

Provocative: How Words Mean

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Introduction

Jacques Pepin is famous for many things, one of which is deboning a chicken. Pepin starts with a whole chicken and, using only his experienced hands, a sharp knife and a towel, deftly removes every bone while keeping the meat entirely intact. I want to do that with philosophy, with truth. I want to expertly identify the joints and tendons of reality, the points of articulation, where the things in themselves naturally separate. I want to analytically carve the world into its component parts so that I can examine each part at its most simple. I want to splay the meat of reality neatly in front of me.

Language and thought and reality don't work like that.

Reality appears to be an infinitely and paradoxically complex organic whole. Examples: unemployment (underemployment),

Groundwork for a Metanarrative of Meaning

“Doesn’t the telling of something always become a story?”

“Perhaps in English. In Japanese a story would have an element of invention. We don’t want any invention. We want the straight facts.”

“Isn’t telling about something – using words – already something of an invention? Isn’t just looking upon this world already something of an invention? The world isn’t just the way it is. It is how we understand it. And in understanding something, we bring something to it. Doesn’t that make life a story?” – Life of Pi

I must start with story, instead of word or language, because I can’t claim “words don’t work that way”, I must say “it is not healthy, effective or satisfying to say words work that way” and to be able to say that I need to start from a position where healthy, effective and satisfying are the judges and stories about words are the subjects of our judgement.

Eventually I would like to discuss how language specifically and representation generally works. However, such a discussion involves recursive complexity – I have to use language to talk about language, so any conclusions reached at the end of the discussion, must be applicable to the beginning. Beyond this initial recursive complexity of using language to talk about language, the most satisfying, healthy and effective explanation I have found for how language works drives me towards a particular understanding of how discussions/explanations work. Which means that I will be composing an explanation in language, about how language, and, by extension, explanations. This would seem to require at a minimum that my own use of language and construction of this explanation be an application of my conclusions.

“Here’s another story”:

All men are, by nature, storytellers. We tell ourselves and each other many different stories. It is raining. I

love you. Mass can be converted into energy in a predictable proportion. I'll be able to sell this house for a profit before my first real mortgage payment comes due. If only I had a space heater handcrafted by an Amish carpenter, then I would be happy. Treat others as you would have them treat you. And they lived happily ever after.

The stories we tell matter. They explain what is, what could be and what we can do with what is. They tell us who we are, who we ought to be, what things are available to be desired and how to get what we want. Stories tell us who *they* are, why we don't like *them* and what we ought to do to *them*. They tell us what we are doing, what we did and why. Stories explain what things matter. [^Just as this story I am telling is saying that stories matter.] Stories describe our lives and guide, perhaps determine, how we will live our lives going forward. It makes sense, then, to care about which stories we tell and to want to tell the right stories.

Surely there are not many right stories. Surely there is but one right story – the True story. Perhaps, but I neither know this story, nor can I conceive what form such a story could take. A theorist, having spent all day pondering the labyrinth of mathematical formulae which compose quantum physics, has no qualms going home to love her husband and help her son with his astronomy homework, even though the story of quantum physics has no place for homework, husbands, sons or planets. What form could the true story take in order to both make accurate predictions of the behavior of particle accelerators, and satisfyingly explain families?

Tell hypothetical story (materialist's dream) where quantum physics expands to explain husbands. Show as unsatisfactory. "Who cares if it is satisfactory, it's right". It's true? It works? How do you know? It works the best? There couldn't be a story that works better? What if it leads to nihilism? What if it is incoherent? Be careful not to go off on a tangent in material that is better included in the section specifically dealing with referential theories.

Let us attempt to grant the materialist's dream. We dig down through the layers of explanation from fathers to sons to heredity and evolution to genetics and chromosomes to proteins to molecules to atoms to protons to quarks all the way down to the fundamental waveform/energy/force/particle/string/function/?/unit. These fundamental units and their known, calculable interactions fill the explanatory space of science. What we have heretofore described as quarks, we now explain as the emergent behavior of 2^{32} units when measured in the observation chamber of a particle accelerator of sufficient size. Likewise for protons, atoms, genes, sons, fathers, spacetime, gravity, electromagnetism. Indeed the story of units has such explanatory power that we now, as a matter of course, capture what we once called neutrinos in generators the size of AA batteries each one of which produces electricity in controlled quantities equivalent to decades of global energy consumption.

How do you know the unit is fundamental? Where is morality, meaning?

Notes

[relevant jrnl](#)s

The provocative feedback loop.

Don't start writing a book. Just flesh out thoughts. An explanation, not a full blown academic defense. A short essay for a sympathetic and interested small audience, not an academic treatise addressing every concern. Fashion a way of talking that is helpful and addresses the biggest issues, that can serve as inspiration and foundation for other writing and working.

Be inspired by Borges. Don't write the book. Assume the book and write the review.

Emergence and emergent phenomena – opposed by [lesswrong.com](#)

When you cut the world with words, sever a whole into things, the two never appear to be one again without magic (gravity, force, energy, emergent) or distance (stepping up to a higher level of abstraction).

Always know what difference of experience you are arguing about. What would about your anticipations for future events would change as a result of accepting proposition X?

