

## REFLECTIVE INQUIRY AND LANGUAGE

For the contextualist language is critically important in our thinking and our interactions with our world, and nowhere is this fact more evident than in problem solving activity. If we think reflective inquiry as problem solving, language plays a focal role for human problem solvers throughout this process; and the more difficult the problem, the more important is the role of language. The pattern for this activity as outlined in Dewey's analysis of reflective thinking starts with the appearance of a problem, moves through observation and analysis to clarify and define it, sets forth ways of solving the problem, develops deductively the implications of the proposed solutions, and finally tries out the more promising hypotheses.

In problematic situation we need to formulate the precise nature of the problem or difficulty, the possible solutions for it, and the consequences of one proposed hypothesis as contrasted with those of another. Through language we can anticipate possible dangers and formulate ways of dealing with them before they are physically present. Knowing that what will probably occur if steps are not taken to prevent a specified eventuality, we can change or avoid a possible occurrence. Language thus makes possible prediction and control.

Language is a primary means of making inferences—of using knowledge we already have to gain further knowledge. Because we can formulate alternative sets of consequences, we can weigh them critically and act on the basis of considered consequences instead of having to respond in unreflective haste. In effect an experiment in terms of ideas may guide our conduct, obviate certain risks of over experimentation, and enable us finally to try out only the more promising possible courses of action.

Language makes possible distinguishing between legitimate and illegitimate inferences and, further, stating the principles which must be observed if thinking is to achieve trustworthy conclusions. Determining the implications of a proposition, passing from the truth of one statement to the truth or falsity of another, ascertaining whether two statements say the same thing, are consistent, contradict one another, or what, and the like all depend on language.

And these logical operations are crucially important for problem solving.

Verification of a state of affairs is also dependent on language. What we verify is whether or not a given statement accurately describes a situation. In looking to experience, to check on the truth or falsity of a specific descriptive statement, we look to experience as modified, formed, or constituted by prior linguistic conditioning.

What we perceive is linguistically conditioned in a host of ways, as an example or so may readily show. Although words may function in other ways than to refer to things (for example, connectives) and the fact that we have a world which appears to refer to something does not mean that there is always a corresponding thing, none the less it is true that our range of sensory discriminations is greater in areas in which we have a richer vocabulary. For example, we tend to make far more discriminations in colors than in feelings, moods, or emotions, and it would appear to be no accident that our color vocabulary is far more extensive than our set of words for feelings or emotions. Although we have hundreds of terms for colors, the best we can do in referring to some feelings is to speak of the mood or feeling evoked by this or that piano piece of Chopin. Within a given area such as color, moreover, those whose working vocabulary is slight are likely to make fewer discriminations than those with a richer vocabulary. The kinds of distinctions we make in field after field seem to be correlated with our linguistic facility or range.

We confidently expect that what we see, hear, and do will be affected by directives to watch or listen for this, that, or the other; and from earliest childhood words help form our patterns of expectation and observation.

Presupposed in all we have said about language as an instrument for problem solving is the notion that language is a social product. It is communication through the use of symbols; and ideas or meanings, conceptions and theories, thinking and knowing, depend on it. It occurs in a culture, and a basic part of our acculturation depends on language. Our language, of course, antedates any given speaker. We learn to speak and think in terms of the social structure of our language. Fluency in our mother tongue makes us members of a linguistic community, a membership we retain in significant measure even if geographically separated from other

members of our community. As members of a linguistic community we are pervasively influenced by our language and culture and are not solitary, self-sufficient egos possessed of an antecedent stock of ideas which we have only to name or articulate.

On this view as developed by Mead, Dewey, and Royce we do not first think out ideas and put them in words. The relation between language and thinking is far more intimate than that. Reflection is not a prior condition of communication but a concomitant of it, indeed, a form of it. It is a kind of converse in which, through a process of role-taking, questions are posed and responses made, now in one role, then in another, and so on.

In terms of this general outlook we may escape certain of the difficulties which have beset modern Western Philosophy since Descartes and Locke : difficulties of how to get beyond a solitary thinker and his ideas to a real external world. This view reverses the procedure which professed to discover an indubitably existing ego or mind at the centre of the universe and then struggled to reach an external world of other persons and things. For G. H. Mead we distinguish between myself and others in a social matrix; and the distinction may be drawn somewhat differently, depending on the problem; but in any event, the others are not simply derivative and myself primary.

If, in accordance with later version of the Cartesian problem, everything I find and anything I think of turns out to be by that very fact one of my ideas, what, then, for the new view of Mead and Dewey ? In terms of it what is one to say of the central ego ? Perhaps first we should note that this problem does not arise on their view. From their outlook it seems clear that this ego, once posited, no matter how isolated it is geographically from its neighbours, is a social one. Its deliberations are formulated in language. The social structure of language, moreover, as Cassirer or Heidegger might readily show, carries with it something of the culture which gave rise to it. And the allegedly solitary thinker or ego raises his question in a highly social context. Without language they could not be raised at all.

That we interact with our environment and solve a never ending succession of problems and that language helps us find our way about in our world, all this seems clear enough; but if we raise questions concerning language and the structure of thinking and

ones concerning language and reality or the extralinguistic setting of reflective inquiry, two important limitations of our thinking become evident: (1) All of the thinking with which we are concerned in problem solving is expressed in language, and there is always the possibility that our thinking may be influenced by the symbols in which it is expressed. We may mistake accidents of grammar for logical inference, or we may call a thing or group names instead of merely using symbols to describe it. We may think that because we have a name (say, "chance") there must be an objective referent for it. (2) Our thinking about a problem is always conditioned by beliefs and systems of interpretation—social, psychological, linguistic, etc. already accepted. And we may be more concerned to make the system look good than to get at the relevant facts. These limitations correspond roughly to Bacon's Idols of the Market Place (or Forum) and Idols of the Theater.

Various philosophers apparently have thought that we could overcome these limitations to a degree by setting up a kind of dialogue with nature or by discerning in nature the same logical forms to be found in language. Bacon spoke of putting questions to nature instead of simply waiting to observe what happens. Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and others have sought through an interrogation of being to allow the basic facts to show themselves forth. And the Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus* attempted to exhibit the logical syntax or grammar of the universe.

For various problems distinguishing between language and thought, thought and reality, language and reality, may be both necessary and proper; but a comparison between language and the extralinguistic involves greater complications than may at first appear. If we try to make a sharp separation between language and its referents, we find ourselves using language to formulate the distinction. To talk about the extralinguistic we must begin with language, and there is the possibility that the structure of these referents is imposed by our manner of speaking.

Many contemporary philosophers are convinced that the classic accounts of the nature of reality in certain important respects tell us more about the structure of our language than about the structure of the world. What Aristotle spoke of as laws of being and the Neo-Hegelians treated as laws of thought, they argue may be more properly viewed as rules of language. In speaking of the structure

of language and the structure of the world, however, it may be well to remember that it is not as if we could set side by side language and the extralinguistic real world utterly free from prior linguistic conditioning and do a point by point comparison. Whatever we may hold concerning the extralinguistic will be expressed in sentences. The structure of our language, moreover, may be due at least as much to the requirements of our inference-making process as to the antecedent structure of the extralinguistic.

Language, it seems safe to say, provides an important part of the structure of our thinking; and much of what we see or experience comes to us in terms of the structure of our language. Perhaps the best evidence we have of the usefulness or adequacy of our language in dealing with our world may come from our continued success in solving problems.

Southern Illinois University  
at Carbondale Carbondale,  
Illinois

LEWIS E. HAHN

