

## RELATIVITY OF LANGUAGE AND CULTURE\*

### I

In this paper I propose to answer briefly the following inter-related questions. Does language express and suppress reality simultaneously? Does reality have an ascertainable identity of its own independently or the language used to talk about it? In other words, can we logically and coherently say, "language and reality are self-contained and exclusive 'things'?" Or, will it be right to say, "language is a part of reality and their identities are historically inter-woven within a common cultural fabric? Does not successful communication between the individuals belonging to different cultures necessitate the postulation of a common and independent extra-linguistic and extra-cultural world? What is the role and status of concepts in making inter-cultural communication possible?

### II

#### **Thought, Language and Culture :**

The other day I was listening to the Chief Commissioner of Andaman and Nicobar Islands, Shri Krishnatry, who was telling me with a plethora of examples how the lack of communication between the settlers and the original inhabitants is steadily ruining the latter. From ordinary daily routine matters to extraordinarily abstract concepts all are handled by a common generic competence and that is, symbolic competence. Of course we may draw lines of distinction between signal, sign and symbol. But we are well-advised to bear in mind that the distinction between them is one of degree and not of kind. For the identification of an object, whether it is material or mental, we do need something else, i.e. other than the object itself and which can "stand for" or symbolise it.

Symbolisation marks the beginning of the release of the mind or the human consciousness from its blind and immediate encounter with the object. This release, however, competently

initiated and executed, is bound to be partial and can never be complete. In other words, there is always a real linkage, may be it is invisible to start with, between, say, what is described and the descriptive expression (s) even between name and nomen-tum. Symbols are, therefore, somehow fastened to a culture, its material and mental objects. One might go further and add, every system of symbols and their rules of connection and interpretation, i.e. language, is not only culture-bound but also through culture earth-bound.

Language and expression are two of the many other inter-related ingredients of a complex and comprehensive fabric of culture. Man generally expresses himself in and through language, but not necessarily so. Extra-linguistic expressions are also there. Since language happens to be the most essential ingredient of man's self-expression, and also of his experience of other things and beings, his competence to make use of it is very important. The importance is two-fold : first, it enables him to grasp intimately his material environment and cultural milieu, and, secondly, to communicate the same to other men. In brief, language presents our environment, both material and cultural, to ourselves and gives us the ability to share our experiences, ideas and emotions with others. At the one end language releases our mind from the bondage of immediacy, immediacy of experience, indefinite acquaintance with the objects of experience, and at the other end it enables us to share the results of this release or freedom with others.

Perhaps there is a native propensity in man to express himself. An infant who is yet to learn and use a language makes some noise or sound to express his experience of, say, want or pain or joy.<sup>1</sup> A dumb man makes gestures and inarticulate sounds to express himself and communicate. A normal grown up man uses language to express not only his joy and satisfaction but also his suffering and disappointment. Expression is a sort of purgation, which eases one's burden of experience, which one intends to share with others and by sharing it one enjoys intellectual and emotional satisfaction. The urge which transforms an idea into action is also involved in the human intention to share his experience with others.

## III

**Meaning, Communication and its Different Models :**

Let us now look a little closely into the elements of a (meaning) communication situation. How one communicates? What makes communication possible? How to explain the gap between the content of intended communication and that which is actually communicated? The elements and the complexity of the (meaning) communication situation have been differently understood and analysed. There are two-variate, three-variate and also multi-variate models of it. Common to all models of communication situation is of course *meaning*. Unless and until something can "mean" or "stand for" or "symbolise" some other thing, a situation cannot be a communication situation.

But the basic element of the communication situation, i.e. meaning, lends itself to various interpretations. At one stage, a strictly behaviourist conception of meaning was very popular. The behaviourist defines the meaning of a linguistic form as predictable pattern within a mini-mix range of relationship between what the speaker utters and how the hearer responds. This is a simple two-variate model of communication situation within which meaning has been defined. Although the behaviourist admits, in principle that to get an accurate definition of meaning for every form of language we do need accurate knowledge of everything in the speaker's world, but in fact in terms of two-variate model it is easy to define the meanings only of the "simple" words like water, salt and chair. When we are called upon to spell out the meanings of words like god, soul and love, we are immediately landed in difficulties. To think that a linguistic function has only two parts, the linguistic form, on the one hand, and the related non-linguistic events, including contextual ones, on the other, is simplistic. It is all right to say, for example, "Water means  $H_2O$ ". But it is not clear why *water* would mean  $H_2O$ ? In other words, what prevents one from saying, "the meaning relationship between *water* and  $H_2O$  is arbitrary". The defender of the two-variate model might now proceed on to spell out the meanings of individual letters  $H_2$  and  $O$  and the related rules of interpretation together with the concerned definitions. It is perhaps realising the

complexity of meaning in a communication situation that the discerning behaviourist impresses on us the necessity of "knowing everything in the speaker's world".<sup>2</sup>

To remove the inadequacy of the two-variate model some philosophers of language have developed a three-variate model of meaning. Patanjali, for instance, thinks that in a meaning situation there are three components—the word, the meaning and the object which are mixed up in common usage. When one utters the word "water", one finds that the word, the meaning and the object are mixed up; the word is transmitted as vibration of air molecules; the actual water exists independently of all human consciousness and conventions of nomenclature. What relates these two isolates is the human mind. And meaning is the *relationship* which associates word and object and is not itself a "thing".

