LANGUAGE AS WINDOW OR PRISM

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ABSTRAK

Apakah dengan bahasa kita dapat melihat jelas kenyataan? Atau dengan bahasa, kita membangun realitas kita sendiri? Kedua pende-
katan terhadap bahasa ini terus bersaing untuk mendominasi, dengan
maksud sosial dan etis yang khas yang muncul dari masing-masing
pendekatan. Jika realitas dibangun atau diproyeksikan melalui bahasa,
lalu bagaimana ini dapat menjadi keuntungan atau kerugian dalam
mengabarkan kabar baik? Apa artinya menggabungkan transparansi
bahasa dan kreativitasnya dalam pendekatan teologis terhadap ba-
hasa?

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INTRODUCTION

Is language a transparent window on reality? Or with language, do we con-
struct our own sense of reality? These two approaches to language continue
to vie for dominance, with distinctive social and ethical implications emanating
from each. How are they different? Why are they sustained, even if tacitly, in
every generation? What implications are there for relationships, community
and integral human life for each approach?

If reality is constructed or projected through language, how is this either an
advantage or a disadvantage in proclaiming good news? How would we know
that we are not deceiving ourselves about reality in general or a particular
perspective and its valuations? What would it mean to combine the trans-
parency of language and its creative impetus in a theological approach to
language?

The following dialogue stages a tension between language as a transparent
window through which we see life and language as a prism by which our view
of life is already coloured. Sequences following this dialogue explore varie-
gated possibilities within language use, especially in relation to theology.
EVELYN AND ADAM DISCUSS LANGUAGE

Evelyn likes to discuss issues concerning language and understanding with her partner Adam. She is the more adventurous thinker of the two as always soaking up new information, while readily questioning anything. Adam is a pragmatist—we have received many reliable assumptions for practical understanding that can be accepted without needing to be questioned.

Evelyn is very contemporary in her thinking. Take naming for example. The act of naming is an assertion of power over what is named. Evelyn recognizes that naming has tacit implications for our relationship with anything we name. Naming conveys an implicit law for whatever is named.

For Adam, language and so naming has a functional value, even if a word is finally not intrinsic to a thing in itself—such as ladder, which is also applied to stockings as indeed, stocking a pantry or stocking a paddock have different meanings too. If a rose by any other name is still a rose—a name is given, even if it is not economical with its syllables, as in the difference between peteion and bird; yet petomai sounds like a (Greek) bird in flight. If a thing has been named, it has been named; no need to be suspicious of naming, as if something is imposed on or deprived of an intrinsic value. A rose is not imposed with thorns by the name rose; it is not deprived of perfume if it bears a name other than rose.

Evelyn is not so sure. For her, naming wields influence; there is always a temptation to use this influence, which can be detrimental. Understanding is invariably partial and so naming is always limited, summoning subtleties that are finally poisonous to transparent veracity. If we name from less than a composite knowledge of anything, we perpetuate lies about the things we name and so our interaction with them. If however, we seek pervasive understanding so as to see anything essentially, beyond naming, distortions or lies will not be generated or perpetuated. This includes what we commonly ascribe with the labels good and evil. If by the use of rhetoric, good can be made to appear as evil and evil can masquerade as good, it is imperative to know beyond naming so as to untangle good and evil beyond names. If naming establishes the law of anything—as its significance for us—language is inherently political. This is evident in names and definitions for things that have been conferred by others—by tradition, religion and so tacitly, God as the supreme source of lawgiving.
Evelyn is suspicious of God being cited as the source of anything we know, for this can be a ruse for being told what we should know, as having come from God. Even if something supposedly does come from God, it is already distorted by interpretation within any context. If distortions are to be avoided, it is preferable to know directly for oneself, without God being cited. The fruit of anything is judged by its taste and nourishment, not its nomination by others and so its proscription as to particular meaning and value.

Adam is not keen to meddle with language. Engaging life, we need stable definitions and reliable ways of interpreting phenomena. He is aware of the potential for multiple perspectives but rejects any posturing on such awareness as adequate to practical engagement of tangible possibilities that are actually before us. Evelyn is dubious about Adam’s faith in the transparency of language. By language, we can colonize and even exploit the things we name. The process of naming should always be questioned. If naming can be questioned, so also, seemingly transparent natural ways of seeing and interpreting the world can be questioned. Adam cannot argue with this; yet we must begin somewhere, with received definitions and shared meanings, if we are to have traction to do anything.

