

Language and embodied consciousness: A Peircean ontological justification for First Language educational instruction and the need for regional lingua-francas in Africa

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Abstract

Effective learning needs to be as existential (and, in a sense, as experiential) as possible and that involves more the pragmatics rather than merely the semantics of words. The initial system of signification that enables one to process/grasp concepts is crucial in whatever one will do with those concepts subsequent to their acquisition. Since students come to school from a background of conceptuality informed by their First Languages, learning would be more meaningful and effective if it is carried out in those languages. During instruction in any language, effective learning will take place only when the experience behind the sign or word or what the word points to is emphasized more than merely the knowing of the word itself. Nevertheless, the sign/word that initially points one to the concept determines the possibilities of what you will do with that concept afterwards, hence the importance of First Language instruction. My paper seeks to explore how the relationship between signs/words and concepts impacts on conceptuality in general, and how this would be reflected in an instructional setting where a foreign language is used, specifically. Adopting Charles Sanders Peirce's triadic model of the organic relationship between the sign and the referent (in a pragmatic sense), the paper argues that the relationship between signs and referents is not as arbitrary as Saussurean and some post-structuralist language theorists posit.

Key words: First Language instruction, Existential /experiential learning, signs/words and concepts, Saussurean and post-structuralist linguistics, Peircean linguistics.

An ontology of language: its source and place in First Language situatedness

Arguments for the advantage of First Language Instruction have already been advanced in various studies (see Mtenje, 2002; Heugh, 2001; Pota, 2001)¹. My task in this paper is to lend weight to these arguments by entering the debate from a branch of philosophical studies called ontology. Simply put, ontology is the study of “being” or “becoming” and, for humans and animals, consciousness is at the “centre” of an investigation into their being or becoming. Specifically, I want to approach the matter from developments in current studies in the physicalist school within philosophy of mind (i.e. that the mind is as physical as the rest of the body and that it exists on a continuum with it). I will also explore how the position posited in the physicalist school relates to human and animal consciousness. In a consideration of that state of being, the relationship between language and subjectivity, or language and consciousness is crucial. The principal question is: What is the relationship between language and conceptuality, and how does that relate to the question of the languages of instruction used in schools?

At this stage, I need to note with liberatory approaches in various fields, notably of pedagogy, such as those propounded by the Brazilian educator and social reformer Paulo Freire, that learning, to be meaningful, needs to be as existential and experiential as possible (1991). The language used in facilitating such learning is important. Common observation suggests that Malawians (and, perhaps, Africans, generally) have difficulty linking the

¹ Since 1999, the University of Malawi, with the technical cooperation of the government of Germany through GTZ, has been running a series of conferences on the need for First Language Instruction in Malawi and beyond. This paper is a product of a presentation at one of these conferences that was held in 2007. To-date, there have been about six of these conferences. For more information on this debate, which has drawn in specialists from South Africa, Zambia, Uganda, Malawi, etc. the reader is referred to the series of conference proceedings which can be accessed at the Centre for Language Studies (CLS), University of Malawi, Zomba.

knowledge they supposedly gain in school with their immediate environment and their lived experiences in it. In other words, there seems to be a yawning gap between what they “know” and what they are supposed to “understand” – by which is meant what they practice in their environment and lived experiences. This development has led to a lack of broad-based initiative and creativity among the populace since the citizenry do not see how they can harness their environment to improve their livelihoods. But, further to this, the ‘arbitrariness’ sentence passed on language by Saussurean and post-structuralist theories of language seems to suggest that words exist as free-floating signs that have no organic or necessary relationship to the entities or referents they designate. This view of language casts doubt on the rootedness (however contingent) of human subjectivity, given that language is an expression of that subjectivity – even if mediated hence, partial.

In other words, according to the above theorists, there is no necessary or “organic” relationship between the sign and the referent; rather, so the argument goes, the relationship is purely conventional and arbitrary. What this seems to suggest is that language pre-exists subjectivity and not that subjectivity gives rise to language. As a consequence, humans are deemed to be divorced from the reality around them because their subjectivity is grounded in language which is itself divorced from the reality it only “pretends” (because it is merely conventional) to represent. The overall view in this school of thought is that it is not individual humans who produce and own language; rather, language is seen as a gift, handed down to humans for their benefit by a thoughtful process or being that pre-exists humans such as society - as a collective (as in Saussurean and post-structuralist linguistics).²

This mystification of language (see Stokoe, 2001) is part and parcel of Cartesian linguistics. It is reflective of the general trivialization and deprecation of the body in a dichotomous conception of human subjectivity characterized by the mind/body binary according to which the supposedly non-material mind is privileged over the material body. From such a point of

² Or, in our case, a colonizer or former colonizer (in the case of English, French, Portuguese, etc.), or even a hegemony-minded post-independence political dispensation (as was the case with the imposition of Chichewa as the Malawian national language during the Malawi Congress Party [MCP] era).

view, any language will do for the instruction of pupils in schools (thereby courting the real danger of serious ontological alienation) provided that the signs constituting that language are learnt – itself not an easy task where the First Language happens to be different from the language of instruction.

