LANGUAGE AND THE EVOLUTION OF THE SELF

N. Sreekumar

This paper intends to analyse the nature of the human self and its perspectival horizon with a focus on the roles of language in determining them. It is a fact that the model of reality we subscribe to and the subsequent account of the understanding of this reality exert vital influence on our understanding this self. Thus we inherit the belief that consciousness, which is a special characteristic feature of the self, provides the foundation for all our understanding and knowledge. Since Descartes, the foundational status of consciousness had been forcefully asserted and it had been excluded from the subject matter of natural science. The domain of the self and its being were clearly defined in terms of the phenomenon of consciousness.

The most important feature of the phenomenon of consciousness in this framework is its ability to provide the human self a universal perspective. In other words, it envisages to understand the human self in the light of the "universal conditions of human existence", to which the perspectival horizons of the human self are intimately related. This paper emphasises on the ways the human self is related to language and argues that since the perspectival horizon of the self is the product of the linguistic horizon it inherits, the former cannot be an absolutely universal one.

Again, a discussion on the nature of man's being cannot ignore a pivotal feature of this phenomenon, viz., individuality. This phenomenon has to be properly accounted for and explained prior to any examination into the nature of the self. But by associating the self with a linguistic horizon a different picture naturally gains prominence. The intersubjective and community-bounded features of language prevent us from conceiving the self and the structure of its beinghood as limited to any closed subjective

horizon. This paper argues that the real nature of self cannot be understood without recognizing the ways it is determined by the different perspectives to which it is exposed as a result of its interactive encounters with others and reality as a whole through language.

This is to recognise the significance of language as a hermeneutic medium, which determines the ontological states of our being. Conceived from such an angle, language possesses the capacity to contain the various perspectives within its interactive and dialogical structure. It therefore functions as an intersubjective plane where continuous discourse between the various perspectives are carried out. Consequently, the position adopted here contends that the human self is in a continuous process of evolution within the intersubjective field of such continuous discourses. The evolution of the self presupposes the conversational structure of language, which in turn is necessarily dialogical. Before we come to recognize this we have to primarily assert the perspectival factor.

Self and its Prespective

The notion of, the human self, possessing a universal perspective, presupposes a metaphysical conception that asserts that the former has an intrinsic nature or essence. A peculiar notion of human rationality is derived from this metaphysical framework. It takes into account the demands of the scientific world-view, especially the notion of objective scientific knowledge. Kant's separation of the empirical and the emotional that are contingent from the rational, which is necessary, further contributed to the development of this framework as a paradigm. The idea of self surrounded more on reason, which is common to all human beings. It provides a picture of human self in the light of the universal conditions of human existence and thereby ascribes to the former a universal perspective for knowledge acquisition.

Richard Rorty examines the conceptual presupositions of this picture and says that, this temptation, to think of the world or the human self as possessing an intrinsic nature or essence, is the legacy of an age in which the world was seen as the creation of a being who had a language of its own[1]. Such a non-human language that is necessarily non-contingent will have the power to determine all the conceptual categories of man and will

consequently provide the human self a universal perspective.

Conceptually, such a picture of the self and the notion of universal perspective were propagated in order to free the concept of self from the subjectivist and relativistic consequences it may lead to. This is because, a notion of self and of human consciousness almost inevitably brings with it the idea of individuality, which in turn calls for an explanation of the subjective features of the former. The identification of the self with the rational part of human nature is an attempt to dissolve the problem that may arise when subjectivity is associated with consciousness. This identification presupposes a separation of the mind, the *res cogitans*, from the body, the *res extensa* and also an exclusion of the former from the concern of natural science. All these were necessary to ascribe a universal perspective to the self. In short, what Rorty describes as the concept of a world created by a being who has a language of his own, takes for granted the legitimacy of the mind-body dualism.

This separation ultimately helped philosophers to surpass the individualistic features of consciousness. When a nonhuman language is envisaged to be representing the structure of the cognitive perspectives, consciousness as a special subjective feature of the self ceases to raise any conceptual riddle due to the former's invariable assurance of universality. This language makes the issue raised by subjectivity vanish and what remains is the world which is objective and which can be objectively represented.

