



Language of Embodied Experiences: A Discussion from Phenomenological Perspective

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ABSTRACT: The tendency to understand and interpret language only through syntax and semantics makes its periphery limited. Language is a medium of communication and it is necessary to take into account all forms of communication which may be useful in a particular context. The Analytical trend dealing specifically with the syntax and semantics of language, interprets meaning only in terms of the written and spoken words. Contrary to the Continental trend which is claimed to be a-linguistic, their main concern is to analyze language in a structured way. For them, the traditional philosophical problems are the results of improper use of language. The paper argues that the structured analysis of language is a limited approach and it cannot do justice to our lived experiences which are much expressive than the written or spoken words. Here, it is argued that language in all possibilities can be understood in a better way by appealing to the continental philosophical trend of phenomenology, which analyses language in light of the lived embodied experiences expressed in non-syntactic ways. Phenomenology allows language to be comprehended as it is and considers it to be a self-manifesting phenomenon rather than something to be structured and controlled. Here, even silence is considered as more meaningful than any uttered words in certain contexts. Hence, a possible cross-fertilization is sought to understand language in a broader sense which may accommodate the lived experiences coming out of the imprisonment of structured linguistic analysis maintained in the analytic philosophical trend.

KEY WORDS: Analytic philosophy, language, lived experiences, phenomenology, silence

I. INTRODUCTION

Language remains as a cause of rift between continental and analytical trends of philosophy. From the boundaries of syntax and semantics the understanding and interpretation of language has now developed to a level where a mere

symbol represents a meaningful communication. The paper takes up the discussion on language in this broader understanding where without uttering anything we may communicate in a meaningful way. In philosophical debates, while analytic philosophy is primarily considered to be a philosophy of language, continental philosophy is claimed to be a-linguistic, being more bound to the world of things themselves. The treatment of language as found in the analytic writings gets more attention pertaining to its simplicity, clarity and stylistic consistency maintained in the structured, logo centric ways of linguistic analysis. But, experiences of human life show many shades which cannot be reduced to symbolic linguistic representations or scientific experimentations. Language needs a broader understanding in order to express embodied human experiences. In this paper it is argued that the phenomenological trend initiated by Edmund Husserl and later reinterpreted by Martin Heidegger and J.P. Sartre takes care of such lived human experiences with some reinterpretation of language and meaning. Hence, with a comparative note the paper tries to bring out the impact of the phenomenological tradition in dealing with the lived experiences of the embodied human being in linguistic references.

II. LANGUAGE IN ANALYTICAL TRADITION:

Analytic philosophers, following the line of Gottlob Frege mostly aim for argumentative clarity and precision. They treat language mostly through the tools of logic and their interpretations often identify, more closely with the sciences and mathematics, than with the humanities (Blattner n.d.). The specific emphasis of the analytic trend has been to solve the traditional philosophical problems by logically analysing concepts, terms and propositions. According to the analytic philosophers much of the confusions in philosophy are caused by the improper use and understanding of language. They try to come to a common consensus on a



particular style of philosophical conversation following some particular rule and their yardsticks for linguistic refinement are appropriation of simplicity, clarity and concision of expression (Humphries 1999). May be in different ways but with the same intension of clarity in language and philosophical thought different analytic philosophers have offered various forms of logical, linguistic and conceptual analysis over the years. Though there are criticisms and reinterpretations within the trend, their goal of clarity and logical rigour remains the same. As Humphries notes, “the discourse which permits their differences to be aired shows a remarkable stylistic consistency...” (Humphries 1999; 260). It may be because the analytic writings follow a particular set of rules of writings explicitly set by Russell. Nevertheless, the analytic philosophers’ crave for too much precision and certainty has somehow made its analyses rigid like mathematics and natural sciences. The belief of the analytic philosophers of being able to resolve fundamental philosophical questions through the application of rigorous logico-linguistic science deters them from doing justice to the lived experiences of our daily life. However, the modified views of Austin and Wittgenstein cannot be overlooked.

It is to be understood that our lived experiences cannot be interpreted in such reductionist way. Kennan (2004) argues that the more structured and informative use of language has failed to reflect on the humanistic demands of philosophical thinking. Hence, he emphasises on making a philosophical attempt to capture the personal at the heart of the structural at a time when the singular seems either to have disappeared into the propositional, or to have taken flight into a more radical non-propositional. He insists that the words are not just readymade there to be analysed and interpreted scientifically. Words also carry some personal intrinsic attachment (Kennan 2004). Reason being the standard rule of evaluation in analytic philosophy, judges everything in the scientific way allowing no space for the lived experience of the embodied human being. But, human life encompasses many shades which cannot be reduced to symbolic linguistic representations or scientific experimentation.

III. PHENOMENOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION: LANGUAGE OF LIVED EXPERIENCES

The phenomenological tradition insists on experiencing things as they appear. They strictly avoid the reductionist attitude practiced by some of the trends in philosophy. Accordingly language also

gets a broader space in this trend. Hence, intervention of the phenomenological tradition is found operative in getting back to the lived experiences of the human world even being within the periphery of linguistic discussion. Considered from the analytic philosophy’s point of view phenomenology always appears to be dealing with the non-linguistic, as phenomenologist’s concern is with the things in themselves. It is largely defined as a philosophy of seeing; a tradition, basically concerned with the world itself, with the non-linguistic silent world (Benoist 2008, 217). But, it is to be noted that the living, conscious subject, understood phenomenologically, has a synthetic link not only with its own experiences, past and future, but also with the meaning that interconnect with the lived world and other subjects. The horizons of meaning, in other words, transcend the individual subject, and yet that transcendence is maintained within the subject through its temporalizing activity of consciousness (Rodemeyer 2008). The phenomenological trend initiated by Edmund Husserl, minimises the importance of the logical analysis of concepts or language and concentrates on the rigorous description of our immediate experiences. He considers phenomenology as operating at the fundamental level of knowledge on which any truths of conceptual or linguistic analysis would have to be based. The Phenomenological trend emphasizes on reviving our contact with reality taking our mindset away from the arid academic discussion of philosophical problems found in nineteenth century philosophy (Moran 2000). Contrary to the narrow traditional philosophy, Phenomenology claims to offer a holistic approach to the relation between objectivity and consciousness. It studies conscious experiences as experienced from the subject’s point of view.

