ToK Ways of Knowing: Language

"ALMOST ALL EDUCATION IS LANGUAGE EDUCATION."

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What is the nature of language?

* Language is rule-governed
* Language is intended
* Language is creative and open-ended
* Language is so much a part of human activity that it is easily taken for granted.
* The issues related to language and knowledge call for conscious scrutiny in order to recognize its influence on thought and behavior.

What else about language?

- Language can be thought of as a symbol system, engaged in representing the world, capturing and communicating thought and experience.

- Language also can be seen as existing in itself, as something to be played with and transformed and shaped in its own right and something that can transform and shape thought and action.

Language is rule-governed

- When learning a foreign language, one of the main things you have to learn is grammar.
- Grammar gives the rules for how to combine words in the correct order.
- Grammar helps to determine the meaning of a sentence.
- Jill hit Jack.   We know Jill is the hitter and Jack is the hittee by the way the sentence is structured.
- In English there is a rule which says that the noun before the verb is the subject and the one after the verb is the object.

Language is rule-governed (language)

- The other main element is language – vocabulary – is also governed by arbitrary rules.

- For the native English speaker, it feels as if there is a natural, almost magical, connection between the word "dog" and the animal it stands for.

- It is the word our culture has settled on. It could just as well have been *quan* (Chinese), *koira* (Finnish), or *kutta* (Hindi).

- For communication to work, there needs to be general agreements within the culture.

Language is intended.

- Although language is a form of communication, not all communication is language.

- You can yawn because you are bored and want your teacher to know or

- You can yawn as a reflex but not want to communicate boredom.

- Information is communicated, but it is not considered "language."

Language is creative and open-ended

- The rules of grammar and vocabulary allow us to make an almost infinite number of grammatically correct sentences.

- We are able to create and understand sentences that have never been written or said before.

- Psychologist Stephen Pinker has determined that there are at least 1020 grammatically correct English sentences. If you said one sentence every 5 seconds, it would take one hundred trillion years to utter them all—that's 10,000 times longer than the universe has been in existence.

- Languages are not static entities, but change and develop over time. People invent new words or we borrow words from other languages all the time. English is notorious for this phenomena. Technology adds new words, as well.

- Shakespeare gave us such words as *dwindle*, *frugal*, and *obscene.*

- We have borrowed *algebra* (Arabic), *kindergarten* (German), and *chutzpah* (Yiddish), to name a few.

Nature of Language

- What different functions does language perform?
- Which are the most relevant in creating and communicating knowledge?
- What did Aldous Huxley mean when he observed that "Words form the thread on which we string our experiences"?
- To what extent is it possible to separate our experience of the world from the narratives we construct of them?

Nature of Language

- In what ways does written language differ from spoken language in its relationship to knowledge?

- Is it reasonable to argue for the preservation of established forms of language, for example, as concerns grammar, spelling, syntax, etc.

- Is a common world language a defensible project?

- What is the role of language in sustaining relationships of authority? Are there extenuating circumstances?

Nature of Language

- How does technological change affect the way language is used and the way communication takes place?

- What may have been meant by the comment, "How strangely do we diminish a thing as soon as we try to express it in words"?   --Maeterlinck

The problem of meaning

- Since most of our knowledge comes to us through language, we need to be clear about the meanings of words if we are to understand the information that is being communicated to us.

Language and Culture

- If people speak more than one language, is what they know different in each language? Does language provide a different framework of reality?

- How is the meaning of what is said affected by silences and omissions, pace tone of voice, and bodily movement? How might these factors be influenced in turn by the social or cultural context?

- What is lost in translation from one language to another?

- To what degree might different languages shape different self-concepts or world-concepts? What are the implications of this?

Theories of meaning

- The following are three theories of what distinguishes meaningful words from meaningless ones.

- Definitions theory
- Denotation theory
- Image theory

Definition Theory—what is it?

- The most obvious way of trying to resolve confusions about what a word means is to consult a dictionary.

- Define the following:
  - Triangle
  - Table
  - Love

Definition theory criticisms

- Now define "red" to a blind person.
- The main problem with the idea that the meaning of a word is its dictionary definition is not simple that most definitions are vague and imprecise, but, more fundamentally, that they only explain the meanings of words by using other words. If we are to avoid being trapped in an endless circle of words, language, must surely connect with the world.

Denotation theory: What is it?

- According to the denotation theory what distinguishes a meaningful word from a meaningless one is that the former stands for something while the latter does not.

- "France" means something because it stands for the country in Europe

- "Jumblat" is meaningless because there is nothing in the world that corresponds to it.

Denotation Theory: Criticisms

- While the denotation theory might work in the case of names such as "France" or "Socrates," it seems to fall down in the case of abstract words such as multiplication, freedom, and wisdom, which do not seem to stand for any thing. --you can point to examples of wisdom but not wisdom itself.

- If we follow the idea further—we could not talk about people after they die because with their death, the meaning of who they are/were disappears with them.

Image theory: What is it?

- The meaning of a word is the mental image it stands for, and you know the meaning of a word when you have the appropriate concept in your mind.

- Example: you know what the word "freedom" means when your associate it with the concept of freedom.

Image theory: Criticisms

- If meanings are in the mind then we can never be sure that someone else understands the meaning of a word in the same way that we do –or, indeed, that they understand it at all.

- The idea of "red" can be different for different people.

Meaning as Know-how

- Some say that rather than thinking of meanings as something that can be found in dictionaries, or in the world, or in the mind, perhaps it would be better to say that meaning is a matter of know-how.