Such conceptions of language as presented above are very likely mistaken because like all human praxis, language is an ontological phenomenon; it is an aspect of consciousness and, in the physicalist tradition that taps from the neurosciences, consciousness (for a long time regarded as non-physical) is an embodied phenomenon. From such a viewpoint, in and through language a particular people communicate to one another and, in translation, to those outside their group, the message: “This is how we (the individual ‘we’ for the most part) have neuro-physically experienced, interpreted and organized our encounter with our corner of the universe and this is how we define our place in it”.³ Each language is an expression of an encounter with, and interpretation of, the universe. Each language is a unique worldview and the initial system of signification that one encounters is critical to subsequent developments – intellectual or otherwise.

However, a particular people’s universe is not all the universe there is out there; hence it is enriching to be exposed to other languages besides one’s own. As the Ganda of Uganda have it: *Atanayita atenda nyina okufumba* (‘The untraveled man praises his mother’s cooking’ - Finnegan, 1976: 402). In relation to language, the point here is that each and every language, being a worldview that it is, may have something to teach to the other languages much as it may also have something to learn from them. As such, for a richer and better rounded understanding of the universe, each and every language needs to be accorded its rightful place and status among the polity of languages. As such, where a foreign language has to be learnt as a subject, there is need,

³ It needs noting that while language may seem collective on the face of it, it is neither collective nor static. Signs/words should not be viewed as calcified/ossified and given entities that were handed down to first human beings. Signs/words are recreated by each subject in her or his own way, from her or his own positionality. Much as language and subjectivity interact (both are aspects of consciousness), ultimately, in ‘authentic’ forms of subjectivity it is individual Subjects that create language out of their pragmatic interaction with the brute reality around and in them rather than the so-called conventional language that creates the Subjects’ subjectivity.

throughout the period of the student's learning of such a language, and in the lower classes especially, to translate that foreign language into the closest approximate local words (or words from cognate languages). The instructor needs to make clear the reasons why there may be a need for the students to be exposed to different languages – the reasons are mostly social organizational or power relational, but also in the interest of the cross-fertilization of ideas.

In light of the foregoing, my paper explores how the relationship between words and concepts impacts on conceptuality in an instructional setting and how that is related to the language of instruction used. Adopting the Peircean triadic semiotic model of the affective and “organic” relationship between the sign and the referent (in a pragmatic sense), the paper argues that the relationship between words and concepts is not as arbitrary as Saussurean and post-structuralist language theorists posit.

Consciousness, Concepts and Language

Post-structuralist theory has seized on the supposedly troubled relationship between the sign and the referent (according to Saussurean linguistics) to proclaim our alienation from “objective” or brute reality by arguing that we have access to such a reality only through language which is itself not a representation of reality–in-itself and that, as such, the only reality we have is the one we construct through language which comprises free floating signifiers and signifieds in endless differential networks. I have no intention to comprehensively discuss post-structuralist theory of language in this paper. Suffice to say that my position departs from the Saussurean dyadic sign-referent construction of language (in which the relationship between the sign and the referent is arbitrary) and constructions of subjectivity that are said to arise from it. Instead, my approach expresses affinities with the Peircean triadic construction of language and subjectivity – advanced by Charles Sanders Peirce in several of his writings on semiotics (see, for example, Peirce, 1932; Peirce, 1991; Merrell, 2001; Deledalle, 2000).

According to Peirce signs or words are not as arbitrarily related to reality as in the Saussurean model. Peirce has three stages of apprehension of reality and construction of words, the first of which takes into account the kind of conceptuality that happens during the pre-verbal phase in the Subject producing a word, and the post-verbal conceptualisation that takes place in the

Subject who listens to a word that has been uttered. Peirce posits that communication and signs have at least three dimensions to them:

Firstness is a general state of mind in which there is awareness of the environment, a prevailing emotion, and a sense of the possibilities. This is the mind in neutral, waiting to formulate thought. *Secondness* moves from possibility to greater certainty shown by action, reaction, causality, or reality. Here the mind identifies [or constructs] what message is to be communicated. *Thirdness* is the mode of signs shown in representation, continuity, order, and unity. The signs thought most likely to convey the intended meaning are selected and the communication process is initiated.⁴