The idea of a nonhuman language with a universal perspective ascribes to the former certain fixed roles and functions. Its nonhuman nature suggests that it is free from contingencies and its structure is fixed and universal. This ideal of universality further led to an explanation into the essential logical features of language, which will in advance define its functions and applications. The representational conception of language is the natural output of this outlook. Here representationality is conceived as the essential logical feature of language. This conception ultimately resulted in conceiving language as medium of expression or representation. With an emphasis on such logical features, the representational conception envisages to provide the self a fixed universal perspective. The model of

language analysis carried out in this framework subsequently focused attention on simple forms of linguistic expressions that are immediate representations of the factual reality. This kind of language analysis ultimately asserts that language possesses a universal structure and therefore an intrinsic nature.

Again, this model eventually creates a unique space for the self, where it exists independently of the rest of the world. The conception of language as a dualistic medium is the central insight of this model. Being a medium through which reality is filtered, apprehended and communicated, language here stands between the self and the world yet not related to both in an intimate manner. It is, in other words, a nonhuman medium-though used by human through which reality is represented. In other words, the world speaks through language. Representationality is the logical feature shared by all linguistic expressions. Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus* categorically asserts this by introducing the concept of logical form. The logical form, according to him, is the essential form that is shared by both the realms of language and the world[2]. This logical form makes representationality a matter of logical necessity. He further introduces the concept of the general form of propositions. This general form is the essential logical form of all propositions that are pictures of factual reality. It would define the universal conditions to be satisfied by all linguistic expressions and would consequently provide a universal perspective to all those who use it.

This view with its attention shifted to language from mind implicitly proposes that the perspectival horizon of the self is located within the structural framework of language. Yet the dualistic framework it upholds immediately leads to certain conceptual difficulties. Rorty indentifies the mistakes of such a conception even if it substitutes language for mind or consciousness. He continues,

> But in itself this substitution is ineffective. For if we stick to the picture of language as a medium, something standing between the self and the nonhuman reality with which the self seems to be in touch, we have made no progress. We are still using the subject-object picture, and we are still stuck with issues about skepticism,

idealism and realism. For we are still able to ask questions about language of the same sort we asked aboout consciousness[3].

The problem is with the separation between the medium and the mediated. Once we shift our attention from single sentences to vocabularies, asserts Rorty, the dualistic conception of language loses its foundation. It then becomes hard to locate the intrinsic nature of language because, here we lack a precise criterion to decide between the multitude of vocabularies, each possessing different nature and function. It will become difficult to think of the world as making one set of vocabularies better than another. As Rorty puts it, we cannot adjudicate on the basis of the world between the vocabulary of Athenian Politics vs. Jefferson's[4]. Here we have to consider alternative language-games. We hardly find any justification to think that the vocabulary is somehow alreaday out there in the world waiting for us to discover it[5].

The image of a world that speaks through the language, which is its medium, vanishes. To identify language with alternative language-games and vocabularies is to recognize that the former is basically contingent. Consequently the relation between the language and world also becomes contingent and hence multidimensional. This is the result of what Rorty calls, a dedivinisation of the world. He adds;

> The world does not speak. Only we do. The world can, once we have programmed ourselves with a language, cause us to hold beliefs. But it cannot propose us a language for us to speak. Only other human beings can do that[6].

When we do speak in this way we do it not from an independent space we occupy, detached from the world and the medium. No language game is an independently existing phenomenon, but is intimately associated with a form of life that is formed out of various practices. In other words, the self always finds itself as participating in the various language-games it is engaged in. The idea of language game therefore, envisages a unique coming together of the self and the world in language. It implicitly suggests that, the various forms of life determine not only our knowledge about reality, but also our very self-hood. Each language game, which the self is engaged in playing, reveals a unique dimension of reality to which it is

intimately interwoven. As a consequence, a one-dimensional concept of reality is thoroughly undermined.