For Adam, language is a given phenomenon. So too, are many of the tacit values and assumptions on which we rely in daily engagement with life, work and relationships. Language represents a world because it articulates what resonates with our experiences of life. If this were not so, particular concepts and images would lapse in their incongruity with our experience. Specific naming, even if it is modified with time, has currency because it affirms tangible experiences of life. For example, there is contiguous meaning between light, enlightenment, illumination, idea and seeing. These could refer to ideas illuminating a mind or light illuminating a room—different phenomena, yet contiguous—so that a light globe is a common image for a penny dropping. Language conveys many values as a courier of lore or natural reasons for accepting and doing things without having to renegotiate the validity of an action every time it is imperative (this occurs with tacit values in a specific culture). Lore is implicit within language, for it is shaped over time by our existence and what is perceived as appropriate, economical or valued.

Evelyn thinks that Adam has made an unwitting equation of language with authority—for acceptance of language as transparent in representing phenomena, experiences and artefacts also perpetuates conventions that impose law and so authority as natural and unquestioned. Unless we can actually
challenge whether for example, good is good or evil is evil, we will default invariably, to received authority through lack of suspicion as to what language is actually saying behind familiar words. Evelyn believes that we have an obligation to know, understand and think panoramically so as to name good and evil as these are perceived within our understanding. If we are capable of responsibility, we must also think through the full implications of this responsibility. Nothing can be left unquestioned as a given; everything must be tested.

Adam thinks Evelyn’s approach to language, naming and so the law of what we do, will ultimately end in blame and conflict if a self-chosen perspective should prove to be a cul-de-sac. Adam recognizes that lore is not generated by our initiative; it may even be perceived as an imposition. Yet as received, we share any potential inadequacies of lore, even as it is beneficial beyond our immediate calculation. Paradoxically, lore provides space for personal freedom. Within accepted limits, we do not need continually to rethink the parameters of what is permissible or beneficial. As given, lore precludes alternatives that are known to be detrimental. Evelyn thinks that Adam is conservative. Adam’s conservatism, or as he prefers, his pragmatism, is accepting what is spoken into our lives as gift, so preventing potential injury, loss of dignity and relational harmony. Lore also conserves energy, saves time and allays anxiety over uncertainties.

Adam exercises a combination of pragmatic thinking and received wisdom. Being conservative (Evelyn’s term) or pragmatic (Adam’s self-designation), does not exclude our capacity to project alternative possibilities, contemplate them and if necessary, reject them. Adam is bemused by Evelyn’s assumptions as to what is conservative—for in reality, an idea that is considered but not pursued may not be evident to others, even if much reflection has occurred before the final rejection of a particular possibility. There are no transcripts of inner deliberation, even as soliloquies of temptation—unless intentionally, these are narrated. Adam is a little peeved that his thoughtful engagement with potential possibilities and their considered rejection is regarded as conservative. Against his inclination, yet intrinsic to his desire not to be misunderstood by Evelyn, Adam is prepared to concede to her more adventurous and insistent questioning of presumed limits.

The temptation of Adam and Eve represents possibilities that are continually before us, which is far more complex than a caricatured orchard peccadillo
that seemingly has no relevance to contemporary life. Precisely in its existen-
tial impetus, the variegated subtlety of biblical testimony speaks into our lives
with a wholly pertinent word, addressing our most complex challenges, temp-
tations and desire for integral existence.

The following cameos on language juxtapose perspectival angles that can be
held within a tension between linguistic transparency and creativity.

1.1 Language

Language is the basis of dialogue. If language were merely an affirmation of
existing agreement, language use would be minimal. Because language is
used to engage existence with fine degrees of distinction, so that two words
can have the same but different shades of meaning, language invokes and
provokes dialogue. Differentiation and difference by degrees is not a weak-
ness in language as to accurate use of words and their precise meaning. This
differentiating capacity is a source of distinctive identity and specific commu-
nication. Differentiation within Christian testimony is not a lamentable "prob-
lem" but energizing, in continually re-engaging an engaging word.

1.2 Semantics and understanding

In a laudable desire to ensure that we do not misunderstand each other, pre-
occupation with designating a word’s precise meaning suggests that differen-
tial meanings represent a flaw within language. By contrast, mutual trust
within shared understanding does not need to nail the precise meaning of
words for transparent communication. Understanding is the capacity to
bracket an assumed ratio of word and meaning, habitually listening for nu-
ances of meaning by tone within other people’s use of language. The rich
variegated meanings associated with any word (known as semantics) can
enhance understanding, the use of words and significantly, our capacity to
trust.

1.3 Enmity and misunderstanding

Is misunderstanding a consequence of enmity within human fraternity or is
misunderstanding a source of enmity? It is generally assumed that enmity is
a consequence of misunderstanding. Yet what if enmity precipitates misun-
derstanding? What would this imply? A potential difference between enmity
leading to misunderstanding and misunderstanding leading to enmity is that
the first is ethical and the second may be cited as poor method or lack of
technical skill for successful communication. While misunderstanding can lead to enmity, it is generally an absence of generosity, so latent enmity that fails to surmount misunderstanding due to any hiccup in communication.

