

Original Paper

On Revelation of the Meaninglessness of Language

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Abstract

There is a conceptual relationship between language and significance, that is, whenever it comes to language, it is set to have meaning. But it does not mean that whenever we speak, we have meaning or we speak meaningfully. Based on the research of the meaning of language, the thesis proves that talking about the things that do not exist in the world will lead to meaninglessness from the two perspectives. One is the opinion from Wittgenstein that "Meaning of a proposition is the state of affairs", the other, limitations of language. It further probes the meaning of human life based on the meaninglessness of language and three suggestions have been put forward as to how to experience the meaning of human life.

Keywords

language, meaninglessness, limitations, human life

1. Introduction

Different linguistic schools have different perspectives towards the study of language. The formalism, headed by Noam Chomsky, studies language differently from cognitive linguistics, thinking that language, as an open system, is influenced by the social culture and natural law. Yuzhi Shi puts forward the systematic view towards the study of language (Shi, 2018). In addition, the meaning of language has been paid much attention to by many famous linguists and scholars, for example, Lyons (1977), Leech (1981), Palmer (1981), Wierzhicka (1996), etc. Pu (2019) made a detailed analysis of four views of meaning: meaning as referent, meaning as reference to concept, meaning as system self-reference and meaning as discourse self-reference and concluded that with the external and internal world unable to produce meaning, meaning can only be constructed by language or discourse. The significance of "meaning" is full of ambiguities. There are two ideas about the word "meaning" in "Modern Chinese Dictionary". One is annotated as the content represented by language, words or other signals, which

includes two aspects of “the substance or meaning contained within things” and “the sum of the intrinsic elements of things in philosophy”. The other is annotated as the value and function. Both explanations indicate that the meaning expresses a kind of relationship. The first annotation is actually the “meaning”, which converts the symbol represented by the signal into other symbols, and one symbol state can be equivalent to other symbol states. The second annotation refers to the comparison and evaluation among symbols, and the existence of another symbol or symbol system implicitly refers to the change of each symbol when one symbol state acts on another or multiple symbol states, indicating the meaning of a symbol upon another symbol or symbols. I agree with the second one. Starting with general ideas about meaning, the paper is going to find out the meaninglessness of language and its revelation on the meaning of life through Wittgenstein’s “image theory” and limitations of language itself.

2. Definition and Boundary of Meaning

The boundary between meaning and meaninglessness lies in whether there is a relationship between the objects being investigated. If there is a connection, the connection can be perceived as having an effect, and the presence or absence of meaning is the presence or absence of the function. For instance, in the food chain of cabbage-rabbit-tiger, cabbage is meaningful to tigers, but tigers do not think cabbage is meaningful to them. The meaning lies in the function, and the function reflects the relationship. The chain of the relationship breaks and the meaning is terminated. The philosopher presupposes that language is meaningful because it has a specific relationship with the objective world, and “meaning theory” is studying this relationship. In general, language is meaningful because it refers to the exact existence of the object. That is to say, it is either true or false for the sentence in the language. Therefore, a sentence refers to the value of true or false, which in turn depends on the meaning of the sentence. In addition, the meaning of the sentence depends on the meaning and reference of each component of the sentence (Huang, 1983, p. 162). The language philosopher Frege (1988) believes that if the sentence does not have a clear meaning, it cannot talk about the value of true and false. This statement is true if the statement corresponds to the fact. The symbol of the language is “signifier”, and the object referred to is “signified”. Whether there is “consistency” between the signifier and the signified depends on whether the statement makes sense. Meaning is a relationship. When the meaning involves only a single substance, it is meaningless.

3. Wittgenstein’s View of Meaning

The meaning of language is a central research topic in language philosophy. In “The Philosophy of Logic”, Wittgenstein, one of the most important founders of modern analytic philosophy, believes that “propositions are images of facts” (Chen, 2006, p. 121). In this way, to question the meaning of language, there are two ways to go: one is the language itself, and the other is the fact. Wittgenstein outlined the following framework for us. As for the facts, they constitute the world and the reality from

above and they are the state of affairs from below. The state of affairs can be either existent or non-existent, composed of the basic objects in the relationship. The basic objects are the unchanging things that are real, and the only thing that is variable is their configuration relationship. Then, Wittgenstein declared: "Only facts can express meaning". Propositions are such facts. Therefore, this is very clear that the two roads are actually just one way, i.e., the propositions are the names in certain relationships, which are the names of the objects. Their relationship between them is the relationship of the objects in the situation, thus, naturally, the meaning of the proposition is the state of affairs.

