TAKING ON THE CONVERSATION: UNRESOLVED TENSIONS IN CONVERSATIONALISM AS A SYSTEM

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Abstract

In his "On the System of Conversational Thinking: An Overview", and in the talk he presented as part of the development of this paper (similarly titled), Jonathan Chimakonam attempts the first systematic fusion of the various components of Conversationalism. I refer to the ideas in the paper and the talk as 'SCT' (short for System of Conversational Thinking) in the comments below. In my response, I make an effort to largely ignore the comparative aspects of the work. In other words, I am not too concerned with the case Chimakonam makes to distinguish Conversationalism as a Philosophy separate from other styles and approaches such as analytic philosophy and hermeneutics. Instead, I make an effort to focus on Conversationalism in its own right and not in contrast to other systems. In doing so, my conversational stance is one of a critical proponent in the sense that I am broadly in favour of much of Conversationalism, but insist on rigorous scrutiny of its insights in the interests of making it stronger. My comments are thus focussed on potential problems with the internal coherence of the ideas contained in Chimakonam's work, and my hope is to excavate them as areas for further discussion. To this end, I call attention to the following areas of conceptual dissonance in the explication of Conversationalism in SCT.

Keywords: Conversationalism, philosophy, Chimakonam, context, meaning

The first area of dissonance pertains to the discussion of 'border thinking' in SCT. We are given a very clear definition to work with:

"I employ the concept of bordering to characterise the modernist practice of erecting an imaginary wall of difference in which the inside is construed as the zone of existence, and the outside is construed as nothingness." (CHIMAKONAM 2021, 10). It is also clear, based on everything written and said about it, that border thinking is something to be avoided or even eliminated. Border thinking is associated with the stance of coloniality (CHIMAKONAM 2021, 10), for example. In fact, border thinking is presented as being anathema to the project of philosophising because it stifles or strangles meaning (CHIMAKONAM 2021, 8). All of these suggest that border thinking is unsuitable as a philosophical stance and unsuitable as a foundation for any philosophical system. One of the benefits, presumably, of adopting Conversationalism as a method is that it allows us a way of avoiding drawing such unnecessary borders. Conversationalism is meant to be a system that allows us to do philosophical work without recourse to those borders, or at least is a system that presents alternatives to those borders.

At the same time, however, we are told that one of the benefits of Conversationalism is that it is an effective method for meaning-making or meaning-formation (CHIMAKONAM 2021, 6). In other words, Conversationalism is a way of creating meaning out of meaninglessness. Conversationalism is supposed to be a tool that allows us, through the dialectic of conversation, to manifest meaning out of the nothingness of meaninglessness. This means, of course, that a distinction between the meaningful and the meaningless is a necessary presupposition for Conversationalism to get off the ground. Without this foundational distinction, which in essence is a conceptual border, Conversationalism ostensibly lacks a major part of its *raison d'etre*.

There are ways of potentially rescuing matters. For one, it could be argued that the distinction between meaning and meaninglessness is a sort of necessary evil when it comes to any philosophical system. This would entail that this one border is necessary to generate the appropriate sort of thinking for philosophising to take hold, but that once it takes hold, all other

borders become redundant. But this in turn implies that there is a meaningful distinction between those distinctions that are philosophically useful and those that are not. It is not clear to me how to go about constructing a justification for this distinction, but the more damaging point is that doing so successfully would create yet another border. Taking this route of allowing one distinction to get its foot in the door, therefore, looks like a lost cause.

Another alternative would be to deny that there is a clear border between the meaningful and meaningless. We could see the two terms as occupying polar spaces on some sort of continuum. This would mean accepting that things or events could be considered as meaningful or meaningless to greater or lesser degrees, but there is no real dividing line between that which is meaningful and meaningless *tout court*. Even though this looks like a promising escape, it only works by detracting from the purported power of the Conversational method, which held promise as a way of saving us from the quagmire of total meaninglessness. In any event, this manoeuvre, if taken up, is future labour for those seeking to bolster the coherence of the argument in SCT.

The second area of dissonance concerns Chimakonam's remarks about language and its relationship to meaning. Again, we are given some initial guidance on the picture of meaning that dominates Conversationalism:

> Meaning-making as a conversational practice that proceeds through communication and understanding within specific contexts does not place a premium on words. Words (signifier) cannot be communicated; only ideas can. But we communicate ideas (signified) through words (CHIMAKONAM 2021, 11).

