

Language and Rhetoric

Critical Thinking

Language and Thought

- Most people see the relation between language and thought simply as a one-way street from thought to language: first we think, and then we use language to describe our thoughts to others
- However:
 - Why does it often help to think out loud even if no one else is around?
 - Indeed, why do we often hear ourselves speak with our ‘inner voice’ when thinking?
 - And why is there so much interference to our thinking when someone else is speaking? (interference ok, but why *so much*?)

Language is Part of Thinking

- Many linguists and cognitive scientists see language not as a way to passive descriptor of our thoughts, but as something that helps us think
- Whorff-hypothesis: without language we couldn't think at all!
 - This is a pretty radical thesis, and there are good reasons to believe that the situation is not that extreme, e.g. infants are able to do some pretty sophisticated reasoning before language use.
- However, there are definitely powerful effects of language on our thinking:
 - Framing effects (see later)
 - Using specialized languages (languages of math and science) to help solve problems (e.g. when doing long division, you use paper and pencil)

Whorff Again

- “... language is not merely a reproducing instrument for voicing ideas but rather is itself a shaper of ideas ... We cut nature up, organize it into concepts, ascribe significances as we do, largely because we are parties to an agreement to organize it in this way – an agreement that holds throughout our speech community and is codified in the patterns of our language”

Thinking as Communication to Ourselves

- We often solve (think about) problems or issues by talking about it to others
- Some cognitive scientists think that we learn to use this same mechanism on ourselves, i.e. that by talking to ourselves, we continually switch parties (or perspectives) as part of this group technique to solve problems; we're having a dialogue (often internal) with ourselves
 - Note that when children learn to read, they first to do this by reading the words out loud, and only later learn to do this silently (but note that when we read, we often still hear ourselves saying the words to ourselves with our inner voice)

Language Dances and Language Games

- Still, why would we have a dialogue with ourselves?!? Don't we know what we think?
- Certain kinds of utterances invoke certain kinds of responses, and we wouldn't have thought of those responses if we wouldn't have made those utterances explicitly (as when we do when we have a dialogue with others), i.e. we can only get there by going through this (almost algorithmic; remember long division!) process.
- Indeed, dialogues are like a formal dance, where the players are supposed to act and react in certain constrained ways
- The philosopher of language Ludwig Wittgenstein called these 'language games'

Meaning and Context

- Language is efficient and effective at the same time: with only a few words we can convey a whole host of ideas. Why is that?
- This is probably exactly because of the ‘language games’: given the context of the expression (what was said before; where are we having this dialogue; why are we having this dialogue in the first place; etc) we can (and do) expect certain kinds of responses to certain kinds of utterances, and this allows us to assign interpretations to each other’s expressions that go beyond just the actual words being said

Language Conventions and Abuses

- All this means that language is highly conventional: when we're engaging in a dialogue with someone, we follow certain conventions, which allow us to assign interpretations to each other's expressions that go beyond just the actual words being said, and which allows for language to be efficient as well as effective.
- However, with conventions come parasites: mechanisms that exploit those conventions to achieve ends other than what the original conventions were designed to help out with.
- We'll see examples of such 'language convention abuse' later on.

Speech Acts

- Language can be used in many ways. Put differently, language performs many functions:
 - Descriptive/Informative
 - Evaluative
 - Interrogative
 - Directive
 - Performative
 - Emotive
 - Persuasive
- Each of these uses comes with its own set of conventions.

Wittgenstein Again

- Humans are a linguistic creature. We have erected languages left and right, and live in a sea of symbols. However, just as the last thing a fish in the sea will notice is the sea itself, we humans often don't really notice the world of symbols around us either as we have simply learned to navigate it without giving it any further thought.

Rhetoric

- Rhetoric is the study of linguistic utterances in a social context, i.e. how people use language in social settings. Aristotle identified 3 aspects:
 - Ethos (as related to the speaker): How does the speaker come across?
 - Sources and credibility
 - Pathos (as related to the audience): How does the speaker engage the audience?
 - Emotional appeals
 - Logos (as related to the expressions): What words, claims is the speaker using, and how are they organized?
 - Logic

Form and Style

- Great orators have a way with words, stringing words together in a form that exploit the cognitive processing of the listeners.
 - E.g. repetition: “I believe I believe” is (somehow) quite effective
- But style (for speech: tone, emphasis, for text: font, size) has an impact too.

Size Matters!



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Denotation and Connotation

- Words and expressions have denotations and connotations
 - The denotation is the strict dictionary definition of those expression: what they literally mean
 - The connotation amounts to the whole of the cognitive interpretation of those expressions
- Humans have become masters (again like fish in the sea) in picking words that have just the right connotations to persuade the listener of something or other.

Slanters

- Slanters are words or short expressions that, through their connotation, can be used to sway the listener or reader one way or the other.
- Slanters can 'frame' the debate in certain terms or concepts.