It is very important to know that the meaning of the proposition is a state of affairs rather than a fact. It guarantees that the proposition can be either true or false, that is, it guarantees that the wrong proposition is meaningful. Let us look at this sentence: "Hitler did not slaughter the Jews". If the meaning of the proposition is a fact, it is obvious that this proposition is not a fact, and it is meaningless. But in fact we can understand this sentence, which shows that it makes sense. Its significance lies in the fact it describes a state of affairs, that is, a possible fact. As is said, "a proposition is a description of a state of affairs" (Chen, 2006, p. 128). Therefore, to be precise, Wittgenstein's early view of language is not so much of, what the average scholar calls, the image theory, as the drawing theory. Language is to draw on the possibility rather than to trace the reality, and language does not only reproduce the reality, but also display the possibility. That is, the world includes not only the real world, but also all possible worlds. Wittgenstein, who is in favor of the drawing theory, regards the state of affairs as the meaning of the sentence, and the sum of the state of affairs, i.e., the world and the reality, as the meaning of language. Considering the meaning as a state of affairs leads to the idea that being meaningful is equivalent to the existence of the world. This kind of meaning is rather meager because there are many important things that are not in the so-called world. The world is the meaning of language, so what is within the world is meaningful and what is outside the world is meaningless. The presence or absence of meaning is determined through what is within and outside the world, which is a reflection from the language material. Whatever is spoken outside the world will lead to meaninglessness, such as the meaning of life or the meaning of the world, ethics, etc. In addition to the reflection on the meaning of language from the language material, Wittgenstein also reflected on the form in the early stage. The result of this reflection is that the logical proposition is lacking in meaning because it describes the possibility itself. But the lack of meaning is not meaningless, but zero meaning, just as the no solution to the problem of mathematics is also a solution.

In fact, even if it is about the "meaning" discussed in the book of *Logic Philosophy*, its meaninglessness is not equal to the rejection of meaning. In the language material, meaninglessness supports the whole realm of meaning. The world is my world, and what I can't say is the boundary of my world, and thus the boundary of meaning. To completely reject the meaning is to commit suicide and put the world to an end. In form, meaninglessness can help express meaningful things, such as the logical form of language. How is meaninglessness found? Meaninglessness shows itself, thus, it is not incomprehensible. Meaninglessness is just a sign to show anything that cannot be said. For

Wittgenstein himself, meaninglessness is at least as important as something meaningful. Zhe (2012) selects the “irony” perspective to explain the critical characteristics of the previous Wittgenstein philosophy, and believes that there is an affinity between Wittgenstein’s philosophical activities and Socrates’ induction, which can further understand Wittgenstein’s philosophy and existence as an “important and meaningless” irony.

4. Limitations of the Language Itself

The scholars of logical positivism are even more the so-called “complete empiricists” who advocate that all scientific knowledge with the practical content is the empirical knowledge and must be confirmed by experiences. The limited experience inevitably produces a limited concept. For instance, we must use the concept to describe God. Such God’s attributes as “all-powerfulness” “transcendence” and “infinity”, etc., are used to describe God and He is put within the limited category represented by these words. These limited categories come from the relative and limited rationality of human beings. Therefore, verification only falls into the domain of experiences and all the metaphysical propositions are meaningless, because the metaphysical statements are unverifiable. This of course poses a great threat to theological language, and the knowledge of theology and the description of the revelation will lose their significance. In fact, the limitations of the language itself must be taken seriously in order to open up new paths in various challenges. Later, Wittgenstein regarded the mental process and the private feeling as the meaningless fiction through grammatical analysis, thus negating the private language based on the recognition of the existence of private feelings. Jiao (2011) believes that as a means of fabrication and fiction beyond the form of life, private language is the meaningless nonsense. Therefore, there is an essential problem that must be dealt with first, that is: What is on earth the limitation of the language itself? The linguistic ability to describe is affirmed, but where are its limits? Language is a system of vocal symbols created by people in labor practice, without which thinking activities and communication are impossible. Human production and life are inseparable from language. But once the language is produced, it has its relative independence. Ancient Chinese thinkers, especially Wang Bi and others, have deep understanding of the relativity and limitations of language and their negative effects. For example, as for the expression of the Tao of the universe and the Tao belongs to the non-expressible field. Modern logic language philosophy believes that in the field of science, on the issue of knowledge, the identified external objects can be expressed in the form of language and logic, and the clarity of the statement and the logic are required. But for the problem of metaphysics, the questions in the non-expressible domain that cannot be solved by science and logic such as belief, freedom, God, and things in themselves do not require expression and argumentation.

