

Type the number of the topic AND the name of the author of the quotation here

Topic 1, Aristotle

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Introduction:

“Spoken sounds are symbols of affections in the soul, and written marks symbols of spoken sounds. And just as written marks are not the same for all men, neither are spoken sounds. But what these are in the first place signs of – affections of the soul – are the same for all; and what these affections are likenesses of – actual things – are also the same.”

Language is by far one of the most intriguing mysteries of mankind. The importance that words have assumed in everyone’s life since imemorial times is remarkable, and worth of admiration and wonder. And philosophers have thus directed their reflexions to questioning the nature, vastness and deepness of what allows us to express ourselves and communicate with others.

That will be the goal of my essay. Starting from the cited quotation, I will make an attempt to understand and dissect what Aristotle meant. Then, an attempt to explore some of the key features of language will be done, always oriented by the initial citation. Finally, I will try to conclude, based on such reflexions, what is the ultimate source of language.

Adressing the quote

Aristotle’s view points in a direction that has been followed by most philosophers when the concern is language. The imediat definition that would come to one’s mind would be “a way to express my thoughts and feelings, and to comprehend others’ ” . Disregarding the problem that would arise with an analytical approach of this (for we would have to define concepts such as “thoughts” and “feelings”), that definition would be supported by Aristotle’s words. When he claims that “Spoken sounds are symbols of affections in the soul (...)”, what I believe he means is that *spoken sounds* are a form or representation of what he defines as *affections in the soul* (I will come back to this point further ahead). This, I think, is one of the most – if

not the most – important features of language, i.e. the fact that it allows us to communicate with others.

However, the greek philosopher draws attention to an important detail: “(...) And just as written marks are not the same for all men, neither are spoken sounds (...)”. The lack of (apparent) universality in language is another characteristic that is somehow fascinating. There is not the need to go very far to find a relevant example of this. The mere reading of the topics for this Olympiads, expressed in four different languages, displays how many different forms the seemingly same idea can assume – either graphically or orally.

Nevertheless, the perhaps most relevant conclusion Aristotle reaches in this matter is what regards the *affections of the soul*. His claim is that, ultimately, all languages converge to the same source, and such source is what he calls the *actual things*. This, of course, is most likely to generate controversy, at least in theory, but first we must try to realize what the greek means with those enigmatic expressions.

The aristotelic work was highly influenced by his masters, whether we mean his socratic or his platonic heritage, and in this quote this is perceptible. The notion of *actual things* is a clear reminder of Plato’s *Theory of Forms*. For motives of time, I will not have the opportunity to focus much attention on it, but the main idea I believe this section reflects is that, likewise in Plato’s cave, language only expresses the shadows of the real world, the *actual things*. However, and in such analogy’s perspective, the way people express those *actual things* is different – one could think, for instance, that is because of the cave’s inhabitants different positions, or their points of view, or something alike – and thus leading to the differences found in *spoken sounds* and *written marks*.

All the same, we are still left with the notion of *affections of the soul*. This, I believe, is an attempt to express, not only what I called feelings and thoughts on a simplistic definition of language, but a much deeper domain. This includes our inner selves, the very manifestation of who we are, our most profound experiences and desires, beliefs and emotions. Evidently, this is a personal interpretation of the philosopher’s words, and as we have seen, it is therefore not as reliable as the original source.

Other features of language

Translation, Language Disparity, Wittgenstein’s Family Resemblance

Another key feature of the language issue is translation. Translation is similar to an art, not in the common sense of the word (although it is discussable on an aesthetical view) but on the fact that it involves a good set of both personal interpretation and elaboration. For one to take

a text (or oral testimony), in which an original author once carved his personal traits and marks, and convert it into another language, it is required that the translator:

1. Has both the linguistic skills and the capacity to understand what the author meant;
2. Is able to express in a coherent way, in the new language, what was said or written in the previous one;
3. Manages to preserve the innerent ideas and hidden meanings of the original source.

This might prove to be a challenging, if not impossible, task. The lack of universality of languages – even though they might come from the same ideal source, regardless of their different roots – has managed to create a few disparities between idioms, which is sometimes sometimes a barrier to a faithful and accurate translation. Although this does not imply that that communication is not possible, or that translation will not allow one to understand the the author’s main ideas, it certainly destroys the original sense.

This implies an even most interesting conclusion. If there are words that only exist in certain languages, then two conclusions are possible: either they have been adopted in their original form in other languages, or they express something that only exists in such language’s cultural and linguistic background (this, of course, would be a wide theme to explore, but the lack of time will not allow a much-needed approach).

A few examples are significative. European languages are rich in this disparity: in spanish the word *sobremesa*, which designs the talk after a meal is over; in portuguese the word *saudade*, for the expression of a feeling of longing for something; the english language, which determined a lot of borrowings from other languages (the technological words, *google*, *mouse*, and so on, would be a good representation); french, with the characeteristic gastronomic words for instance; german and its abundant philosophical terminology, *weltanschauung* is one of kind. However, other examples could be cited: japanese (*kamikaze*), hindu (*karma*), or eskimos, who have 42 different words for what one would call in english “snow” are just three another samples.