2.1 Literalism and interpretation

To read is to interpret. To read literally, by contrast, is to reiterate printed syllables, whether silently or aloud, literally, without interpretation. The words of a foreign language could substitute for a literal reading of one's own language: to read—Amit ma megtehetesz, ne halaszd holnapa—makes explicit the effect of reading literally the syllables of another mother tongue—for literal reading is without interpretation. Within a literal reading, syllables remain inert, fastened to a page. Interpretation is intrinsic to reading. Meaning upsurges beyond the printed syllables on a page, to be negotiated and risked within life, context and actions.

2.2 Geology, geometry and relative perspective

A relative perspective of reality is supposedly not subject to challenge. Yet any relative perspective is tested by hard edges of life. Within nature, bodies encounter limits; human existence is shaped within spatially engineered forms of society. Geology exhibits physical contours; geometry provides consistent edges. These are not mere perceptions; we can bump into things. Our use of language will sustain meaning only as particular assertions are not contradicted by solid material contours and regular edges—unless these are suspended within mythology or science fiction. Geographic and geometric phenomena, exhibiting contours and edges within our material existence, moderate relative perspective.

2.3 Upper case value adding

Is truth any more truth by being Truth or is love increased by being Love? Does commencing a value word with an upper case actually give it additional or premier value? What gives value to words is their expression by activity: truth is known by truthfulness and fidelity by expressions of fidelity. While supposedly accentuating honesty by Honesty, such emphatic assertion might be masking a lack of integrity. Upper case value adding is superfluous in the absence of tangible expression. Upper case promotion can occur, as if an upper case establishes the reality; yet only demonstrative expression offers genuine value.
2.4 Why language is surreal

A word conjures the presence of a thing, yet a word is not the thing, marking a split between language and anything. Words are virtual currency; they are not the things they purport to be (the word table is not a table); words mark an implicit gap. Language is surreal because of this gap between word and thing; things abstracted by words are surreal within language. The gap between word and reality is never closed; yet this gap within the tacit surrealism of words abstracting things is the possibility of personal interaction through language amid things. (With reference to Žižek)

3.1 Lend a hand

If you asked someone to “lend a hand”, you would not expect a severed hand. This is figurative but also tangible, for help is specifically sought in the request. While language is frequently divvied between literal and metaphorical, biblical language is pervasively metonymic; its sayings are often at once figurative and literal. Metonymy is figurative in speaking plainly, such as severing a hand that causes offence. This occurs while suspending our awareness of figuration in tangible engagement with real challenges, such as no one putting a hand to the plough and looking back is fit for the kingdom of God.

3.2 Language, slippage and reality

Did Luther throw an inkwell at the devil, as legend suggests? Or did Luther, according to his own testimony in reference to translating the New Testament, promise to repel the devil by the ink of translation? (McGrath) Slippage in theological use of language can form vastly different expressions of engagement with life. These two possibilities connote different perspectives; they are each underpinned by different perceptions of reality. One perspective suggests fearful affront that is repelled by a seemingly infantile response. The other perspective is intentional, patient and creative by reference to testimony that articulates confidence in Christ against any antagonist.

3.3 “Common sense”

Common sense is intimately known and understood within particular communities with shared habits, customs and attitudes. Common sense is transparently the way things are, without having to be negotiated in every conversa-
tion, decision or activity. This means this, without equivocation or quarrel, because that is what we do with this—everybody knows that! (Compare Wittgenstein and Eagleton)

Common sense operates tacitly within a cohesive community in which sense is common without having continually to be negotiated. Yet renegotiations do occur, even in small communities, such as families. Without enough common sense, any community will invariably fragment.

Common sense is assumed, personified and appealed to as an adjudicating factor within differences of opinion: “Common sense tells us that this is right!” Someone appeals to the authority of “common sense” against the assertions of another person who does not share this adjudicating reference; common sense for some may be nonsense to others. Common sense only makes sense when commonly assumed.

While common sense is continually appealed to as universally common, it cannot be located anywhere for consultation in the event of differences (Hamann), even where it is encountered daily among ordinary things and familiar activities. Invariably, we need another point of reference for common sense.

3.4 Definitive measure and qualitative valuations

If a metre is a metre by reference to a particular measure called a metre in Paris, might not this apply to colour? Wittgenstein poses this question. There are qualitative assessments with no definitive reference. There is no definitive colour red in London or definitive blue in New York. Red is relative among many hues of red that are nevertheless recognized as red. What then defines the true colour of a colour?

Similarly, are there definitive words that define any particular word? A dictionary is cited for such reference, only to show historical and cultural variegations of meaning that are latent within any word; additional words introduce nuances that diversify the meaning of any word. A word is finally defined by its familiar use (Wittgenstein).

