

CONCLUSION

FIGURING OUT

To say that language is figurative is tautological in a sense. For, language is what it is only because it is figurative. This dissertation examines how language users—that is, philosophers, poets, theorists and polemicists alike—look at the problem as if language was something other than itself. In a sense the reality of language is bound by the simultaneous emptiness and plenitude of the sign. The language that we use—the language that we understand, and/or are understood by—can be thought of as our language in contexts that we have seen or created. Therefore questions of emptiness and plenitude can be seen as context-bound. Again, given that some of what we say may be seen as valid beyond the contexts that we ourselves create or discover, plenitude and emptiness that may accrue in a given language instance can be attributed to the validity of a sign system beyond individual contexts. Thus we speak of a language community or a speech community or an interpretive community.

An important question may arise here as to the ‘destiny’ of a language or a language instance that is not immediately followed—or cannot be followed—by a given community. We may perhaps put the question differently by asking why the language of a user, presumably from the same community, cannot be followed. We may also ask if the inability of the community to follow a particular instance of language use has anything to do with social convention that does not take cognizance of exceptions to established codes of usage. We may still perhaps put the question differently by asking if—that is, why or how—the language coding by a user in a particular instance translated what was perhaps a personal epiphany into a public discourse. While this question may be asked by invoking structures, it can also be asked by way of looking at the way humans and other organisms translate individual experience into community codes, whether it is bees telling other bees where to look for food or mothers telling their children that ‘food for thought’ is not a market good.

In other words, translating any object-consciousness into words involves subject-centric transformation of orders of thinking into syntactic or paradigmatic orders. In essence, we never have words operating as exact equivalents of things or ideas. This dissertation undertakes a critical inquiry into the nature of the transformation of one order of sign systems into another: awareness into speech or writing, phenomenon into language, or arbitrary systems into stable-looking structures. It argues that that words can be seen signs that operate in and as sign systems, and we may do so without overstating the case.

Beginning with Saussure's early twentieth study on the signifier-signified link, one looks at the central concerns of twentieth century literary-critical theory—raised by Derrida, Lacan and Ricoeur—as one hinged in a linguistic issue. Having said that, the linguistic issue cannot be understood fully, unless taken up in a larger philosophical context.

We may perhaps sum up the findings, not one by one, but as a whole. In Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics* we find an argument that is not generally seen in discussions of structuralism and literary theory. Contrary to what is said, there are in Saussure's work various instances of the word-thing distance and dissonance. Saussure in fact says that the distance between the words and the thing is punctuated by varied instances of linguistic involvement where speakers have changed or challenged not only meanings but also meaning systems. He repeatedly pleads for abandoning the idea that words are either concrete examples or concrete units. Saussure offers several instances of metaphors failing normal word systems but gathering meaning in contexts that may appear innovative and/or disruptive, opening up issues of individual usage and speech community validation for analysis in terms of language hierarchy and social hierarchy. We may have situation where what Saussure calls effects of motivation, demotivation and remotivation can be directly related to power and social systems. Human beings make use of figurations to define themselves in a sign system.

Austin and Searle suggest that expression and communication are medium-dependent. In other words what we call meaning is a linguistic or social obligation. When a speaker uses or rejects a certain meaning in a certain situation, it is essentially an individual anticipation of or resistance to social acts. Speech and act are related socially, and reflect the investments that make social systems possible. The availability of a certain exit from a social system may be the result of a certain individual intervention, but its validity is directly proportional to its acceptability as a case of social intervention. The pairing of saying and doing, meaning and performing, structure and practice, locution and illocution is valid only when language in itself opposes language in context. This is clearly akin to social praxis resisting and allowing for reforms. To look at meaning and context in a linear fashion is therefore counter-productive.

Derrida's freewheeling treatment of metaphoric language and the figure of the figure remains central to this inquiry of language relating to the object world. His deconstruction of grammatology by way of teasing out the very meaning of meaning

pushed language to a world of indeterminacy. All meaning is caught in a process of deferral given that every instance of meaning production is an instance of exposing the multiplicity of layers that make language possible in the first place. Derrida says that displacement is not a characteristic of language but the very condition of language. Without displacement and deferral there would be no room for language to work with its inner metaphoricity, that is, its capacity for creating meaning by invoking difference but by converting difference into *differance*, a productive instance of the negativistic nature of signs and systems. However, to think that there is an outside of language that decides how language ought to work is an illusion. He shows the paradox of Rousseau's paradoxical engagement with the impossibility of taking a position outside of language. No judgement of metaphoricity is free from its own metaphoricity. To say that there is nothing outside of language need not mean that the world does not exist. The world creates language and is created by it. So figurations are important to engage with this very paradoxical situation.

Lacan returns meaning to its originary moment by showing how the axiomaticity of words in relation to words is fictive and factual at the same moment. He draws on the language of poetry and the unconscious and challenges the way we normally see metaphor and metonymy. Given that metaphors are supposed to operate by way of vertical substitution—as opposed to metonymies that operate by way of horizontal extension or substitution—Lacan begins by showing that the very process of substitution challenges any sense of linearity. He in a way suggests that the critical hierarchy of metaphors and metonymies is without much sense. Lacan not only challenges the fundamental assumptions that go into meaning formation—linearity, articulation, correspondence, substitution, and the signifier-signified divide—are bound by desire and imagination. So the difference between word and thing lies in the fiction-facticity continuum and rupture, a figuration of the figure, something that is cared by the user's desire for emptying or filling a word. The context of the letter therefore is not superior to the content or the instance. He relates to Derrida by re-visiting the figure of the figure but also by re-investing in the figure acts of social re-distribution of meaning and power. Metaphors are not just cases of poetic or philosophical figurations of reality; they are also cases of individual desire resisting or modifying social desire. Linguistic substitution and psychological substitution—words or images—are figurations of redistribution of power.

It is Paul Ricoeur who examines the trajectories of metaphor making both in language and philosophy. In his *Rule of Metaphor* he argues that every word is the culmination of metaphoricity, in a way consolidating Saussure's linguistic work in a philosophical template. He shows how meaning production is not just context-dependent but also context-producing. Each time a word is pushed into the domain of meaning-making, it creates new contexts that may perhaps see validation of thinking in different ways. He returns to the sharp disparity that appears to divide poetic and philosophical explanation of figures and says that what divides them is not contradictions but a type of interplay arbitrated by interpretation. Echoing Derrida he says that we are condemned to a conflict of interpretations from which we cannot emerge either by way of hermeneutics or phenomenology. What is possible, however, is mediated interpretation of the world by the word that also allows for the world interpreting the world. We cannot therefore attribute the validation or rejection of meaning to a unilinear distribution of power between society and individual. Conflicts not only produce interpretations but also validate them. To this extent the text is a model case of communication that draws on the distance and proximity between word and thing, that is, the word and the world.

Any secure interpretation of the world through the word necessarily partakes of the word-ness of the world and the world-ness of the word. Figurative language is the condition and consequence of this bridge and divide. The focus on figurative language in twentieth century critical theory offers a broad-spectrum of history and praxis of language as a social and philosophical tool.