The three-variate model is obviously an improvement upon the two-variate one. But even it does not adequately clarify the relation of language and culture. One might point out that both word and object belong to the same material world and a line of distinction should be drawn between it and the mental world in which the two are said to be related. The question is whether there is a fixed and definite universal mental world in which the word-object relationship could be generalised without exception? The mental world being itself influenced and limited as it is by its cultural environment, the question of its universality turns out to be purely speculative on scrutiny. The linguistic behaviour is distinguishable from its subject-matter or content. First, there is a relationship between linguistic behaviour, a part of the material world, and linguistic structure of the mental world. Secondly, there is a relationship between the cultural structure and the objects spoken about or referred to and which are mostly non-linguistic in character. And, finally, there is a relationship between linguistic structure and cultural structure both of which are in a sense parts of the mental world, and this relationship is what may be called meaning. Interestingly enough, both the terms of the meaning relationship, linguistic structure and cultural structure, have their material correlates. The former is related to linguistic behaviour and the latter to the objects referred to. It is in and

through the material correlates of linguistic structure and cultural structure that their "mental" meaning relationship could be given an objective formulation and which can explain the socio-historical variation in the word-object relationship and at the same time lends itself to objective and structural tests. The linguist is primarily interested in the word-object relationship and the ethnographer in the relationship between cultural structure and the phenomena talked about (contents) which are mostly non-linguistic in character.

The adequacy of the three-variate model too has been questioned by some contemporary language philosophers of the Wittgensteinian persuasion. Among other things, they have rightly pointed out the enormous, almost endless, complexity of every communication situation and the inadequacy of formal logical systems for the purpose of analysing it. The meaning of a word or a group of words, e.g. a statement, depends on so many factors—the speaker or the writer, the hearer or the reader, history and the time-frame, society or culture in the concerned context. All these factors may be taken together and designated as situation. So one might say "the" meaning of an expression depends upon "the" logic of the situation. This formulation is open to depth analysis. First, meaning is not a static entity. Secondly, the logic of the situation is itself an unduly definitive expression. For the variables of the situation take on a wide range of values. The identity (historical and otherwise) of the persons concerned, the speaker, the hearer and others who may be present in the situation but whose participation in it may be of different sorts, introduces almost incalculable and unpredictable elements. Consequently, what is called situation is an extremely complex and variable (but not necessarily vague) thing. The logically queer aspect of the situational dependence of the meaning of a statement may be easily illustrated. For example, I say (*a*) "there is a book on the table" and someone "contradicts" it and says (*b*) "there is no book on the table". One can easily conceive a situation in which (*a*) and (*b*) are not at all contradictory. When I say (*a*) I may be in a state of dream or saying it jokingly pointing my finger to a dummy book or even something else, e.g. a notebook. Once we closely look into the complexity of the communication-situation the relativity of meanings becomes very obvious.

## IV

**Relativity of Meanings and Problems of Translation :**

Relativity of meanings raises some obvious problems and translation. Meanings of expressions are culture-bound, i.e. determined or influenced by culture. From one point of view language is best described as a part of culture. From another point of view, which is equally respectable, one might say that culture itself is embedded in language. The descriptive linguist takes pains to point out the close relationship between ethnology and linguistics. Most of the semantic problems of the translator could be adequately tackled within the composite framework of social anthropology and descriptive linguistics.

Environed by a particular culture and used to a particular language, most of us tend to forget the predicament of the translator engaged in translating expressions of other language in our own. The predicament becomes rather serious when one attempts to translate from languages representing simple cultures to languages representing complex cultures. In the complex cultures languages are rich in alternative, equivalent or near-equivalent expressions. When the translator is called upon to translate expressions of complex cultures, which are generically similar but specifically different, into at least near-equivalent expressions of simple cultures, his problem becomes even more serious. To the problem of seriousness is added that of inaccuracy when the translator is concerned with cultures which widely differ in the scale of abstractness-and-concreteness. Some languages are particularly suitable for expressing objects and images. Some languages enable us better to express the abstract ideas and compound them. It is not entirely without point when we are told of the richness of the Indo-European language-family in the context of philosophical ideas.

