Language
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Abstract
In this article we outline the ways in which questions of language have both revealed problems with conceptions of knowledge and suggested constructive ways of addressing those problems. Having examined the limitations of instrumental notions of language, we outline some alternatives, especially those developed from the middle of the nineteenth and throughout the twentieth centuries. We locate forceful and influential philosophical interventions in the writings of Nietzsche and Heidegger and foundational revisions in the linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure and his structuralist inheritors. We also chart the parallel path of literary theory from Mallarmé through Blanchot and poststructuralism to deconstruction. We conclude, after making some observations about the politicization of language in the works of feminist and postcolonial theorists, with some remarks about how the question of language helps to problematize global knowledge.

Entry
A common starting point when answering the question of language is often a consideration of its function. The common sense response to the question of what language is for is likely to be that language functions as an instrument of communication. This common sense response is not so much a matter of universal perception but more a symptom of how knowledge is currently produced. It is given powerful support by linguistics, which aspires to be a kind of scientific knowledge, and so treats language as something that can be made into an object of knowledge. The assumptions that language is an instrument of communication and that it can be made the object of scientific knowledge follow apparently quite naturally from the most pervasive attitudes towards modern knowledge. Knowledge is attributed to a knowing subject who is capable through his reason of making judgments about his objects. One of the tools or instruments at the scientist’s disposal would therefore be his means of communication, without which this special knowledge would have no means of dissemination.

These assumptions are questionable on several grounds. There is much at stake here because, if language turned out not to be just an instrument for communication, and if it was not possible, after all, to turn language entirely into an object of science, then we’d be faced with a situation of discourse that was more powerful and more fundamental than scientific discourses are currently capable of comprehending. We would need to develop an alternative attitude to knowledge.

Language would be perfectly fit as an object of science only if it was reducible to the instrumental function of communication. And, in empirical and formal terms, that is exactly what language seems to be. We might question its efficiency and we might question whether it is entirely suited to this function. But so long as we have an instrumental attitude towards it, language provides us with what we’re looking for: an instrument. There is something peculiar in this fact. The way we use language tends to encourage us to see it as essentially what we use it for. If we use language as an instrument then it certainly seems to be an instrument. When we communicate (I send a message which someone else understands correctly and perhaps acts upon) language certainly seems to be an instrument for our communication. So perhaps, when science takes language as an object of science and establishes a theoretical or a practical linguistics, all that it is capable of studying is the way it uses language. The
only object that linguistics knows under the term *language* is the instrument of communication that the scientist uses in order to disseminate its knowledge.

Modern philosophies of language, which include those of Rene Descartes and John Locke, differ in their explanations; yet they always assume that language functions as an instrument of communication, which the human subject learns to use. Descartes argues that the ways in which humans use language reveals an a priori rational determination, while Locke assumes that words represent the ideas that are generated by experience. In both cases language expresses or represents a prior mental activity. Language thus functions as the basic medium of communication.

Alternatives and subversions of these philosophical accounts also emerge, drawing on several earlier traditions. Taking exception to the assumption that language functions primarily to communicate and that once we perfect language we can complete the project of assembling all knowledge for all time, Jonathan Swift launches a series of satirical pieces aimed precisely at the circumscription of language and language use, as well as the political implications of such delimitation. In his 1726 novel, *Gulliver’s Travels*, the protagonist visits a “School of Languages” in which projects to improve language include one that will “shorten Discourse by cutting Polysyllables into one, and leaving out Verbs and Participles; because in Reality all things imaginable are but Nouns.” Another attempts to abolish words altogether, using the things they represented instead, as a means to achieve a “universal Language to be understood in all civilized Nations, whose Goods and Utensils are generally of the same Kind.” The satire is aimed at kinds of nominalism, typical of the eighteenth century, which would reduce the function of language to empirical reference. The constitution of language as an object and an instrument for communication embedded in a scientific project to routinize and universalize all knowledge is taken to its absurd reduction in this section of the novel when people of much import and business must be accompanied by various bearers of their objects (that is, their words rendered concrete) and the vast amount of time required for them to sort through their goods in “conversations,” all done in the name of rationalization.