In this context, the idea of fixed human nature is no more at issue. Human beings rather derive thier essence out of the various ways they are involved in the language-games and forms of life. Since there is no fixed essence for a language-game and hence for language as a whole the idea of a fixed human nature also gets invalidated. The various language-games, says Wittgestein, have no one thing in common, as they are related to one another in different ways[7]. As language is something constituted of such relationships the human nature itself is something that evolves out of them. It is only through the projects and processes of various language-games that the human self derives its essence and this makes it flexible and historical. It is flexible because, a rule in the language-game does not stand for any a *priori* essence or structure that transcends the concrete existence of human being. And it is historical because, no language-game can exist in a vacuum. As Wittgenstein says, the term language-game is meant to bring into prominence the fact that the speaking of language is part of an activity or a form of life[8]. Every human action and life form constituted of such actions and behavior patterns presuppose a background in history. We make the various language-games through our interactive encounters. Language evolves out of the historical process where in the words of Rorty, new forms of life kill old forms, not to accomplish a higher purpose, but blindly[9].

In order to understand the nature of the evolution of the self from this historically situated interactive encounters we must know how the self derives its perspectival horizon from the various language-games that come to encounter each other in the process of historical evolution. This consists in understanding to what extent the historically evolving language-games determine the ontological status of the self. Here we cease to think language as a dualist medium and conceive it as a hermeneutic medium, which encompasses the being of man, the world in which he finds himself and all that contributes to the formation of a living reality for him. To recognize this hermeneutic significance of language is to conceive it as, as Hans George Gadamer says, as element in which we live and which we can never objectify to the extent that it ceases to surround us[10]. Language is;

> ...nothing like an enclosure from which we could strive to escape.
> The element of language is not a mere empty medium in which one
> thing or another may be encountered. It is the quintessence of
> everything that can encounter us at all[11].

Hence in a very preliminary sense, language is ontologically significant in two ways, which together define the linguisticality of man's very being. They are:

1. Language functions as the essential hermeneutic medium that we cannot dispense with at all. All our access to the world and reality presuppose language and is necessarily perspectival.

2. language is both historical and contingent. This is because, on the one hand it is a historically evolving phenomenon as a result of human interaction and on the other hand it is the creation of humans who are contingent.

Conceiving language as a hermeneutic medium encompasses these two aspects. Martin Heidegger thus conducts a hermeneutic analysis of the being of man by combining these two aspects and accordingly derives his peculiar notion of human existence. The essence of man, according to him lies in his existence, which being historical is a temporal process that manifests in and through language. This temporal feature of being represents its historicity. The horizon of being. asserts Heidegger, is time[12]. *It brings together in a peculiar way the three dimensions* of time into the unique framework of its being-hood. The present is formed out of the past and also projects the future to integrate the whole of its being. The past as well as the projection of the future constitute the present through a process of self-making.

This self-making process is, at the same time, a process of constituting history. This is because, the process of integration of the being that happens in the self-making activity is never a completely independent activity performed by the individual. This process on the other hand happens in a particular situation, natural as well as historical. The natural situation does not suggest any significant change in the structural movement of the self-making process that reveals itself in the domain of time. But the historical situations, being themselves formed out of the self-making process, penetrate this temporality in order to determine the momentum of such

acts. In other words, there exists a dialectical relationship between the being of man and the histroical situations where he finds himself. In a sense, both are the products of the self-making and the integrating acts of man's being. Asserting the temporal features and historicity of man's being Heidegger contends that man's being is irretrievably being-in-the-world. Therefore, there exists a fundamental practical relationship between the being of man and the things in the world.