Words and expressions are essentially the symbols for features of the culture. The translator and the comparative linguist are required to follow the precise relationship of cultural information to the semantic problems. These problems are basically exercises in finding out of badly needed but elusive linguistic equivalences. The elusive character of the badly needed equivalences is due to

language-culture relativity and which could be studied under different headings, (a) ecological, (b) material, (c) social and (d) religio-ethical.<sup>3</sup>

The ecological features of culture are reflected in language and vary from territory to territory. The extremity of ecological variation raises surprising problems for the translator. Seasonal variation, variety of flora and fauna, types of natural calamities or turbulences, e.g. dust-storm, snow-storm and flood are not uniformly present all over the world. The features of tropical vegetation can hardly be translated in the Eskimo language. To a Mayan Indian the word "desert" means an "abandoned place". But one can easily find out that "desert" and "abandoned place" are not strictly equivalent unless the implicit concept underlying these two terms, i.e. lack of human population, is brought to the fore.

The problems posed by variation in material culture-features are even more complex in character. The concept of cooked food is unknown to the Andaman islanders who are used to taking raw fish and wild fowl. The words like "walled city", "gate" and "carpet" have no equivalent in the languages of the tribal people whose material equipments of life are altogether different and who live under the sky or in the deep forest.

Even where the near equivalent of material form is found, the problem of the translator does not completely disappear. For the question of different interpretations of the same or similar material forms and ecological features still remains. The "sky" is interpreted in some cultures as "heaven" or "space" and the "underground area" of the earth as "hell". Here too Ptolemaic and Copernican Cosmogonies introduce different rules of interpretation. Caste-features are unknown in some cultures and where these have been taken to be equivalent of class-features.

The relativity of religious and ethical features is perhaps the most perplexing thing for the translator. As we know, most of the tribal deities are peculiarly local and so are the modes of their worship. Words like "Holy Spirit" and "Holy Ghost" have no equivalent expressions in many non-Christian tribal languages. The word "Manasā" (the Snake-Goddess of Bengal) cannot be translated in a desert gypsy culture where snake-god is unknown and the necessary expression is uncalled for.

Similarly one might easily point out the enormous difference in what is meant by ethical words like "good", "bad", "right", "wrong", "praise", "blame", "remorse", "resentment", and "regret" in different cultures. The response to this argument that the difference is confined to the exemplifications or applications of these ethical concepts and has nothing to do with the meanings of the concepts themselves is well known but hardly convincing. For, it suggests, among other things, (a) there are some apriori and inherent meanings of these concepts which could be identified independently of their empirical examples or fields of application, and (b) the meanings of these concepts are irrelative or absolute, i.e. context-invariant. Ethical relativity is a part of cultural relativity and language-features are subject to this general truth. Semantic Platonism provides no solution of the problem.

## V

### **Between the Words and the World are the Concepts :**

Up to now I have been analysing how linguistic expressions, simple and complex, concrete and abstract, are determined and influenced by culture-features, material, mental, moral and so on. In the process I was highlighting the translation-problems resulting from culture-language relativity. Had these problems been absolutely insurmountable, then different peoples would have been completely shut out and separated from each other, rendering meaningful communication between them impossible and making translation an equally impossible task. The case is obviously not so hopeless. We, human beings, belonging to different cultures and speaking different languages, do communicate between ourselves and translate each other's ideas and expressions. As it happens in some cases, this translation may be good, bad or indifferent and again to ascertain that we have to evolve a consensus on the meta-linguistic criteria to be used to determine the correctness or otherwise of translation. Since language is related to culture, the task of translation necessitates *adaptation* in some form or other. When we tell a Mayan Indian that "desert" means "abandoned place" our translation is tinged by adaptation. If in the ecology of one particular culture, there is nothing like what we call desert, the only way left for us to make him understand what we mean by it is to say something like "abandoned place" which he can understand



with the help of a *concept*, "lack of human population", which could possibly establish, though inexactly, a semantic correlation between "desert" (of English language) and "abandoned place" (of Mayan Indian language).

At one stage some philosophers like Russell and Wittgenstein went to the extent of suggesting that facts and propositions are directly and uniquely related. Some Indian philosophers have observed that by the *power* of their meanings, linguistic expressions enable us to directly identify the referents, whatever they might be. This robust claim regarding a direct relationship between propositions and facts, of words and objects has in course of time given way to very different and diluted semantic theories which bear unmistakable imprint of language-culture relativity.<sup>4</sup>