Developments in several strands of literature, philosophy and linguistics since the nineteenth century have made it difficult to maintain instrumentalist assumptions. The field of literature again poses the most persistent challenge to conceptions of language that treat it as secondary and external to some more essential inner quality of experience or thought, which it would thus express or decorate. At the end of the nineteenth century, Stéphane Mallarmé, in conjunction with his continuing formal experimentation in verse, develops a complex response to the question of language. For Mallarmé language is the basis and foundation for literary art because it is also the very essence of the world. Maurice Blanchot, writing in 1943, reveals how important Mallarmé is for a French theoretical tradition that acknowledges the challenge of aesthetics. After Mallarmé, he argues, we must acknowledge that it is language itself that is expressed in language:

The nature and dignity of language are expressed both by man, who reveals himself in a dialogue within which he discovers the event that is his foundation, and by the world, putting itself into words in an act that is its deep origin. The error would be to think of language as an instrument whereby man acts or manifests himself in the world; in reality it is language that positions man, by guaranteeing the existence of the world and his existence within it. (Blanchot 45).

For Mallarmé (developing a strand of thought that is already present in his precursor Baudelaire) language manifests two faces: there is the everyday circulation of words whose function is exchange and communication, acts which exhaust the word; and
there is another side, revealed by the poet and novelist, which presents, in language, that power of language that cannot be understood—which resists knowledge and understanding but which nonetheless gives itself for those purposes. Awareness of this dichotomy grows with yet more intensity as the twentieth century proceeds through its increasing emphasis on technology and instrumentality, in the work of Roland Barthes, Julia Kristeva and other members of the Tel Quel group, who build on both Mallarmé’s poetics and later developments in structural linguistics.

Also towards the end of the nineteenth century, Friedrich Nietzsche turns to the pre-Socratic philosophers to pose his own set of problems, this time from within the philosophical tradition. His project would prove important for Martin Heidegger, whose meditations on language also deploy the pre-Socratics. In each case, the exploration of earlier traditions sualbed by the Socratic understanding of Truth reveal a partially suppressed understanding of language and its relation to the formation of knowledge, in contrast with the direction taken by scientific knowledge after the seventeenth century. In his 1873 unpublished essay, “On Truth and Falsity in their Ultramoral Sense,” Nietzsche displays a pre-Socratic sensibility that posits the flux of the world and limits of human knowledge while still remaining grounded in active deployment of reason, argumentation, and critique. The pre-Socratic fondness for paradoxes and metaphors to challenge staid assumptions about knowledge and the nature of the world inspires Nietzsche to assert in this essay, much as the pre-Socratics did, that Truth is not predicated on universal absolutes but rather on conventions codified for specific purposes of society and residing in “a mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, and anthropomorphisms” (174). The idea of the perfectibility of knowledge is thus undermined by the very instrument that was meant to lead to its completion: language.

Heidegger’s sense of the grounding nature of language is already clear by the 1935 article, “The Origin of the Work of Art,” which features the key distinction between world and earth. He works through three rather different kinds of artworks—Van Gogh’s Shoes, a Greek temple, and poetry—but the third kind, poetry, clearly best exhibits, for Heidegger, the literary and thus linguistic grounds not only of art but of Dasein’s world. His reading shows that art can be regarded neither as merely an aesthetic object designed to give pleasure or to portray beauty, nor as a kind of thing with the addition of aesthetic beauty. Rather, art discloses the nature of things. In the case of poetry, because the matter or earth of poetry is language and because language is what gives Dasein names for beings, then poetry has the power of addressing the possibility of human communications and relations. The relationship between world and earth, when it takes the form of linguistic innovation, manifests the embattled relations between concepts and words when they are formed and form each other. Poetry reveals the conditions through which not only artworks but all other kinds of communicating and all other kinds of thing are possible at all. For this reason Heidegger increasingly privileges Dichtung (poetry and in a more extended sense, the power of invention) in his later works. The disclosing of being—if it is to be achieved in any way that eludes the classifying, calculating procedures of modern knowledge—must be an evidently singular event each time.

Meanwhile, the posthumous publication in 1915 of Ferdinand de Saussure’s Course in General Linguistics is often regarded as the foundation of modern linguistics; but the work has had two rather different long term consequences. They correspond to a distinction that is made early in the lecture course, between langue and parole. Langue (“language”) designates the abstract differential system that must be presupposed as the internalized and unconscious condition for individual language
use. It thus represents the “work of a collective intelligence” [l’œuvre de l’intelligence collective], in so far as it is beyond the will of any individual to change it. Parole (“speech”), on the other hand, designates individual acts, statements and utterances, events of language use manifesting each time a speaker’s ephemeral individual will through his combination of concepts and his “phonation”—the formal aspects of the utterance. Saussure points out here that the single word “linguistics” therefore covers two radically different kinds of study. The study of parole would be entirely focused on individual utterances, using all the available resources of formal and empirical study to analyze—usually within a specific language—actual statements. The study of langue would be focused on the general conditions of possibility for all languages and all uses of language. The Course in General Linguistics thus follows the second route in this inevitable “bifurcation,” setting out in what has become a decisive historical event in knowledge, the groundwork for all attempts to grasp the basic conditions of possibility for language and language use.