Within diverse times and regions people have discerned qualitatively, the fidelity of many values—like ascertaining the right word or shade of colour, without final recourse to definitive reference. These discerned valuations are often then legislated, so qualitative discernment eventually becomes law.
Christians refer to Christology rather than to law for their valuations. Yet ascertaining values by reference to Christ is a qualitative challenge, accentuated by rich variegated interpretation of his words and actions exhibited throughout New Testament writings.

4.1 Interpretation, translation, dialogue and discovery

Contemporary recognition that everything is interpretation, with human discourse suffused with diverse languages, is not new. This is humanity in its variegated expressions, assertions and questioning concerning existence; it is humanity exhibited between Babel and Apocalypse. There is also dialogue among interpretations and translation between languages. Interpretation and translation suggest that we do not settle for inevitable incongruity; we seek congruities and understanding. The desire to engage by interpretation and decipher by translation reflects inklings of a truly generous and authentic word. Contemporary avoidance of dialogue and discovery, because everything is encrypted in a dialect, is both lazy and prejudiced.

4.2 Language currency

Language is a shared currency within relationships, vocation and community. Any social dialect represents a variable currency; it can accrue value in the form of trust, shared imagination and a cohesive perception of life; it can be inflated with attitudes that have potential detrimental effects, personal and social. For good or ill, any social dialect articulates variegated perspectives that have real exchange value, even as the value of these is consolidated or contested. By investment of valuations, language embodies a dynamic social currency. Creatively, Christians can enhance the currency of social exchange from a christological dialect of grace and veracity.

4.3 How much does the word "kilo" weigh?

Do words have any intrinsic value? Does language convey anything real? After all, how much does the word "kilo" weigh? This question concerns the use of language to make claims about reality.

Through words, ideological assertions are made, having little correlation with life as it is. An ideal existence is easily pitched; people’s experience of life is often different. There is a great difference between words and tangible realities such as hunger, insomnia, affection and beauty. This difference is like the difference between the word "kilo" and carrying so many kilos (Weil).
Through language, we can negotiate our way within life; language both is and is not reality. Our existence is seemingly wallpapered with language, for everything we do, occurs within language and interpretation; yet what language articulates can be speculative and hypothetical. Language is double-edged.

Language enables us to think beyond our tangible limits—by reading a book we can be immersed in a different time and place. Language can articulate anything people imagine. Language combined with imagination can expand our perceptions beyond tangible limits; yet language can also signify nothing, even though it is used to signify almost anything. Words can nurture illusions.

4.4 The value of being spoken to

We are spoken to before we can speak. We begin life hearing the character of our surroundings through language, so that our engagement with familiar artefacts and phenomena is received as already interpreted within conventional, cultural and social significance in language.

Language gives us expectations and values before we have determined anything about these. It is not until we encounter other versions of life and interpretations of similar phenomena that we realize our “world” is given in a language of relatively stable meanings and workable conventions.

The language through which we learn to nominate and communicate the value of many things is primarily vocative—as the experience of being spoken to by another and others. Being addressed, we are called into relationality. In relationships, our identity is formed in hearing and responding to others through decisions, responsibilities and vocation as the capacity to engage life. (With reference to Levinas and Buber)

In biblical testimony, God interacts with human life, encountering us in the vocative experience of being unique—as spoken to. This vocative call to response and responsibility is given priority over the variegated nomination of “stuff” that surrounds us, disclosing the reality of God as relational and ethical. To reverse this priority is the essence of idolatry. (With reference to Bultmann)

CONCLUSION

Our use of language is diverse: (i) we live within a pervasive linguistic reality that perpetuates conventional values or habits and which tacitly, continues to
be reinterpreted according to social aspirations; (ii) personal realities are so-
cially configured by language which for some, masks surreptitious ideologies
that must be made explicit; (iii) through language, inarticulate yearnings are
expressed as phenomena are intended and engaged as essential or even
sacred within specific cultural identities; (iv) by language, we nominate things
and so a reality we can manipulate for our benefit; this utility use of language
permeates everything from technology to medications and its proper use is
strictly lexical.

In evaluation of these variegations: tacit presuppositions and so valuations
are assumed within familiar language use (corresponding to i); yet rarefied
abstractions over competing ideologies have little traction amid real ambigu-
ties of particular life experience (ii); there is restless disquiet within human
existence that eludes specific cultural or sacred valorization (fixed value) of
selected phenomena (iii); life is more complex than utility uses, invoking a rich
engagement of language within relationships and responsibilities amid diverse
difficulties of humanity (iv). (With general reference to Eagleton and Taylor)

For Christians, the Word has assumed our humanity, reinterpreting our exist-
ence through language—the unique language of good news!

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