Euphemisms

- Euphemisms are slanters with positive connotations (or at least they make something bad sound not so bad)
- Examples:
 - ‘custodian’ - janitor
 - ‘correctional facility’ - prison
 - ‘public servant’ - government employee
 - ‘passed away’ - died
 - ‘freedom fighter’ - someone picking up arms against government
 - ‘tax revenue’ - taxes
 - ‘wardrobe malfunction’ – Justin Timberlake ripping off part of Janet Jackson’s bodice
 - ‘extended viewing fee’ – late fee
 - ‘given an involuntary career assessment opportunity’ - fired
 - ‘enhanced interrogation technique’ - torture

Euphemisms in the Military

- From Vietnam War:
 - ‘pacification center’ – concentration camp
 - ‘specified strike zone’ – area where soldiers could fire at anything (used to be called free fire zone)
 - ‘friendly fire’ (shelling friendly targets by mistake)
- From 1st Gulf War
 - ‘servicing the target’ – bombing
 - ‘visiting the site’ – bombing
 - ‘revisiting the site’ - more bombing
 - ‘sanitize’ – bomb
 - ‘suppress’ – bomb
 - ‘degrade’ – bomb
 - ‘force packages’ – bombs
 - ‘collateral damage’ – civilian casualties by bombs

Euphemisms in Government

- ‘pay equalization concept’ – pay raise (for politicians that is)
- Department of Defense (used to be Department of War)
- Pro-life
- Pro-choice
- Clean Air Act
- Healthy Forests Initiative
- The “If you don’t support this bill then you’re a terrorist” Bill

Dysphemism

- Opposite of euphemism
- Examples:
 - ‘bureaucrat’ – government employee
 - ‘terrorist’ – someone rebelling against government
 - ‘tax burden’ – taxes

Downplayer

- Something used to minimize the importance of something, whether this be your enemy's achievements, or your own mistakes.
- Examples:
 - I see he got his “degree” from the back of the cereal box correspondence school, eh? (the scare quotes are the downplayers)
 - I was just trying to ... (‘just’ is the downplayer)

Hyperbole

- Opposite of the downplayer: exaggerate
- Example:
 - This constantly happens (really? Constantly?)
 - Everyone was ... (really? Everyone?)

Proof Surrogate

- Something used as a substitute for an actual reason or argument
- Examples:
 - Needless to say ...
 - Obviously ...
 - Clearly
 - Anyone with half a brain ...

Some Interesting Proof Surrogates in Academia

- Ellipsis (... , etc)
- Hand-waving
- “Left to the reader”
- “as found in Blake et al. (forthcoming)”
- “The reader will see that this [one specific case] trivially generalizes”

Weaselers

- Words used to shuck responsibility and accountability for a certain claim ... while still very much suggesting it
- Used a lot in advertisements
- Examples:
 - ‘virtually leak-free’
 - ‘like new’
 - ‘helps clean’
 - ‘may prevent’
 - Some books also see expressions like ‘doctors recommend’, ‘studies show’, etc. as weaselers

Convention Abuses

- Persuasive Definition
 - ‘television’ – electronic medium to keep an entire nation in a semi-narcosis by feeding them a steady stream of inane drivel
- Persuasive Explanation
 - It was a reasonable proposal. That’s why they rejected it
- Persuasive Comparison
 - The color of her skin was that of fallen snow
- Innuendo
 - No, he didn’t get fired yet
- Complex Question
 - Are you still beating your dog?

Redefining Terms

- ‘Manufacturing jobs’ – now includes people working at McDonald’s
- ‘militant’ or ‘combatant’ – any military-age male close enough to military target to be killed in drone strike of that target

Other

- The 'Scoff' / 'Snort' / 'Sneer':
 - 'ha, if pigs fly!'
 - 'pscha!'
 - 'whatever!'
- The 'Sigh':
 - 'I get so tired of ...'
 - 'once again ...'
 - 'yet another ...'

Further Rhetorical Tactics

Obfuscation

- To bewilder, confuse, or stupefy
- Can be used to intimidate (attack):
 - Technical jargon (e.g. 'legalese')
 - Complex mathematical equations
 - Expensive or metaphorical words
 - Mumbo-Jumbo

Distraction

- Often used as a defense mechanism:
 - Changing the subject
 - Delaying tactics
 - Dodging, weaving, beating around the bush
 - Smokescreen

Vagueness

- The English language is vague.
- This often reflects the fuzzy nature of some of our concepts, which are necessary to reflect the fuzzy nature of the world around us.
- However, vagueness can be abused: intentionally leaving things vague in order to evade/defend, shield against criticism, or make things sound good without really saying anything at all!

Puff

- ‘puff’ is where vague language is used that nevertheless sounds meaningful
- Again, advertisements are good at these (good ‘puff’ is a work of art, i.e. it takes time and conscious effort to come up with good puff, which is why you don’t see it a lot in direct conversation)
- Examples:
 - ‘The rock of Prudential – above and beyond’
 - ‘When you say Budweiser, you’ve said it all’
 - ‘Toshiba – in touch with tomorrow’

Ambiguity

- As stated before, many things are left unspoken, making English very efficient.
- However, it can also be a source of ambiguity:
 - ‘New and improved’ (compared to what, when?)
 - ‘Bigger and better’ (than what?)
 - “The new Ford: 700% more quiet”

Equivocation

- A notion related to ambiguity is equivocation: the use of a single term with two different meanings in an argument.
- Example:
 - A feather is light. What is light cannot be dark. Therefore, a feather cannot be dark.
- Interesting case:
 - Abortion is the intentional termination of a human being. The intentional termination of a human being is murder. Therefore, abortion is murder.

Repetition

- Argument Ad Nauseam!

What to Make of This?

- “This two-day weekend seminar will open you to the wonders of the contemporary experience of modern High-Tech Serendipity Meditation, as your seminar leader and originator of the High-Tech Serendipity Medication Experience personally conducts this expansive program, demonstrating the power and potential of this contemporary meditative technique. The weekend includes four power-packed sessions of Holodynamic Serendipity material presented in such a way as to enable each participant to personally experience the contemporary ease and the full potential of High-Tech Meditation”.