From the theory of knowledge, the philosophy is regarded as the science of pursuing knowledge and experiences about external objects. Then the relationship between thought and language must be “the complete expression of meaning”, that is, anything or any entity can be stated and verified through logic. If philosophy is regarded as the knowledge to pursue the otherworldly realm of life, as the root of

people's settlement of life, and as a study of faith, then the relationship between language and thought can only be "incomplete expression of meaning". To put it in another way, such questions as human spiritual realm and human belief and faith cannot be expressed with the language, nor can they be verified by the logic. The recognition of "incomplete expression of meaning" shows the certain limitations of language, thus, it recognizes the uncertainty and ambiguity of language in expressing things and thoughts. Geisler (1983, p. 276) believes that language does not need to be considered as a form of "expressing the essence". It can express objective reality without objectifying the reality it represents. To a certain extent, language is the Tao, words about reality. His view is that the ability of language is limited, whose role is not to define reality, but only to show reality. Therefore, we can probably know the function of language. Language can express the reality, but the reality can't be conceptualized; it can indicate, but can't describe in details; it can display, but can't completely embody the concept. Language can represent God, but cannot fully explain the essence of God. The meaning of language is that this use of language is possible (not necessarily realistic), and the meaninglessness of language is essentially the "impossible" use of it.

5. Meaning of Life

Does the insignificance caused by the impossible use of language really have no value? These meaningless statements, which are not in language games—that is, virtually impossible use of language—are not trivial. The meaning of life and the meaning of the world are not in the world, so it will not be said nor expressed. Although Wittgenstein said, "That is only meaningless at the other end of the boundary" (preface), but to be more precise, the other end of the language is not meaninglessness, but rather it has "other" meanings, a non-factual significance. Just as Kant suspends religion and morality in the field of knowledge and then retains them in the field of faith, Wittgenstein suspends religion and morality in the field of speech, and then retains them in wordless silence. Therefore, from the meaninglessness of language and the limitations of language, we can think about the meaning of life. Where is the meaning of life? This seems to have become an age-old proposition, and everyone often thinks of this unanswered proposition in an inadvertent or lonely state. Language philosophers such as Heidegger and Gadamer believe that philosophy is the question of human beings' self-existence. The questioning of meaning by language philosophy is the questioning of human existence. In this way, "meaning" becomes the ontology of philosophical questioning, and "human meaning" is the main research object (Heidegger, 1987; Gadamer, 1975). Human beings and meaning are symbiotic and coexist; meaning exists because of human beings, and humans live by meaning. According to my personal observation, for most people in the world, life is meaningless and worthless. Moreover, they never consider such philosophical issues. When you are lucky, you are arrogant and muddle-headed; if you are unlucky, you sigh and are lost in fame and fortune. We do not understand why we lived this life until we get into the casket. "What is the meaning of life?" The questioning of the meaning of life is the inevitable pursuit of each thinking entity.

I am always an optimist for the future of mankind. As Heidegger first pointed out, finiteness is the destiny that modern people must bear. Heidegger emphasizes the limitedness and historicalness of the existence, and Wittgenstein emphasizes the natural history of life forms and language games. In fact, just because we are limited, there will be meaning problems, and only from the limitedness can we answer the meaning question. It is the Taoist philosophy that truly puts forward the philosophy of language in the history of Chinese philosophy and profoundly discusses it. "Tao" is the highest category in the Laos' philosophy, containing the dual meaning of the origin of the universe and the universal law. As the origin of the universe, "Tao" is invisible. The universe is infinite, and nobody can grasp the general law of the infinite movement of the universe completely at any stage of development. Therefore, the Tao that reflects the general laws of the universe is not to be named and expressed. Although we can't specifically say what the Tao is, we are convinced that there is an initial source of existence in the world, and something that runs through everything. If there are no people in the world, then this universe will forever exist and change, but there will never be the meaning that people pursue. It is meaningless in itself. Therefore, the person itself is a kind of negation of insignificance. It is because of people that meaning comes into play. If life is to be meaningful, it must have absolute goals, and it must have faith. In modern times, people cut off God's head with reason and disorganize logic with irrationality. As a result, everything has become nothingness and meaning is gone. Only when you return to the faith and let the arrogant people re-accept their own restrictions and find their place will life make sense. Faith requires "believing without seeing" and their establishment does not point to events, but to the heart of everyone. With this kind of emotion, they exist alive. A person inspired by religious beliefs is one who has liberated himself from selfish shackles to the utmost extent and is concentrating on the thoughts, feelings, and goals that he insists on. The key here lies in the power of this content that transcends the individual, and the depth of faith that transcends all its far-reaching meanings, instead of whether it has attempted to relate the content to a divine being. Therefore, true wisdom will lead to the path of faith. Similarly, faith is also bred by wisdom. Zhou (1995) has a particularly fascinating text describing wisdom and belief. "The human spiritual self has two gestures. When it rises to the earth, it sees the inevitability of restrictions, which creates a sense of understanding and a feeling of detachment. It is wisdom. When it stands in the earth and looks up to the sky, it is longing for perfection due to eternal defects, and pursuing transcendence due to the limitations of the flesh. This is faith." In fact, faith is the eternal hope and pursuit of the imperfect beings for perfection as well as the place where people's hopes and values lie. All external beliefs are only forms, and their value lies in directing people to the heart. Faith is the pursuit of human goals and hope. The meaning of man lies in it. Therefore, life from birth to death is a process of seeking meaning; seeking meaning is to settle down for life and find the foundation of life. Human existence is the appeal for meaning.