Saussure identifies the basic unit of language as the sign, which he divides between a signifier (formally recognizable mark) and the signified (what the mark might at any time mean). He observes that people used to think of language as a correspondence between word and thing. The thing, though, has nothing at all to do with how language functions—it is irrelevant:

A linguistic sign is not a link between a thing and a name, but between a concept and a sound pattern [image acoustique]. The sound pattern is not actually a sound; for a sound is something physical. A sound pattern is the hearer’s psychological impression of a sound, as given to him by the evidence of his senses (66).

So the minimal unit of the language system is the sign, which is made up of two sides—an abstract image of a sensible form (the signifier) and an idea or concept (the signified). A physical manifestation of writing or the sound of speech would each time manifest a repeatable and thus recognizable mark of some kind, to which there must correspond a sense of what it might mean.

The distinction between langue and parole creates an object for linguistics, because it produces a kind of undetermined space for the generation of theories of langue, which can then be applied to actual events or formal examples of language use. However, langue remains, even now, an ingenious theoretical fiction, which is susceptible to nuanced and subtle speculations but admits to no absolute decision as to its fundamental nature. If nothing else the theory of langue and parole demonstrates the conditions on which it is possible to invent theories (of language). This discovery continues to inspire speculation on language, aesthetics, politics and society.

The French linguist Emile Benveniste is celebrated for establishing a fateful distinction, based upon the difference between langue and parole, between what he calls the subject of the énonciation (represented by the signifier) and subject of the énoncé (represented by the signified). In two influential arguments Benveniste focuses on the role and implications of the ubiquitous first person pronoun (and its reciprocal second person), used at least implicitly in every language known to man and woman. He concludes that language is not something the human subject uses, but rather, the human subject is something only made possible by language. In his 1958 article, “Subjectivity in Language,” Benveniste underlines this point:

We are always inclined to that naïve concept of a primordial period in which a complete man discovered another one, equally complete, and between the two of them language was worked out little by little. This is pure fiction. We can never get back to man separated by language and we shall never see him inventing it … It is a speaking man whom we find in the
world, a man speaking to another man, and language provides the very definition of man. (Benveniste 224).

We need to be careful here, because when Benveniste says that language provides the very definition of man, we mustn’t assume that we know what language is in its entirety. At this stage language provides us with the definition of man only because of the peculiarity of personal pronouns. The foundation of “subjectivity” is determined, according to him, by the linguistic status of the person:

Consciousness of self is only possible if it is experienced by contrast. I use I only when I am speaking to someone who will be a you in my address. It is this condition of dialogue that is constitutive of person, for it implies that reciprocally I becomes you in the address of the one who in his turn designates himself as I (224-225).

So the linguistic basis of subjectivity would not be found in those aspects that constitute either its lexical content (meaning) or its formal and grammatical rules; it would only be discoverable in the exercise of language and as a precondition the relationship to the other. This account of language implies an irreducible division corresponding to that between enunciation and statement (énoncé). The subject of the statement seems fixed in time, a snapshot of a moment that has immediately passed, already fading in its enunciation; the speaker is already in principle out of the picture and all that remains is his representative in language.

In a further development, the concept of linguistic competence, introduced by the linguist Noam Chomsky in 1965, is intended to address certain assumptions about language, especially in structuralist linguistics, which understands langue as an unconscious system. Chomsky is concerned to establish instead a science that would study what he calls “the language faculty,” in analogy with other mental faculties like logic, which as a kind of intuitive reasoning power requires no accumulation of facts or skills in order to develop but rather seems to be present and fully functional in speakers fluent in a language. Competence defines the system of rules that governs an individual’s tacit understanding of what is acceptable and what is not in the language they speak. The empirical and formal realization of competence would be performance, which thus corresponds to diverse structuralist notions of parole, utterance, event, process, etc. Competence thus defines what Chomsky refers to as an innate grammar of language use that is applied variously across languages and institutions.

In the absence of a model, so far, for an innate universal grammar, one might nevertheless suppose that a capacity exists that contingently gives the speaker access to whatever syntax or other kind of competence might be required by environmental needs. Then it would follow that competence no less than performance was institutional in some way. The concept of discourse helps brings to light interesting correspondences between Chomsky’s theoretical formulations and those of Michel Foucault, to whom he is more often opposed. Foucault in The Archeology of Knowledge adapts the notion of archive to account for those rules that govern what we know and what we can say, but which we cannot, for that reason, ever describe. These rules function not as part of an innate faculty, as Chomsky understands it, but as a “system of accumulation, historicity, and disappearance” (Archaeology 130). The archive thus designates what Foucault calls the “historical a priori,” historical conditions independent of both knowledge and experience that nonetheless help to determine them.