When the later Wittgenstein advised us to leave language as it is and not to mould it in our formal logical structures, he overstates the theory of linguistic relativity and verily berates the significance of the conceptual structure existing between words and the world, between signs or symbols and facts. Certainly by language we express as well as suppress, decode and encode our thoughts and yet communicate, but that does not mean that this performance is explainable purely in terms of certain rules of use of the concerned language in a given situation. This implies something more. Firstly we can and in fact do penetrate phonetic clothing and grammatical disguise and somehow get to that which is clothed and disguised, i.e. the underlying reality of language. Secondly, the very fact that we can discover the true logical forms concealed under misleading grammatical forms of different expressions shows that we do possess and use, though pre-reflectively, certain rules in terms of which the decoding and encoding performances could be identified, elucidated and clarified. And as a result of that, in spite of syntactic aberrations, semantic inexactitude and grammatical disguise, we can *dis-cover* the *real* objects underlying different languages irrespective of their cultural locus or situational context.<sup>5</sup>

One might agree with us on this point and yet raise the objection that the rules which enable us to find out the real objects penetrating the misleading language fabric do not converge on a definite segment of reality, enabling us to identify it uniquely. Quine, for instance, thinks that even if we assume that there is

such an underlying reality, it is not clear how could we possibly determine it uniquely. And in that case the sceptic's argument regarding the reality-language relationship remains substantially unanswered. He can merrily go on saying (a) idea-object relationship is doubtful and (b) so is expression (or word)-idea relation. Nothing other than neural-behavioural test can put a practical stop to this doubting habit. But one is again brought back to the *sense of reality* when one is reminded (1) that the neural-behavioural responses are *not* self-caused and self-regulated and further (2) that the process of causation and regulation itself is not explainable without residue in terms of psychological or logical behaviourism. Nobody would deny that natural languages are not free from misleading referring expressions. Cases of failure in referring should not be taken as a last stricture against natural languages. The *forms* of misleading reference, thanks to modern researches in formal logic and above all human insight, can be *transformed* enabling us to ascertain how and where the intended referring expressions have gone wrong. Besides, we should remember that all objects of reference are not to the same type. For example, material objects, mental objects, some cultural objects, including the art ones, are obviously not of the same type.<sup>6</sup>

We do not identify reality directly in and through the expressions of natural languages which are highly culture-relative. Language-culture relativity does not make inter-cultural communication impossible. The ground of possibility is to be found in conceptual affinity. I say affinity but not identity. Hidden in every natural language is a world-view. This becomes very evident when we study different primitive languages separated by space and time. Concepts themselves are also relative, of course in a much more restrictive sense. On the one hand, concepts are partially subject to what we call vagaries and vagueness of natural language and, on the other, at least partially reflective of and addressed to the objects of the concerned space-time frame work. After all concepts are also formed and in the course of time and through test transformed. If you raise the issue to a higher level and ask the question: what about the concept-forming concepts? My response would be: what is true of the first set of concepts is also true, of course to a lesser extent, of the second set.

## VI

**Conclusion :**

Language, as I have said before, is embedded in culture.<sup>7</sup> Language partly expresses and partly suppresses the world of objects, objects of different types. Language is highly influenced, both concretely and abstractly, by its material and cultural conditions. Our linguistic competence is evident in its best form when it comes to the question of using our own mother-tongue or natural language. On the rich base of natural language to construct and use formal and artificial languages poses no serious problem. Whether it is a question of tackling problems and translation or it is a question of creative thinking, all things being equal, man is likely to excel most in using his own mother-tongue. All that I have been trying to say converges on the point that the best aid to correct and creative thinking is to be found in the mother-tongue, no matter whether it is Hindi or Tamil, Bengali or Marathi.

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## NOTES

\* This paper was first read in a meeting held in Poona on August 2, 1975, in connection with the formal release of *Marathi Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*.

1. Jean Piaget, *The Language and Thought of the Child*, London, 1959.  
2. Leonard Bloomfield, *Language*, New York, 1951; see also, B. F. Skinner, *Verbal Behavior*, New York, 1957.

3. Dell Hymes, ed., *Language in Culture and Society : A Reader in Linguistics and Anthropology*, New York, 1964.

4. See, for example, Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, London, 1972; *Investigations*, Oxford, 1963; *Philosophical Grammar*, Oxford, 1974; B Russell, *Logic and Knowledge*. London, 1956.

5. J. J. Katz, *Linguistic Philosophy : The Underlying Reality of Language and its Philosophical import*, London, 1971; see also, Benjamin L. Whorf, *Language, Thought and Reality*, Camb. Mass., 1957; W. V. Quine, *Word and Object*, Camb. Mass., 1960.

6. Edmund Husserl, *Formal and Transcendental Logic*, tr. Dorion Cairns, The Hague, 1963; see also, Michael Dummett, *Frege : Philosophy of Language*, London, 1973.

7. D. P. Chattopadhyaya, *Societies and Cultures*, Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Bombay, 1973; see also his *Individuls and Worlds*, Oxford University Press (forthcoming).

## DIALOGUE

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