I understand the attempt to downplay the role that words, or even sentences, are thought to play in containing and transmitting meaning. After all, we can convey things through pictures, sounds, touch or body language, and there are no accurate verbal or written analogues for what these modalities express. Nevertheless, I think it goes too far to say that words cannot be communicated. Maybe

Chimakonam is even correct in that words are not primarily what speakers try to convey, but this shouldn't be taken to entail the stronger claim that it is not possible to communicate words. This entails that they are not appropriate as vehicles for the transmission of communication. Thankfully, this ability is acknowledged in the final sentence of the quote. But if we don't have recourse to words as the primary vehicle for communicating ideas, what does SCT propose as an alternative?

The true import of Chimakonam's ideas about the link between words and ideas, is best understood in terms of his theory of meaning-formation. The crux of this account is that there can never be a like-for-like transfer of ideas between two people engaged in a conversation. This is because "No two linguistic beings associate precisely the same ideas to the same words" (CHIMAKONAM 2021, 11). At best, there can be sufficient approximation of a speaker and listeners' meanings for successful communication to take place. The meaning that gets created during this encounter is what is important for SCT, not the precision of the content that gets transmitted during an exchange. We are implored to reject the naïve view, blamed on hermeneutics, that communication is simply about transmitting information through a medium such as words. Instead, we should see communication as a complex interplay of "signifier (word), employed by significists (nwa-nsa and nwa-nju), to convey an idea, signified (idea)" (CHIMAKONAM 2021, 10). These three elements come together, and it is their creative interaction that creates meaning.

The interesting thing that comes out of this is the way this account extracts meaning for the purposes of analysis. In doing so, it interprets it as a phenomenon that is removed from the ambit of the participants in a conversation, as well as from the medium of communication those participants use to understand each other. The obvious problem becomes: granted, we now have an account of meaning. But who understands these meanings? Where are these meanings meant to be located, and who are they meanings for? On the SCT account, meaning emerges as some sort of third-party (fourth-party?) phenomenon, understood neither by nwa-nsa nor nwa-nju, and not contained in the signifier. If meaning has not been analysed out of existence, then SCT has the further task of coming up with an account of the location of meaning. I am not suggesting

Conversationalism follow the path of analytic philosophy, for example, with its debate about whether meanings are found 'in the head' or not. All I am arguing is that if SCT wants a complete and comprehensive account of meaning, then what is sorely lacking is an account of where meanings are supposed to inhere.

This problem is exacerbated by my third point of dissonance, which relates to SCT's commitment to the idea of meaning-making in the absence of stable facts. Chimakonam has a very intriguing account of how meanings emerge in the absence of stable facts:

> In conversation there are no stable facts. Facts are like the shooting star that lighten up at different points. So, facts are unreliable; they are always changing and cannot be captured by language as analytic philosophers and the logical positivists suppose! The goal of conversation is to make meaning. Meaning is an individual's appreciation of an idea which approximates the appreciation of the significist who conveyed the idea (CHIMAKONAM 2021, 33).

This yields an account of meaning that is not underpinned by reference or denotation in the traditional sense. I say this worsens matters because we have now excluded another potential locale for meaning: the external world. At least with accounts of reference or denotation that have recourse to facts about the external world, we have some basic insurance against complete failure in meaning. I am thinking here of the traditional example of ostensive definition where two speakers are looking at the same object (say a tree for example) and say the words "There is a tree". As simple as this example is, it demonstrates how stable facts (the existence of the tree) provide a way for meaning to emerge. On the SCT account, this simple example can never transpire. SCT cuts out this option of using stable facts as a method of triangulation to ensure the accurate transmission of meaning. This can be useful even if one asserts that the concept of 'tree', for example, has to be understood contextually, and that there is no stable fact at play in this example. To see why, imagine that this scenario plays out on a very hot and sunny day. After they say "There is a tree" they move towards it to take shelter in its shade, but quickly realise that what appeared to be a tree from a distance was really a green tarp propped up by some metal poles.

Now it is true that the use of the concept 'tree' was inappropriate initially. However, the stable fact of the existence of that object allowed the speakers to convey meaning successfully. Absent such stable fact, it is not clear how such successful communication could occur.