- You know the meaning of a word when you "know how" to use it correctly.

Problematic meaning

- Vagueness
- Ambiguity
- Secondary meaning
- Metaphor
- Irony

Vagueness

- Many words, such as *fast* and *slow* are intrinsically vague, and their meaning depends on context.

- *Fast* means one thing when you are talking about a long distance runner and something else when you are talking about Formula 1 racecar driving.

- Vague words can be useful—they point us in the right direction.

Ambiguity

- Words and/or phrases have multiple meanings
- Example: The duchess cannot bear children.
- Ambiguity can be intentional to mislead people.

Secondary Meaning

- Words have a primary meaning or denotation
- Words have a secondary meaning or connotation
- Connotation refers to the web of associations that surrounds the word.
- Connotations vary from person to person
- Words like *love*, *death*, *school,* and *priest* may have different connotations for different people.
- Sometimes we use euphemisms for harsh words because they have more acceptable connotations.

Metaphor

- We use language both literally and metaphorically. Ex: Miranda has got her *head in the clouds. Or* Marvin is a *pillar* of the community.
- What is the difference between the following sentences:
  - My brother is a butcher.
  - My dentist is a butcher

Irony

- Saying of one thing in order to mean the opposite shows just how problematic language in action can be.
- Nice weather, heh?
- Any more bright ideas, Einstein?
- We cannot necessarily take a statement at face (notice the metaphor) value
- Irony adds another layer of ambiguity to language.

Meaning and Interpretation

- There is an element of interpretation built into all communication.

- Rather than saying we either understand something or we don't, it might serve us better to say that there are levels of meaning in language.

Why are the meanings of words important?

- Journal your response to this question.

Language and translation

- "Who does not know another language does not know his own." Goethe   1749-1832
- What can you learn about your own language by studying a second language?

Language and translation

- There are approximately 3,000 different languages world wide.
- We tend to think our own language fits reality.
- What realities do we experience because we speak English?
- What would be the advantages and disadvantages if everyone in the world spoke a single common language?
- In what ways does learning a second language contribute to, and expand, your knowledge of the world?

Three Problems of Translation

- Context: The meaning of a word in a language I partly determined by its relation to other words. For example, to understand what the word "chat" means in English, you also need to be aware of related words such as "talk," and "gossip," and "discuss," each of which has a different shade of meaning.

Problems (cont.)

- Untranslatable Words: Every language contains words that have not equivalent in other languages, and can only be translated by lengthy and inelegant paraphrase.
- For example, the English word "quaint" has no very precise equivalent in other languages.
- *Schlimmbesserung* (German), means "an improvement that actually makes things worse"
- *Rojong* (Indonesian), "the relationship among a group of people committed to accomplishing a task of mutual benefit"

Problems (cont.)

- Idioms: a colloquial expression whose meaning cannot be worked out from the meanings of the words it contains.

- For example, "Don't beat about the bush" or "He was born with a silver spoon in his mouth."

- Give examples of words in your own, or your second language that have no precise equivalent in English.
- How would you go about trying to translate the following idioms into another language?
  - David is barking up the wrong tree
  - Samuel was only pulling your leg
  - Daniela is resting on her laurels.

- When Pepsi Cola ran an advertising campaign in Taiwan, they translated the slogan "Come Alive with Pepsi" into Chinese. The campaign was a flop. When the slogan was translated back into English, it read, "Pepsi brings your ancestors back from the dead."

Here are some more:

- The manager has personally passed all the water served here (Mexican hotel)
- The lift is being fixed for the next day. During that time we regret that you will be unbearable. (Romanian hotel)
- Ladies may have a fit upstairs (Hong Kong tailor shop)

Lost in Translation

What do linguists determine as criteria for good translation?

- Faithfulness—translation is faithful to original text
- Comprehensibility—the translation should be comprehensible
- Back translation—when we retranslate a translation back into its original language, it should be approximate to the original.

Questions of the Day

- What would the world be like if there were no language?
- What would the world be like if there were no written language?
- How do children learn language?
- Who would have the power in an oral society?
- What would the world be like if only certain individuals had access to written language?
- Who has the power in a literate society?

Language and Thought

- How have spoken sounds acquired meaning? How many definitions can you think of for the word, "tree."
- Is it possible to think without language? How does language extend meaning? Limit meaning?
- To what extend does language generalize individual experience? To what extent do some kinds of personal experience elude expression in language?
- Can language be compared to other forms of symbolic representation?
- How do "formal languages," such as computer programming languages or mathematics, compare with the conventional written and spoken languages of everyday discourse?

Language and Knowledge

- How does the capacity to communicate personal experiences and thoughts through language affect knowledge?

- How does language come to be known? Is the capacity acquire language innate?

- In most of the statements hear, spoken, read or written, facts are blended with values. How can an examination of language distinguish the subjective and ideological biases as well as values that statements may contain? Why might such an examination be desirable?

Linking Questions

- To what extent is it possible to overcome ambiguity and vagueness in language? In what contexts might ambiguity either impede knowledge or contribute to its acquisition? Does the balance between ambiguity and precision alter from one area of knowledge to another?

- What do we gain, and what do we lose, when we name something? Do different areas of knowledge manage differently the balance between particularity and generality?

Language and Areas of Knowledge

- How do the words we use to describe an idea affect our understanding of the world?

- How does the language used to describe the past change history?

- What about describing human behavior or conditions?

- How important are technical terms in different areas of knowledge?

- To what extent might each area of knowledge be seen as having its own language? Its own culture?