The emphasis in such a model is on the “pragmatics” of both words and conceptuality itself rather than merely on the “semantics” of words. What the receiver does with her or his own pragmatic contact with the triadic process is very important as it determines what level of grasping (i.e. apprehension and, hence, ontological authenticity) she or he will command.⁵

Similarly, the argument in this paper is that concepts and words are not one and the same thing – primary proof of this is the fact that one and the same concept can be expressed in different languages. According to post-

⁴ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sign/28semiotics/29> 01-07-2007. I am still in the process of attempting to understand Peirce and a better established view can be had from the writings of Peirce himself as well as from commentators such as Gerard Deledalle (2000). My hope is that the present article will stimulate both interest and debate in Peircean linguistics which I believe would yield us a viable alternative to Cartesian linguistics of whatever shade.

⁵ Not that one should necessarily be searching for the etymologies of words as Giambattista Vico seemed to be urging (see Edward Said, 1985); rather, one should have a personal ‘take’ on the concept of which a particular word is its symbol.

structuralist theorists, the fact that concepts are expressed as language – as words – renders them arbitrary constructs, without any significant relationship to “objective” reality in reference to and out of which the mind in fact constructs them. I will concede here that it is true that we cannot have either a collective or individual access to “objective” reality-in-itself. However, the impossibility of this is not because we cannot have access to such a reality only through language which is only arbitrarily related to it. The impossibility comes from at least three sources. The first is the fact that we each approach “objective” reality first, through appearances, which are a form of mediated contact through perceptual organs of varying constitution and quality. Secondly, because we each approach “objective” reality from a position of subjectivity, that is, from a particular point of view (from our positionality or situated-ness). Thirdly, objective reality itself is in a state of perpetual flux.

It needs pointing out that Saussurean and poststructuralist linguistics actually seem to be part of Cartesian linguistics that, just as in Cartesian autonomous subjectivity, seems to specialise in the mystification of what is arguably an otherwise entirely natural phenomenon that language is. Chronologically considered, concepts pre-exist words and words are only symbols of concepts (as representations of representations) but are not themselves concepts – much like the shadows on the wall of Plato’s cave. However, even shadows are not totally arbitrary since, unless another medium intervenes, shadows reflect the shape of objects which they are shadowing. Indeed, even in the case where another medium intervened the explanation for the resulting shadow will take into account the nature of the intervening medium. For example, a straight-looking stick in space looks bent at the point it enters the medium of water because water refracts light. In like manner, just as the relationship between concepts and phenomena is a mediated one, so is the relationship between words and concepts.

As I have noted elsewhere (see Mfuné, 2012), philosophy clearly distinguishes between a word and its concept. According to philosophers of an Aristotelian bent such as Ayn Rand (1990), while a word is a unit of signification, a concept, according to philosophical epistemology, is an idea or a mental picture of a group or class of objects, formed by combining all their aspects; not only in their differences but also their similarities. Concepts exist anterior to the words employed to express them, even if words may point us to

concepts. Concepts are representations of brute reality and words are representations of concepts. Nevertheless, language acquisition is contextual and existential or experiential; words are not acquired in a vacuum but are grasped only in relation to the existents they point towards which process gives them both their semantic and pragmatic import. Now, if concepts are representations of brute reality as encountered by a Subject, implying mediation (constructs), the words that arise to represent this encountered reality are, therefore, representations of representations (constructs of constructs), hence doubly or multiply removed from the brute reality of which the concepts are its “primary” representations. This should explain the refracting and, hence, largely alienating quality of language in relation to brute reality. But this in no way implies an arbitrary connection (through language) between the two. And the fact that concepts are grasped only in relation to the actual existents they point to strengthens the case for First Language Instruction given that the learners have these primary existents within easy reach.⁶

In this regard, the phenomenon of onomatopoeia points to the likely possibility, across-the-board, of the non-arbitrariness of the relationship between the signs and their referents in a network of signification. It is simply that, unlike onomatopoeic signs, most words are not one-on-one shadows of individual or stand-alone referents but are rather even more mediated and refracted shadows. Nevertheless, from a physicalist understanding of the mind