According to the SCT notion (CHIMAKONAM 2021, 12) of 'Approximated Linguistic Transference of Idea' (ALTI), when a listener in a conversation listens to what is conveyed by a speaker then that listener constructs in her mind a picture that is not identical to the picture in the speaker's mind. It is only by a process of conversation that the two pictures converge towards a range that makes communication possible.

While the prospect of failure to convey meaning is always hovering in the background, SCT gives reason for optimism because of the following consideration:

> To help *mutualise* the degree of meaning, what epistemic agents do instinctually is to take into account each other's worldview and mindview that provide them with a context for interpreting their ideas and eventual meaning-formation. How well this is done determine the degree of mutuality of meaning that is produced in a conversation (CHIMAKONAM 2021, 42).

What plugs the gap that threatens to derail meaning, is an appreciation and respect for the worldview and mindview of those we are engaged in conversation with. These are defined for us as "the world as it appears to us (worldview) and how we restructure what appears to us (mindview)" (CHIMAKONAM 2021, 21). What this means is that one of the necessary conditions for meaningful conversation is an instinctive understanding of the way the world appears to our conversational partners, and how they 'restructure' that appearance.

But perhaps this is too optimistic. It requires, for one, rather deep insight into the psyche of others. It is not clear that we have this insight into others, nor is it explained how we develop these insights. But even if this conundrum is resolved, there is a deeper problem. One of the reasons for the rejection of stable facts in SCT is the idea that facts can never be stable because they are constantly upset by

changing contexts: "*Context, therefore, upsets facts* since what is true in one context can be false in another" (CHIMAKONAM 2021, 11). But SCT fails to recognise that a person's worldview and mindview are facts about that person. Presumably, worldview and mindview are fluid, at least to an extent, and not fully determined at birth (or at the moment that one's existence begins). If this is the case, then a person's worldview and mindview can be in flux and could also respond to context. If this is the case, then basing the possibility of communication on an intuition of worldview and mindview is as precarious as basing it on facts, if not more so. This, combined with the need to 'read the mind' of one's conversational partner in order to understand them, makes communication an extremely onerous and complex task, if the SCT account is correct.

Finally, and related to the discussion of contexts and facts, my final point pertains to the example Chimakonam gives to explain the logic of Conversationalism in on-technical terms. The example goes something like this: take the statement "You need water to stay alive". According to a binary and deterministic system like classical logic, this statement should have the value of either true or false but not both. Chimakonam's point is that this insistence on a true or false value is flawed because a judgment about the truth or falsity of that statement must be influenced by context. For example, that statement, when it is made in the middle of the Sahara Desert, is true. However, that same sentence made in reference to a man drowning in the River Niger is clearly false (CHIMAKONAM 2021, 20). The inability to take on board these important contextual factors, according to Chimakonam, is a problem with traditional logic. Ezumezu, the logic underpinning Conversationalism, is better equipped to deal with this example because it can take account of the Context-dependence of truth values (CDV).

My problem with the example is that if we properly apply the principles of Conversationalism to it, the impasse about truth values and context never arises in the first place. To see why I claim this, let's run through the scenario again. Imagine the first person says: "You need water to survive." According to the Conversational method, the second person, if engaged sincerely in conversation, would go on to elicit more insight into the idea that the first person is trying to convey. The simplest way to do so is to ask: "What do you mean?". The problem is generated because there is more than one

answer to this question. However, the answer with the closest approximation to the logical meaning of the statement would be something like: "All humans die if they go without drinking water for more than three days". Now this sentence is true regardless of context. It is a true statement said in connection with the man in the desert as well as for his counterpart in the river. If either of them went for longer than three days without drinking, they would die. So, there is no quibble about the truth value of this answer. Of course, a different answer could be given. The second person could respond: "I am speaking to the guy in the desert and telling him he needs to drink water to survive." Again, this is obviously true, and there is no argument about its truth value. The third answer could be: "I am speaking to the drowning man and telling him he needs to drink water to survive." This final answer is false, but it does not express the same idea as was expressed by "All humans die if they go without drinking water for more than three days." In other words, context is important, but not only in the way Chimakonam makes it out to be. It can be a way of determining the truth value of a given statement, but it is also a way of determining which idea conveys the true meaning of a statement. Considering ways of incorporating this expanded role for context in logic is yet more grist for the SCT mill.

Relevant Literature

1. CHIMAKONAM, Jonathan O. "On the System of Conversational Thinking: An Overview," [Arụmarụka: Journal of Conversational Thinking], pp1-46, 2021. Vol 1. No 1.