6. Experience of the Meaning of Life

After dealing with the many problems in this article, I once again feel the finiteness of the finite existence. How can people not be humble in this vast universe? How can people not be honest and fearful? If there is something that the deep blue and mysterious sky teaches me, I think it should be humility and awe! From the meaninglessness of language, we discover the meaning of life. I can use language to define the boundaries of the world in which I exist. Language makes my world my life. The meaning is not in the “world” but in the “human world”. Wittgenstein believes that “language is part of our body and as complex as our body” (2003a, p. 116), emphasizing the integrative “inner” nature between language and human beings just like the combination of flesh and blood. The study of meaning is inseparable from language, and even more inseparable from people. The meaning is not in “language” but in “human language”. Then, how to experience the meaning of life? The followings are the three ways.

6.1 Experience Value in Life

It refers to understanding the meaning and value of life through the experience of life. People often discover the meaning of life through the experience of good things through nature and the human world, and this discovery has special aesthetic value. For example, some people love reading books, some travelling, some music and some painting. People are full of love and gratitude for life because of these hobbies. They feel that life is full of meaning and more interesting, therefore, embarking in spirits into life. In addition, the most important value experience is our experience of loving others. People can experience the sense of value through not only experience of something but also experience of love in their loved ones. Through the love for others, we have extended the sense of meaning to the people we love, and at the same time, we have enhanced our sense of meaning.

6.2 Discover the Meaning of Life by Providing and Creating Value

Through creative work or thinking, we can provide the world with tangible products or intangible ideas with personal characteristics. In this way, we can also give meaning to our lives. Many people have a misunderstanding that only when they created a specific material contribution did they create value, which is not true. The truth is that there are so many valuable things that each of us can offer to the world. From a spiritual perspective, a person’s kindness, sincerity, integrity and fraternity, as well as a child’s innocence, purity and vitality, are the most valuable spiritual products that people can provide to the world. In terms of materiality, it is not that only a big invention or creation that can be called a creation but that anyone’s productive labor is providing creation to the world. Anyone, as long as they are truly serious and responsible towards their work or study, they are experiencing the meaning of life in a way that provides creation to the world.

6.3 Discover the Meaning of Life in Suffering

If people are unfortunate and face suffering, they must be able to discover the meaning of life from suffering. If we can find meaning in the unfortunate fate that cannot be changed, then our suffering becomes valuable. Frank believes that people are most concerned about not being happy or escaping

pain. People are most concerned with understanding the meaning of life. If a certain life makes sense, even if people need to pay for it, people will suffer for it. For example, in Chinese idioms, it is painful to give up, but because it is the price of justice, it is worthwhile and valuable for a person who insists on justice. Although a person cannot change his fate materially, if he is in the face of pain, he can maintain human dignity in spirit and show the power of his personality. Bad luck can become a touchstone for a person's personality, by which the pain of experience makes life meaningful.

To sum up, in human language, meaning is the way in which language exists; in the human world, meaning is the way humans exist. In this way, meaning is both the way of existence of language and of human beings; meaning makes language become the language of human beings, making people become human beings with social attributes. Only by merging language and human beings can we realize meaning. As Hongru Li said, "Language is people, people are languages" (2007, p. 11) Meaningless languages can be used meaningfully. Originally there is no meaning at all, meaning is in us. Meaning is given by us. Life is meaningful for it not only discovers meaning, but also achieves absolute eternal meaning.

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