⁶ It is not likely that words are arbitrarily related to the entities they symbolize as poststructuralist theory holds. There is a danger of committing the fallacy of appealing to ignorance in declaring the relationship between signs and referents arbitrary. The argument seems to be that because we have failed to show that signs are necessarily related to referents then the two are not related. Of course a reverse fallacy is also possible (and I don't want to be accused of trying to commit it myself) where one claims that because it is difficult to prove the existence of a necessary relationship between the sign and the referent then there must be one. But I think it is safer to assume in the present investigation (with the backing of advances in the physicalist school of philosophy of mind) that the relationship between the sign and the referent simply cannot be arbitrary. As Giambattista Vico observes, whatever words we encounter cannot have been “simply emanations from the lips of some primitive being” (see Said, 1985: 351). Personally, I think that different words belong to the order of signs that Peirce categorises into icons, indices and symbols.

and consciousness, these cannot be said to be arbitrary or unmotivated phenomena. In the physicalist scheme of things, there can be no such thing as an unmotivated phenomenon since phenomena occur in networks and sequences of actions, reaction and more action. What Saussurean and post-structuralist theorists call the ‘arbitrary’ is simply the ‘as-yet-unaccounted-for’, and the difficulty in accounting is owed to the opaqueness of most signs, obtaining as they do in huge networks of signification. It is perfectly conceivable to infer that in the relationship between phenomena, concepts and words, words are doubly or, indeed, multiply mediated or refracted, hence the seeming arbitrariness.

It needs noting, though, that, much as language and subjectivity interact (both are aspects of consciousness), ultimately, in “authentic” forms of subjectivity it is Subjects that create language out of their pragmatic interaction with the brute reality around and in them rather than language that creates the Subjects’ subjectivity. If the latter were the case we would have the phenomenon of having language in the absence of subjectivity which would be an “interesting” scenario as it would present language as a mystical “given” and not as a natural human construct as I have already noted above. It would be plausible to conjecture that there are humans first before there is language and humans construct language to satisfy the need for communication. Authentic and meaningful subjectivity and communication are dependent on each individual creating her or his own pragmatic meaning (and hence own language) out of whatever received or semantic language.

Conclusion

In view of what has been discussed in this paper, and other studies before it, the need for First Language instruction cannot be overemphasized. From the point of view of the relationship between semiotics and embodied consciousness as posited in the physicalist school of the philosophy of mind, the referent, the concept and sign are not one and the same thing. They exist in the order presented above. However, the three are closely, organically and necessarily interrelated (and not arbitrary) in any individual capable of conceptuality. Authentic conceptuality takes place in an individual who personally has a take on the sign as it points him or her towards the concept and the referent. This process of conceptuality/consciousness involves more the pragmatics, in an experiential way, than merely the semantics of signs,

something which the individual can achieve only when she or he has contact with the specific referent concerned, either directly or through cognate experiences – the situation seems to be as positivistic as that. And chances are that more of such referents will be found within the native environs of the learner, a situation which makes First Language learning not only more meaningful but also imperative.

As I have pointed out above (and as people like Ngugi wa Thiong’o have observed elsewhere), any language constitutes a worldview and as such it carries with it a whole freight of individual and collective past and present experiences and the room for imagination about further ontological possibilities. It would seem that only a self-denigrating and as yet ignorant individual would willingly give up his or her First Language wholesale in meek submission to a foreign language – however more powerful than one’s people its bearers may be. In fact Ngugi’s proposal for Africans to write in their vernacular first and only afterwards translate into other languages should not be dismissed off-hand – especially for those Africans whose first languages are not any of the colonial languages. However, as I have already noted above, there is also much to be learnt from other languages which are also unique worldviews in their own right. As Cesaire (1949: n.p), aptly, I think, puts it (excusing the seeming militancy of his summation), “It is not true that the work of man is finished, that we have nothing to do in the world, that we are parasites in the world, that we have only to accept the way of the world. But the work of man has only begun and no [grouping] has a monopoly of beauty, intelligence and strength and there is room for all at the rendezvous of conquest.”

Beyond the classroom, and in the broader context, for our case in Eastern, Central and Southern Africa, the development of a *proto*-Bantu language as *lingua-franca* would greatly improve our development and socio-political standing in this rendezvous of the world stage, not only at the level of self-regard – which is very important – but even more especially so since not everyone can gain native proficiency in English or any of the foreign languages. This is not to kill off the presently existing languages – these will have to be allowed to thrive and develop – Afrikaans inclusive. Rather the goal would be to provide a shared linguistic forum for use in several of our socio-political-economic transactions, which are now fast extending beyond

SADC and COMESA. The same proposal could apply to the different regions on the rest of the continent. Nations which know the ontological and communicative value of their languages spare no expense in nurturing and promoting those languages and African nations should be no different. As far as the development of such *lingua-francas* is concerned, the job for our African linguists has only begun – and they dare not sleep on the job.

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