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On Language, Discourse and Reality

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In this paper, I explore the positive and negative implications of the power of language that stems from its role as a medium for both our perception and thought. My argument takes a form of a syllogism: because reality is defined by language and language is socially constructed, reality must be socially constructed. In order to support my argument, I draw on a variety of historical examples as well as ideas of notable thinkers whose works molded the western society, such as Plato, Darwin, Aristotle, W.E.B. Du Bois and Virginia Wolf. I show that language is both a product of the society as well as an agent that affects and defines it. While physical reality itself is independent of language, social reality is a construct, and as such, can be adjusted through discourse.

Take a look through the window - you see a variety of things. Yet, the bare visual image is not all. Depending on the weather and the view out of your window, you have certain associations and feelings stemming from what you see. All of these - concrete and abstract concepts - are words or combinations of words in our language. Being a medium both for our perception and thought, language has permeated all spheres of our lives. Thus, consciously or subconsciously, seeing always leads to labeling the images, and feeling - to naming the feelings. In this essay, I will try to show that almost all of our reality is socially constructed through language and discourse. My argument takes a form of a syllogism: because reality is defined by language and language is socially constructed, reality is socially constructed. Further, I will discuss the two premises of the syllogism and show why they hold, acknowledging the important distinction between social and physical reality. Throughout the essay, I will draw supporting examples from general knowledge as well as from Three Guineas by Virginia Wolf and The Souls of Back Folk by W.E.B. Du Bois.

Before I get any further, I should clarify the relationship between language and discourse. For expository purposes, I take a somewhat restrictive view on language in this essay. Language relates to discourse in the same way as chess pieces relate to the game of chess: the latter is static, whereas the former is dynamic. Or simply put, discourse is the collective use of language in order to convey ideas.

I will start by laying out the minor premise - language is socially constructed. Let us consider the development of languages. It reasonable to assume that at some point primeval societies felt the need to talk about things that were not present, so they needed names for things. Also, they needed to explain abstract concepts as well as to describe actions and objects. Eventually, people started combining different words, giving rise to sentences. Through this gradual process, the languages started to evolve. It should be pointed out that
languages reflected the geographical and cultural preferences of the respective societies. For instance Eskimo languages have around twenty different names for snow, or Arabic has multiple words to refer to a camel, yet both of these are described by just one word in English, French, Russian and most other languages. Apart from environment and needs of a society, relationships among societies have also had impact on languages. For instance, English is now established as an international language.

This is a result of the continued economic and military dominance of the English speaking countries – Britain roughly till the beginning of the XIX century, and the United States thereafter. Thus, we see how languages are initially socially constructed, and the forces that adjust them also originate from society.

The major premise that reality is defined by language needs a much closer consideration. First, I will address the social reality and then the physical reality. To begin with, I would like to discuss the great power of language – its ability to generalize. For example, we can talk about trees in general, even though there is technically no such thing as a general tree – there are oaks, fire trees, birch trees, etc. Yet, language allows us to convey a general idea that the object we are talking about has a trunk, branches, and some type of foliage. By achieving this level of generality however, we lose precision. Furthermore, we tend to lump all trees in one general category because they are the same in their basic characteristics. With regards to trees, it hardly creates any problem not only because we may not care about them, but also since there is no value judgment involved. Unfortunately, human tendency to generalize does not stop there. The next step is to start making general value judgments, such as “Oak trees are more beautiful than birch trees”, “Toshiba makes bad computers”, or “Americans are obsessed with money”. And once these statements are made, it takes but a step to make the following: “white people are richer than African Americans”, “African Americans are less educated than white”, and finally, “white people are better than people of color”.

Yet, suddenly it seems like we are doing something reproachable – and indeed, we are. Thus, we see a problem with the great generalizing power of language – it lends itself equally well both to value neutral and value laden judgments, to judgments about things and about people. When Du Bois talks about a veil between white and black Americans, he is referring to these preconceived notions that dominate the impression that white people have of African Americans. While I am by no means saying that language itself causes racism, it makes racism at least conceivable.

In addition to the fact that language allows us to generalize, the words we use themselves have connotations that influence how we think about the world. For instance, let us consider two common antonyms: white and black. In English and probably most other languages, 'white' is associated with light, goodness, happiness, etc. On the other hand, 'black' evokes completely opposite associations – darkness, danger, mourning. Even if we consider common collocations with 'black', the most positive one I can think of is 'black humor', and even here all the positive charge comes from the word 'humor', not 'black'. When we use such charged words
talking (or just thinking) about people, these connotations affect our attitude. Of course, this alone is not enough to cause racism, but it creates the soil in which the weed of prejudice can grow. Indeed, linguistic communication with its generalizing ability and connotations is probably as old as civilization; whereas racism, as Cornel West pointed out, was completely unknown in the times of Plato and Aristotle, starting only with the beginning of colonization of Africa, and it was discourse about the external similarities of white people and depictions of God (also created by white people) that gave rise to the notion that people with different skin color were inferior. In this way, reality was adjusted by language, as ideas were spread through linguistic communication. Interestingly enough, nowadays the same process of sharing ideas seems to have been causing a de-escalation of racism. W.E.B. Du Bois suggests that simply talking to each other can change the way we think about racism, can undermine our preconceived notions, adjusting connotations of some words (or even substituting some words - 'African American' for 'black'). As a result, our natural tendency to generalize about race can be curbed, so discourse is used to remove the stereotype. It is interesting to observe that there are other examples when stereotypes are purposefully perpetuated by discourse: for instance, the idea that democracy is always good, even when it is imposed on a society, as it has happened in Iraq. Thus, we see how discourse has a profound impact on our reality.

