without naming anything, only for the joy of observing. We are not too familiar with pure observation because as soon as an object appears to our senses, we immediately conceptualize it.

Q: So conceptualizing is a misuse of language?

A: I did not say misuse, but we should use it in a less aggressive way. The conceptualization of a situation is often very aggressive. There is nothing wrong with using concepts, but when you judge, compare, or condemn, you close the situation. There is nothing wrong with using concepts to explain the facts, but the moment we judge or compare, we close the situation. (14)

Direct Experience of Life

Our ordinary perception and understanding of reality is based on dividing the One into discrete objects and events divorced from the underlying unity or ground of Being that transcends differentiation and abstraction. To understand and participate in the higher dimensions of reality requires a certain way of perceiving the world beyond logic, rationality and conventional

thought. For instance, there is a persistent, universal tradition throughout history of “the acquisition of knowledge and information from supernatural or other sources.”

Words and concepts must be *directly* experienced in order to understand what they truly mean. One can only speak to a limited extent about aspects of reality which transcend the domain of speech and thought. An ancient saying alludes to this: ‘*Whoever has the skill to fashion precious jewellery also has the ability to hide it effectively from thieves.*’

The fullness of reality cannot be adequately grasped or described in words; it must be directly perceived and experienced. “We have the impression that the world is made up of things, but this world of things is derived from a deeper, unified world, a world of *immediate experience.*”

How does one look at a flower? Does the brain immediately scan the memory to find the right name? And what about all the comments about it and the reactions: “I like it” or “I don’t like it”? Where is the real flower, the whole flower? Can the word “flower” be seen for what it is – a name, a label, with many associations that usually interfere with direct perception? We have seen so many flowers and “know” them from memory. We see the remembrance instead of the real thing right in front of our eyes. We may have drawn and painted them, photographed them, or made arrangements of them. All that stuff enters into the looking and obscures clarity. What happens in looking at just one flower? Can the word “flower” be put aside, so one looks afresh, like a little baby not knowing it’s a flower but seeing something strikingly yellow and red, going to it, touching it, pulling at it? (15)

Openness to human experience, welcoming the impacts of life itself, is a prerequisite to the cultivation of wisdom and understanding. “When you walk down the street and look at things or people, these impressions are teaching you. If you *try* actively to learn from them, you learn certain things, but they are predetermined things.” Certain aspects of life, especially deep experiences, can only be perceived by an inner sense and not just understood intellectually or by words:

When there is complete understanding, there is silence. There is no talk. If you share an experience with someone, and this is a true and real – I mean really deep – experience can you put it into words? Do you want to put it into words? When you are in love, does ‘I love you’ mean anything? Or is it the touch of a hand, the exchanging of a glance, which means real love? Something very important is happening in your mind when you have an experience. You take the experience in, and your mind labels it. To do this it has to split it up into a vast number of tiny impressions. Your mind may not be ready for the whole experience, so that the mind cannot handle the impressions. It will select some, and then transmit back to another part of your brain an assessment. This assessment is what intellectuals use. They deal in incomplete assessments. This

is why some agree, some differ. In real experience there is no possibility of disagreement. (16)

Self-knowledge is not based on words and concepts, but rather on the direct experience of our physical, emotional, and mental functioning through impartial self-observation and self-study. "You know everything, but you do not know yourself. For the self is not known through words – only direct insight will reveal it. Look within, search within."

In order to perceive the true nature of ourselves and of existence, concepts, mental formulations and logical assertions must be put aside. "The more we try to be exact with definitions, statements or propositions the more we face complexities and confusions and ambiguities."

The human dilemma of communication is that we cannot communicate ordinarily without words and signs. But even ordinary experience tends to be falsified by our habits of verbalization and rationalization. The convenient tools of language enable us to decide beforehand what we think things mean, and tempt us all too easily to see things only in a way that fits our logical preconceptions and our verbal formulas. Instead of seeing *things* and *facts* as they are we see them as reflections and verifications of the sentences we have previously made up in our minds. We quickly forget how to simply *see* things and substitute our words and our formulas for the things themselves, manipulating facts so that we see only what conveniently fits our prejudices. Zen uses language against itself to blast out these preconceptions and to destroy the specious "reality" in our minds so that we can *see directly*. Zen is saying, as Wittgenstein said, "Don't think: Look!" (17)

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