These various and often incompatible trends in linguistic speculation help to focus on a rather more involved problem of knowledge: the question of the relationship between transcendental ideas and empirical experience. This more technical way of
addressing the problem of the relationship between theory and experience both allows more precision in identifying its nature and helps to focus on how theories of language play a decisive role in its elaboration. If we, as many ancient and modern philosophies have done, accord primacy to ideas then we assume that language functions in a secondary and derivative way with regard to them. Ideas thus exist in at least a semi-permanent state independently of language, along with the world and its things. Language is nothing but a medium. As we have seen, theories of language since the nineteenth century have made it difficult to maintain these assumptions. Something of an immanent language dwells in each of us as a condition for our knowledge and experience. Yet, if we, on the contrary, assign primacy to some aspect of language, as has been a tendency in some fields of social and cultural theory, then we repeat the gesture of traditional philosophy in reverse. Language and its institutions are regarded as the determining factors in human experience. The historical or institutional a priori, regarded as an internalized and unconscious system, takes over the role once reserved for the transcendental sphere. Ideas of materiality, historical specificity, cultural relativity and perspectivism are substituted for older ideas of the soul and universal reason.

The philosophy of Jacques Derrida is notorious for having problematized both of these positions. The first, which he designates by the shorthand of logocentrism, assigns primacy to the idea independently of language (i.e., a transcendental signified that escapes the substitutability of language). Logocentrism, in this case, would not simply be a mistake made by careless philosophers of the western tradition. Rather it is the condition we all must find ourselves in, as we occupy a subjective present while engaging with a world of beings we experience on our outside. The tendency of logocentrism is to project the experience of presence to a transcendental exterior, and it leads to speculations about ideal and eternal realms unmarked by the fateful mortality we experience in life. The second position is manifested most clearly by the psychoanalytic theory of Jacques Lacan, though Derrida discovers the same tendency in writers as varied as Nietzsche, Heidegger, Levi-Strauss and, of course, Saussure. The position here assigns primacy not to the idea but, on the contrary, to the signifier, the formal marker of language without any natural or necessary reference to anything it might mean. The tendency here is to project the experience of presence onto a material marker (the signifier rather than the signified, the body rather than the mind). The signifier, of course, is Lacan’s shorthand for the function of the symbolic order, which inscribes us as subjects and as subject to it. Lacan refers to this function as the phallic function, because the elaboration of the theory involves a linguistic revision of Freud’s Oedipus complex. Lacan substitutes the “lack in the signifier” for the role of the penis and the fear of its symbolic loss in the castration complex, as the origin of our access to the social order. Derrida thus coins the term phallogocentrism to designate the repetition of logocentrism under the sign of the sign itself, its putative replacement. Derrida offers several different (substitutable) terms to designate the conditions for this kind of substitution, which simultaneously repeats that which it putatively replaces, including: supplement, deconstruction, archi-writing and trace.

Much that is central to the critiques posed by postcolonial and feminist studies takes language as the prime location of cultural, political and intellectual struggle. Homi Bhabha, for instance, examines the various ways in which the subject of a proposition and the subject of enunciation reveal identity formation in regimes of stratified power relations as resulting from discursive and performative practices. Within a colonial context, this can take the densely ambivalent form of mimicry, by which the words of the colonizers are repeated by the colonized subjects, thus
clarifying how regimes of truth are not reducible to propositions. The context of the utterance cannot be discerned from its content. The specificity of its moment of articulation raises questions of authority surrounding truth and representation. This leads to a significant shift within postcolonial studies. The purpose of critical inquiry then becomes an understanding of the conditions that make specific forms of knowledge possible. Bhabha, in “The Other Question,” states that his “reading of colonial discourse suggests that the point of intervention should shift from the ready recognition of images as positive or negative, to an understanding of the processes of subjectification made possible (and plausible) through stereotypical discourse. To judge the stereotyped image on the basis of a prior normativity is to dismiss it, not to displace it, which is only possible by engaging with its effectiveness.” (67) In this manner, Bhabha moves beyond the easy identification of oppressive discursive practices, such as racial stereotypes, in order to shift our attention toward the conditions that make possible the specific “regime of truth” in which these discursive practices transpire. Postcolonial discourse then would examine the productive elements of colonial discourse, its poiesis, and thus interrogate the conditions that bring it forward, conditions that posit colonial discourse and anti-colonial discourse at the same time, and would do so not to judge either one by a predetermined set of normative standards but to understand how they are possible at all.