Heidegger says that this relationship is characterized by a 'concern' where the use of entities we encounter in our life situation acquires prominence[13]. This will resist the possibility of viewing something which we encounter in our life situations as an independently existing phenomenon. Rather it has to be approached like a tool or equipment, which will serve some of our practical purposes. Conceiving the world as consisting of equipment which have uses and which we can employ in various projects suggests the inevitability of value intervention in our relationship with the world and others. Every interactive encounter will necessarily precede with a projection of meanings by the self. Since all such projections and interactions are mediated through language, all our understanding of the world and all our experience presuppose that we have already oriented ourselves towards the world in particular ways by means of language. The 'as' structure is built into the very core of our relationship with the rest of the world and it exerts a normative power.

To recognize the 'as' structure of human perspectives is the first step towards recognizing the ontological significance of language, as far as the being of man is concerned. As a matter of fact, the self will be inheriting a linguistic horizon and will be deriving all its cognitive categories from the latter. This linguistic horizon is solely responsible for the self's possession of a perspective. Since the linguistic horizons are historically situated, the human perspective also will be historically situated. In short, the notion of a nonhuman logical perspective sounds highly improbable.

This association of the perspectival horizon of the self with the historically situated linguistic horizons reveals a unique feature of the nature of the human self, its community-bound and intersubjective nature. This enables the self surpass the fetters of a subjective perspective. The linguistic

horizon is a common property of a community. Hence the self, as a result of inheriting it, will posses a broader perspective, the vital elements of which are community-bounded and therefore intersubjective. Conceiving language as a hermeneutic medium will ultimately amount to asserting this. Gadamer thus emphasizes this aspect by showing how in the linguistic character of our access to the world we are implanted in a tradition. Tradition in the wider sense will take care of the socio-cultural dimensions of language. We inherit a linguistic horizon as a result of our being rooted in a language or linguistic tradition. This rootedness in turn, helps us surpass our finiteness and narrowness as a subjective entity. The prejudices we posses are not our subjective prejudices, but are the intersubjective conditions in which the tradition is handed down to us. In other words the linguistic horizon is the common possession of the community to which we necessarily belong. The language that makes up the categories of our thought and guides our thinking is something which we share with others-not as a universal condition, but as a concrete intersubjective field, where we interact with others and something that evolves out of such concrete interactions. Therefore the perspective of the self is not necessarily subjective, but is intersubjective.

Recognising language as a hermeneutic medium and its ontological significance does not conclude merely in an assertion of the intersubjective and community-bound nature of its perspectival horizon. It further leads to the realisation that, the self, as well as the consciousness it possesses is under a process of constant evolution, which never attains completion at any point. This is because, the unique linguistic horizon to which the self subscribes to is itself something that continuously gets expanded as a result of human interacions. Therefore, in order to evaluate the nature of the self further we need to understand the structure of the interactive encounter in which the self is engaged in. In every such encounter the self will be getting exposed to a multitude of perspectives, some of them raising strong challenges and some proposing alternatives to the one possessed by it.

Here the choice is between, as Rorty says, vocabularies, which are self-contained, and not between single sentences which are representations of factual world. Hence we are not presented with any fixed criterion in

order to adjudicate between the alternatives. Consequently the self finds it difficult to decide the conclusive validity of any one of the perspectives that it encounters. This standstill situation is the result of the plurality of linguistic horizons, each proposing a unique and different world-view. To proceed with the interactive encounter the self has to recognise the relative significance of the different perspectives encountered. This is also to realize the limitation of each perspective, including its own, in providing a comprehensive perspective and thereby a perfect world-view. Language comes to fully deliver its functions as a hermeneutic medium only when such a realization occurs and also when it is employed as a medium to perform a dialogic encounter between the different perspectives. The evolution of the self takes place as a result of this dialogic encounter.

Dialogue and the Evolution of the self

To recognize language as a hermeneutic medium is primarily to realize that, ultimately a structure of dialogue is built into every fruitful human interaction. It is this structure that makes possible movements and therefore, is responsible for the essential dynamism of the linguistic medium. In its absence language willappear as a barrier, rather than a medium for interaction. This is because, as we have seen, linguistic interaction is all about an encounter between different linguistic horizons, each rooted in different traditions. In dialogue, the individual boundaries of the respective horizons get surpassed, as a dialogue envisages a collective exploration of meaning by different participants. It culminates in the creation of a common language with a wider and comprehensive perspectival horizon. Similarly, the self acquires a wider perspective from its various interactive encounters with the multitude of perspectives to which it is exposed.