This last example takes me to another point: since language expresses one’s *affections of the soul*, as Aristotle put it, it is nothing but natural that if a person’s (or people’s) life is highly influenced by a certain aspect – whether it is emotional, psychological or physical – his or her language will reflect it. Since snow is such an extremely important features of an eskimo’s life, it is understandable that he pays more attention to it than a foreigner would, and thus their language manifests this concern too.

A discussion on the philosophical theme of language without mentioning Ludwig Wittgenstein’s work would simply be pointless. In fact, his revolutionary approach to the language issue changed much of our views in this particular subject, contributing to a better better understanding of this *phenomena*. Even though the importance of his reflexions as a

a whole is undeniable, I would like to focus my attention on a particular idea he explored (and then left aside), whose roots go to Friedrich Nietzsche and others.

Wittgenstein wonders about the fact that a single word might express so many realities, which apparently might not have much – or even anything - in common. The example he gives is the word “game”. Game signifies a whole group of activities that do not seem to share much features. They all implicate physical activity, one might argue. Not table games, for instance. They all have a physical support, again. Not word-spelling games. They all implicate a competitive effort? Patience, for instance, is a card game in which one plays alone.

This leads the philosopher to the *Family Resemblance* theory. The idea is that, for a word to express some different realities, those realities do not have to share all key features and thus allow the elaboration of a definition. This, of course, is a severe obstacle to an analytical approach to Philosophy. Instead, what is argued is that they have to share between them (and not all of them) some features, and thus be linked by a “chain of common features”. In other words, a game could be broadly defined (and based on the examples stated before) as “a physical or mental activity, that normally involves competition and or has physical support”. This, of course, is not an accurate definition of the word “game”, but it serves to illustrate Wittgenstein’s point.

A somehow similar approach was Timothy Williamson’s one, a twentieth-century philosopher. Apart from his theory’s other epistemological assumptions (which do not have time or relevance to be included), Williamson questioned Plato’s tripartite definition of knowledge by stating that it was not possible to define knowledge, “(...) for most words express indefinable concepts (...)”. Williamson gave examples of cases such as beauty, and perfection would be the ultimate one, I believe. This takes us back to the original statement by Aristotle, which argued that spoken sounds were manifestations of the *affections of the soul*. According to such theory (and guided by Plato’s analogy), words would always be imperfect representations of the perfect ideas and forms, and thus to define such forms in imperfect concepts is logically impossible.

Finally, it might be relevant to analyse what other sources tell us about the topic of language. The biblical narrative is, I believe, a very peculiar one. The lack of universality of languages, as I have called it throughout the essay – i.e. the fact that there are different and sometimes non-corresponding (in terms of vocabulary) languages – is explained in the Babel Tower episode.

It goes like this. One day, men gathered in an assembly and decided to try to overcome God’s power, by building a tower so high that it touched the sky, providing a path directly from earth to heaven. And so they started the enterprise. However, the adventure was stopped by God, who ruled that men started speaking different languages, in order to punish them for their arrogance. Men suddenly began speaking all kinds of different idioms and thus, unable to understand one another, gave up the enterprise.

This is clearly a metaphor, and the religious dimension here is not relevant, whether one believes such history or not. The point here is that language disparity bursted out from men's men's arrogance and thirst for power. From the conclusions previously reached in this essay, essay, this view is questionable.

Nevertheless, this perspective might have some historical support. The fact that the group of languages there are today descends from a smaller group of languages (a common branch, the roots), and the evidence that the creation of some languages is solely determined by, for instance, political reasons, such as the need to mark a barrier between two distinct cultural groups (the pride both scottish and welsh feel about their languages is a pragmatic example, surging from the need to demarcate themselves from the "british oppressor"). However, this does not affect much the reflections previously stated.

Conclusion

After a succinct study of some of this topic's characteristics, most of them envisioned since Ancient Greece by Aristotle, it is easy to realize that language is an incredibly complex and broad topic. Although it is by far impossible to approach all this matter had to offer in terms terms of reflexion, namely some of Wittgenstein's most important work, my intention was to to explore the quote by Aristotle and develop each one of its conceptual frameworks – to attempt a form of an analytical approach, that is to say. I did so by exploring Aristotle's argument – language as an imperfect expression of the affections of the soul, the lack of universality of language, the quote's relation to Plato's Theory of Forms. Afterwards, some of of the key features of language were mentioned, namely translation, the disparity between between languages, Wittgenstein's Family Resemblance Theory, Timothy Williamson's view view of knowledge as it is conditioned by language, and a biblical and historical example that that might help reinforce (or refute) our ideas about this topic.

This, I hope, was a helpful attempt to try to understand language's nature. It is, according to what I argued in my essay, in fact an expression of one's *affections of the soul*, as Aristotle claimed. However, language is also a reflexion of the cultural background, the people's life, and their very character. And all this aspects of life are reflected, as Aristotle would put it, in the *spoken sounds* and *written marks*.