Jocelyn Benoist (2008) considers Husserl to be one of the philosophers who has contributed to lay the foundations for what is today called “theory of meaning” at the beginning of the 20th century. Husserl judges meaning as not the result of the causal encounter of intentionality with the ‘outside’, but there is ‘inside’, where intentionality is supposed to reside, a specific range of activities that are exclusively concerned with meaning. So Husserl discards any reductive theory of meaning, and considers meaning as an original phenomenon. For him, meaning is said to be original and irreducible form of intentionality. The newness of phenomenology is that it gives the object to be sensed as itself. Phenomenologists recognize that the object of intentional experience always carries a sense within and Phenomenology is the description



of things as they are given to consciousness. Phenomenology is the study of the process of appearing. Hence, the things themselves are not bare objects; they are given with their senses. It is the presence of the things always and already interpreted in terms of sense; so to say the things speak. These senses not expressed in any verbal or written language. They can be understood internally through our consciousness which is always intentional. They are sensed through our senses organs and mental abilities. Thus, Austin's claim that "our senses are dumb" gets a challenge here (Austin insists on the fact that "our senses do not tell us anything, true or false") (Benoist 2008). Hence it can be said that any linguistic achievement is caught in a web of non-linguistic relations.

Language has remained a basic theme of concentration in Heidegger's philosophy as well, since he considers Language as the House of Being, where man dwells. Language is one of the disclosures of the being of Dasein. As the main thesis of Heidegger's phenomenology is to make manifest the matters or objects as they manifest themselves (Moran 2000), hence, he believes that to reach the essence of language, to bring language as language to language, we have to hear language as itself, rather than something else. This means to bring the essence of language to itself, to speak in language its own essence. Hence, instead of analyzing language by putting it into different structures the best way is to let language be experienced as language. There are different languages in our life that we come across that cannot be incorporated in any of the set norms but still they are equally important for us. The language of nature stands for such language without any words. Whenever we hear some sound, we hear them with some meaning, which may produce creative imaginations, memories and give directions to our thoughts. It is not necessary to be something spoken to convey meaning. When we think language essentially, as a self-manifesting phenomenon, we experience language. It grants new possibilities that allows manifestation, rather than as something we do, make, or control. (Heidegger 1982)

According to Heidegger we never stand outside language and hence cannot explain it as a tool or instrument of our expression. It can neither be said to represent a fact as a picture nor is it a sign for transmission of meaning. Thus even if concentrating on the so called non-linguistic forms of access to the world, phenomenology considerably contributes to the rootedness of language. Only going through the phenomenological interpretation

of the "things in themselves" we can also realize that the silence of the senses is only epistemic. In reality silence is really noisy as it makes a difference (Benoist 2008, 223). Language need not always be spoken according to the phenomenologists, as silence itself is defined in relation to words. The pause in music is also meaningful equally. This silence is a moment of language. As Sartre says, being silent means refusing to speak and hence it also implies speaking in a sense (Sartre 2012).

IV. LANGUAGE OF CORPOREALITY

The most significant input of phenomenology in the treatment of meaning and language is its emphasis on corporeality. Phenomenology never advances any argument on human affairs leaving aside its embodied nature. As Rodemeyer notes, "the body retains language as much as consciousness does." He argues language to be a paradigm that essentially reveals the retaining activity of both the body and consciousness. When one learns a new language, say a foreign language, it is not only his mouth or tongue and vocal cord involved in the formation of words. Rather his entire body, his gesticulations and his stance with regard to the interlocutors, reveals the involvement of the whole body in language and communication" (Rodemeyer 2008) Further, phenomenological analysis also supplies inputs to challenge the post-modern argument which emphasizes on the superiority of written or spoken language in giving meaning over the embodied experiences. Phenomenological explanations of embodied experiences reveal that in certain cases bodily experiences may take superior role in constitution of meaning over the written and spoken language without their already having a place in linguistic discourse. Rodemeyer (2008) tries to strengthen this stand with the illustration of the doctor-patient dialogue where the patient does not find any suitable language to express his physical uneasiness meaningfully. He goes on describing his experiences and finally the doctor finds some word to name the disease. It is possible that after some further diagnosis the particular disease gets some new name later on. Thus, it can be argued that sometimes embodied experiences gives meaning to a language (Rodemeyer 2008). Though such instances cannot be universalized, yet they are not insignificant too.

V. CONCLUSION

From the above discussion we may come to the point that analysis of language is not the area of interest only of the analytical trend of philosophy and the claim that the realm of phenomenology is



limited to the nonlinguistic silent world is also unjustified. Though the two trends show difference regarding their prime concerns, serious analysis of both the trends may lead to fruitful cross fertilization and may help us to understand language in a broader sense accommodating the lived experience of embodied human beings coming out of the imprisonment of structured linguistic analysis maintained in the analytic philosophical trend. In this newer interpretation even language of silence and language of corporeality or body language also get recognized and understood.

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