The hermeneutic tradition discusses the problem of different perspectives that are historically situated when it analyses the problem of the understanding of textual meaning. On the one hand there is the text, which is the product of a linguistic horizon. The semantic horizon of the text thus belongs to its peculiar historical situation or tradition. On the other hand, the interpreter who tries to understand the textual meaning cannot approach the text directly owing to its historical situatedness. From the outset it seems that the meaning of the text can be explained in two ways:

1. The interpreter should grasp the meaning of the text by transcending his historical situatedness, by imaginatively traveling to the historical situation of the text's original author.

2) This view asserts the historicity of the author more radically. It thus says that, the interpreter cannot escape the boundaries of his own historical situation, and hence he will understand the textual meaning from his own perspective.

The first position calls for an objective comprehension of the textual meaning while the second alternative adopts a relativistic position. Gadamer, after analyzing these two positions elaborately contends that, both are equally mistaken. Objective understanding of the text is impossible, because the interpreter cannot transcend his historicity. According to him, the meaning of the text is located, neither in the language of the text, nor is it to be found in the language of the interpreter. It has to be explored in a common language of the text and the interpreter, which evolves out of a dialogic encounter between them[14].

Similarly, the self will be coming across a multitude of perspectives in course of its interactive encounters with others. Each of these perspectives will be the product of different linguistic horizons. Again, each of them will be holding a unique world-view and propose a model of reality. Therefore, an encounter with them will provide the self a possibility to realize its own limitations and also to acquire a more comprehensive persp ectival horizon. This enables the self to realize its possibilities in the framework of a continually expanding horizon. Every encounter with a different perspective will add something more to its existing view and therefore will enrich its perspective. Here the rootedness of its perspective in a particular linguistic horizon does not appear as an obstacle. This is because the structure of language is essentially dialogic. As Gadamer says, the rootedness and situatedness in particualr linguistic horizons itself contains the possibility of seeing beyond. The horizon does not represent any fixed or solid state of affair. It is something which evolves and expands. To recognize the situatedness of one's perspective is to recognize its limitations and this leads to a willingness to look beyond its boundaries. As Gadamer says, I-lessness is an essential feature of the being of language. He continues;

> ...speaking does not belong in the sphere of the "I" but in the
> sphere of the "we" ...the spiritual reality of language is that of the
> pneuma, the spirit, which unifies I and Thou[15].

But to see beyond one must primarily realize and admit one's limitations and the inability of one's perspective to provide a comprehensive picture of reality. One should also admit the validity of other perspectives as possible interpretations of reality. This is to make oneself open to the claims of other perspectives. While discussing the problem of the understanding of textual meaning Gadamer stresses on the creative role of the interpreter which consists in exhibiting an openness to the text's claim to truth. This openness, as a matter of fact, amounts to the admission that one is not the authority about the subject matter and many things are left out for one to know. This is to admit one's ignorance and the very possibility of dialogic interaction presupposes such an admission. This in turn is to admit the contingency of one's own position. The self that encounters other perspectives ought to admit this ignorance and consequently make its position indeterminate. It thus has to consider other prspectives as possible alternatives. Since each such perspective is a product of historically situated linguistic horizon, each will be containing the insights of a community, which it has assimilated during its historical existence.

But in a dialogic interaction these insights can no more remain confined to their respective historical situations. They necessarily get exposed and articulated in language. Language in a peculiar manner contains all these various perspectives, since all of them are essentially linguistic in nature. In dialogic interaction there is the possibility of these various perspectives to get assimilated to a language of conversation that takes place between them. Gadamer observes that the evolution of a common language of conversation is a prerequisite for dialogic interaction. He writes:

> Every conversation presupposes a common language, or, it creates
> a common language. Something is placed in the center, as the Greeks
> said, which the partners to the dialogue both share, and concerning
> which they can exchange ideas with one another. Hence agreement
> concerning the object, which it is the purpose of the conversation
> to bring about, necessarily means that a common language must
> first be worked out in the conversation[16].