Likewise feminist scholars have used language as an object of inquiry into public discourse. Following from the work of psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, Helene Cixous and others explore how subject positions of gender are structured within language. The terms ‘man’ and ‘woman’ function as binary terms, a binary opposition replicated in a whole host of oppositional pairs found in the social and symbolic domain of language: masculine/feminine, culture/nature, reason/emotion, active/passive, moral/immoral, phallus/vagina, power/weakness, presence/absence etc. In each instance, the terms on the left side of the slash resonate with one another, metonymically invoking each with the articulation of any one. Woman, therefore, also carries associations within the Symbolic of nature, passivity, emotion, irrationality, weakness, and perhaps most importantly, absence. Thus, within the Symbolic, these terms function not as neutral terms of binary oppositions of equal status, but as indicating the structure of value-laden hierarchies. The Symbolic, ordered by the phallus, the male-dominated set of codes within society articulated through language, reveals authority as essentially “phallocentric.” Some theorists combine this insight with “logocentrism” and borrow Derrida’s term “phallogocentrism.” However the term is, at times, somewhat mistakenly interpreted as revealing the structure of Western cultural systems, and therefore as providing a means for constructing an alternative knowledge regime. Phallogocentrism does reveal this structure, but by doing so, shows the impossibility of overturning the metaphysics it depends on without substituting it with another metaphysics. And in this double-bind, we learn nothing about Western cultural systems necessarily but more about the role of metaphysics in the formation of knowledge generally. Building on these insights, Cixous, Irigaray and others show how women, as both biological beings and terms within the Symbolic order, create disturbances within the rigid ordering principles of the Symbolic by their very constitution within it. Through the constitution of women as “woman,” the rigidity of the larger cultural system is rendered vulnerable by its own terms. The means by which feminism uses the rules of the language game, to show how they cannot be upheld on their own terms, provides an essential strategy for the critical engagement of knowledge formation and authorization.
Some arguments suggest that language serves as a tool for the containment and control of feminine sexuality. As the psychoanalytic doctrine of the castration complex—and its correlative in the “lack in the signifier”—suggest, feminine sexuality is constituted in language as a kind of absence. Somewhat paradoxically, it is marginalized within the Symbolic as residing outside it. The response to this is varied; at its most effective it mobilizes the force of this outsideness as a way of exceeding and ultimately replacing what Cixous calls “this Phallocentric Performing Theater” (84). Female sexuality can be regarded as a site of jouissance, in the untranslatable French term, a kind of joy or pleasure (on the analogy of orgasm, the petit mort) which exceeds the normal pleasures of a traditionally constituted subjective ego. Jouissance designates a kind of erotic pleasure that operates outside patriarchal discourse. To the “spurious” phallocentric notion of bisexuality (the “fantasy of complete being,” the joining of two gendered halves) Cixous opposes the other bisexuality, that is to say, the location within oneself of the presence of both sexes … the non-exclusion of difference” (84). Thus, the predicates of feminine sexuality operate in much the same way as do the predicates of writing in relation to the positivity of language, like the absences that, as Derrida observes, are necessary possibilities: the a priori possible absence, in the mark of language itself, of sense, of referent, of addressee, and of addressee. Cixous mobilizes this fact of inscription—which operates both inside and outside language as the mark of its possibility—in her notion of écriture féminine: “her writing can only go on and on, without ever inscribing or distinguishing contours” (88). And so the positivity of linguistic theory (for which the terms of language are always signifiers and signifieds, messages sent and received, etc.) are complicit with theories of gender and sexuality, which posit similarly profound delimitations. The exclusion of the conditions of their difference (rather than the positive—male—or negative—female—terms) thus correspond to the exclusion of writing that Derrida discovers animating theories of language from Plato to Levi-Strauss and including those of Rousseau, Condillac, Hegel and Saussure.

The exclusion of writing, of course, turns out to be the exclusion of that which relates, that which connects one thing to another, one text to another, an addressee to an addressee, as well as friends and lovers to each other. The written mark—as the trace of another—thus disappears, even as it gives itself to whatever relation one posits, and so is easy to gloss over, to miss, to negate, to marginalize and to exclude. At the same time, it functions by reserving itself, failing incessantly to connect and to establish for once and for all the last relation (it can only go on and on). The possibilities of language, then, are tied to possibilities of knowledge too, beyond all positivity. The condition—both within and beyond language—of all our relations would be the inextinguishable, yet incalculable and always as yet undetermined, relation to the other. Coming to know this would thus be a precondition for proceeding towards the idea of a global knowledge and towards the realization that such knowledge in the positive sense must remain unfulfilled.

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**Bibliography**