Further, I would like to compare and contrast the social and physical reality. In fact, they are similar from the perspective of an individual member of society: social reality is what one knows about society, and physical reality is what one knows about the physical world. Indeed, before Marx published his Communist manifesto, workers did not know about communism: for them, communism did not exist. Once the knowledge about communism spread, it became shared by different communities and thus a part of our reality. In the same breath, physical reality is also just the shared knowledge about our physical world. For instance, before Pythagoras (roughly before sixth century BC), people 'knew' that the world was flat; and before Newton, people followed Aristotelian belief that bodies are at rest when no force acts upon them. These laws were as real to people in those times as the existence of spherical earth and universal gravitation is to us nowadays. The reason why now we have different ideas than before is because new ideas were spread through discourse, thus adjusting our 'reality'. Yet, while social and physical realities are similar in a way that for us they are both shared human knowledge, there is a fundamental difference between them: while social reality in its entirety is created by humans, physical reality is actually independent of us. Yet, the problem is that our descriptions of this independent physical reality have been repeatedly proven false, and there are absolutely no grounds to believe that our current scientific theories are correct, nor that they will ever be. Thus, while actual physical reality is not socially constructed if only because the age of the universe far outstrips the age of the mankind, our conception of physical reality has a significant social element to it.
One may reply to this by arguing that language simply describes what is there and thus merely reflects the reality instead of defining it. I believe language does both. For instance, initially Mrs. and Miss were introduced into English probably because marital status was the most important thing to know about a woman. In that way, language reflected the reality. However, after this distinction was introduced and preserved for some time, it crystallized in our society to the point that people stopped questioning why it was the there. That is, through discourse, it permeated our culture and life, making it still harder for women to achieve a voice in society, as Virginia Woolf points out. Friedrich Nietzsche offers an insight into this by discussing the nature of our historical consciousness: in thinking about the present and the future, we constantly tend to refer to the past, “ruminating” the same ideas. The existence of this cycle explains the difficulty in changing the established position of women – the new discourse has to break this “rumination” cycle in order for the situation to improve.

This leads us into a deeper discussion of how language molds reality through history. Apart from some statistical data, all of our history is conveyed through language. However, when history is preserved in written form, the message of the author might be misinterpreted due to the fact that, the language changes with time, and so does social reality. Moreover, the message can be misinterpreted – consciously or subconsciously – by the reader himself, as it happened with Darwin’s On the Origins of Species, whose misinterpretation is commonly known as Social Darwinism. Following this thread a little further, if there was no Social Darwinism, it might never have occurred to Adolf Hitler that German race was superior to other races, and the Nazi movement may never have started. As we see, despite the fact that Darwin was not talking about the society at all, a rather influential social theory developed out of his writing. The reason why this happened was that language does not warrant against misinterpretations; on the contrary, it allows us to form abstract ideas, forgetting about specifics, and apply these ideas to a completely different context from the original one. At this point, I cannot help but quote a famous Russian poet, Fyodor Tyutchev: “A thought once uttered is untrue”. With this in mind, it does not seem overly odd that Nietzsche thought his professional education in classical philology appropriate to the analysis of history, especially considering the fact that most of the works on which our modern thought is based were written in Ancient Greek and Latin.

But would there not be a reality even if there were no languages? This question is as important as it is hard to answer. I believe that with the formation of any basic communities, languages would necessarily develop out of the natural need to interact. Thus, there being no languages would imply that there were no societies – something like the initial state of anarchy and self-sufficiency that Rousseau talked about. However, in this state the existence of social reality becomes altogether irrelevant. As for physical reality, I think it would probably be the only case when physical reality would not have a socially constructed element to it.
In conclusion, the syllogism that I laid out applies fully to social reality, and also partly to physical reality. I have shown that language is socially constructed, and as such, it is both a product of the society as well as an agent that affects and defines it. While physical reality itself is independent of language, social reality is a construct, and thus it can be adjusted through discourse. With the benefit of hindsight, we can already say that works of Virginia Wolf and Du Bois, have contributed to the causes of female emancipation and de-escalation of racism, respectively. Their works have affected the way we act and talk about these issues today, thereby defining the current reality. The lesson is that we should be careful and critical about the usage of language – it is important not to underestimate the power of words, not to dismiss discourse as unable to have any real effects.