During such conversations, the self, in a unique manner assimilates the insights of the different perspectives encountered. This suggests that its perspectival horizon is not a closed one, but is under a process of constant motion and evolution. A transformation necessarily takes place to the self. It is a transformation to a new communion with the other perspectives encountered during interaction. The linguistic horizon of the self gets transformed to a wider and more comprehensive one.

The process of transformation is a process of evolution. Here both language and the self evolve. The self is thus a dynamic entity, whose existence consists in acquiring new perspectives and world-views. It accomplishes all these by possessing new languages that it creates in its dialogic interaction with others. This new language will necessarily be a broader and richer one, as it will contain the insights gathered by all the participating linguistic horizons in their historical existence. Our discussion therefore suggest the following points:

1. The human self cannot have a perspectival horizon independent of language.

2. Language and therefore the perspectival horizon of the self are historically rooted, which in turn is a rootedness in a tradition. Hence the perspective of the self cannot be an absolutely universal one.

3. The rootedness in tradition, though suggests the essential rootedness of the self, also simultaneously suggests the endless possibilities of the self to assimilate the perspectives of the other historically rooted traditions and thereby expand its horizon and gets its very self-hood transformed. This consists in its ability to create and inherit new and comprehensive linguistic horizons as a result of dialogic encounters.

From the light of these discussions we can now form the picture of the self as an entity which evolves out of language. With language undergoing changes and transformation the self also gets transformed. Since language offers limitless possibilities for interaction and discourse, the possibilities of the perspectival horizon of the self also is limitless. At the same time every language is contingent and hence every perspective is incomplete and indeterminate. The self also is a necessarily contingent phenomenon. It is this contingency that enables it to assimilate novelty and

thereby transform its nature and structure. Thus its limitations themselves provide it endless possibilities to realize its very being.

The evolution of language is the evolution of the self. Language evolves out of the self-making activities of the self which are materialized in the latter's dialogic interactions. We come to realise the fundamental identity of the two processes. Since the possibilities of language are endless, the possibilities of the self also are endless.

NOTES

This is the revised version of the paper I presented at the ICPR National Seminar on *Mind, Language and the Evolution of Human Consciousness: Indian and Western Perspectives*, held at the ICPR Office at Lucknow during 24th to 26th July, 2000. I thank all the participants of the seminar for giving me valuable suggestions.

1. Cf. Rorty, Richard : 1989, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity,* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press. p 5.

2. Cf. Wittgenstein, L: 1972, *Tractatus Logico Philosophicus,* tr. D. F. Pears and D. F. McGuinness, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul. 2.18.

3. Rorty, Richard : *Op. cit.* p.10-11.

4. Cf. *Ibid.* P.5

5. Cf. *Ibid.*

6. *Ibid.* P.6

7. Cf. Wittgenstein, L. 1976, *Philosophical Investigations,* tr. G.E.M. Anscombe, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 23.

8. Cf. *Ibid.* 25

9. Cf. Rorty, Richard : *Op. Cit.* p. 19.

10. Cf. Gadamer, Hans-Georg : 1981, *Reason in the Age of Science,* Cambridge, The MIT Press, p. 50.

11. *Ibid.* P.50

12. Cf. Heidegger, Martin :1962, *Being and Time,* tr. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, New York, Marper and Row, p.38.

13. Cf. *Ibid.* The Chapter VI of *Being and Time* introduces this concept to characterise the being in the world of the Dasein.

14. Cf. Gadamer, Hans-Georg: 1975, *Truth and Method* (hereafter *TM*), New York, The Seabury Press, p.330.

15. Gadamer, Hans-Georg : 1977, *Philosophical Hermeneutics,* tr. David E. Linge, Berkeley, University of California Press, PP.65-66.

16. Gadamer, Hans-Georg: *TM*, P. 341.

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