Like any conversation, a text is an act of manipulation – Talk like this = break up the world of your experience like this = experience the world like this = think like this = live like this. Our concern about the meaning of a text arises because someone (and that someone could be ourselves) challenges our interpretation of the text and we feel the need to find some basis on which to defend our position. So I first ask what an “interpretation of a text” is. The answer I came up with is that it is a way of talking that claims to rely on the text for at least some of its authority. Ways of talking don't appear out of the void and they don't pass through the gauntlet of life unchallenged and unchanged. The stories we tell ourselves about our experiences (how we talk and think), have histories, they have origins and they evolve from those origins as they are used. We learn them from our parents, from books, from movies, from friends etc. and they change as we encounter things that those stories can't easily account for, or when we discover an alternative way of talking that is more useful/helpful, or when we test our stories for reasonableness/coherence and find

them lacking, or when we submit to some outside authority that demands that we talk a different way. So engaging with someone's interpretation is just like engaging with all of the other ways that they talk except that you have an additional avenue through which to challenge their way of talking – the text on which they are relying.

Example of thought without language: eye doctor's "1 or 2?" – no words to describe difference, but still choice, or recognizing actors/musical artists from voice or gestures or posture – no words to analyze, yet still able to identify.

Lana del ray, Johnny Cash hurt. Who sings it, who says it, changes the meaning. Meaning isn't in the words alone. It's in the discourse, the cycle of response. The provocative feedback loop.

If the meaning of words grows. Then to look back on an older meaning isn't too see deeper but shallower. Perhaps in the line from now to then you can draw a trajectory of growth

Words do. Meaning is doing not being.

Doctrine of Inerrancy - Meaning does not reside in the words or in the speaker, but in the discourse through language between speaker and audience, author and reader. Meaningful languaging provokes response. Meaning is found in the living interaction between responder and provocateur.

Abandoning a referential theory of meaning need not result in an existentialism in which all languaging is an inherently meaningless substrate upon which any meaning whatsoever may be imposed without limit. The divide between meaning and meaninglessness, sensible and nonsense, is efficacy – did the discourse work.

Your faith doesn't rest on the wisdom of man, but on the power of God. There are many ways that the modern church replaces God with the Bible. It gives the Bible authority and inerrancy when God had the authority and Jesus is the truth. Programs are designed to teach about the Bible rather than provide opportunities to encounter God. The goal is changed behaviors to conform with a written moral code rather than growing maturity in relating to the Person at the center of morality. The Bible is the Word of God, not because the authors wrote as they were driven by the Spirit, but because that Spirit still speaks through it today. In the absence of the living God, the Bible is just dead words.

Scripture is true, but is not more true than the rest of "what is". Truth is concrete, not abstract. Particular. Relational. Not a standard or benchmark. Which means Scripture as "authority" does not constrain "what is" but rather constrains what is permitted to be said about "what is"?

We see people using money and words in all their forms, buying and selling, speaking and listening. Nothing is hidden. Nothing stands behind all the activity. The value – or meaning –

lies in the activity. ... We do not mirror reality. We are enmeshed in it. – Ian Ground

Simplified_Technical_English

1. Groundwork for Metanarrative
 2. Stories create limits – compare sailing over the edge of the world to flying/jumping over the edge of a cliff.
 3. Stories create possibilities (framework for questions) – can't ask "how could I convert mass into energy until $e = mc$. – see Scientific Revolutions, Kuhn
 4. Stories establish goals (ideals) and imply (suggest) methods for reaching those goals – prisons are for rehabilitation vs punishment.
 5. We very rarely have only one story to tell.
 6. With multiple stories comes conflict. Conflict implies a lack of clarity about limits, possibilities, goals and methods.
 7. Figuring out what to do in the face of conflict requires the telling of stories about stories so that we can know the limits, possibilities, goals and methods of storytelling so that from within that framework we can judge the stories we have told.
 8. In what follows, I will present several conflicting stories. We need a framework within which to judge those stories. (This is an infinite loop of meta-analysis). I will use three words as my guides (the ideals of the meta-meta-story I am telling):
 9. health – tendency to promote ideals (established by some other story) – e.g., nihilism fails this for most people
 10. coherence – intellectual satisfaction, does it hold together, does it have internal clarity, is it consistent in itself, is it a stable framework
 11. effectiveness – does the story empower its bearers in their pursuit of my ideal for meta-stories: conflict resolution.
2. Beyond Symbols and Shadows: A Genealogy of Meaning (Objection to Thesis: Stories are told in language and language has a definite meaning rooted in being and so every story is either right or wrong)
 2. Symbols and Pictures Generally
 3. To Point at Things
 4. Pros
 5. intuitively appealing
 5. makes most sense of Truth
 5. promises working solutions
 5. seems to be foundation of science
 5. Cons
 5. Assumes world is made of things (do we discover things or create them)
 5. makes all talk about world carry the implicit assumption that whatever we are talking about exists (reification)
 5. Talk about particulars is impossible, but most people seem unwilling to permit

talk about universals 5. We can talk about non-existent things just as easily and sensibly as reality - parmenides 5. Zeno on inability to talk sensibly about space and time 5. How could we ever get it wrong in our talk if all meaningful talk is about what is. 5. Film noir (brick), Doc Holliday in Tombstone – examples of words that have definite meaning without definitions or even prior use – a la Wittgensteins PI

6. Point at or picture appearance of things – sensibilia
7. Point at or picture ideas
 2. Conjure up ideas in another – communication generally
 3. tokens in a language game
3. My Discourse (Response / Feedback loop) theory 2. Types of Discourse
 3. Discourse with Others
 4. Solipsism
 5. Discourse with the World
 6. Access to the World
 7. Relationship with Cause and Effect 5. We could push back on “cause and effect” as well and say that this is not a very helpful story to tell. But that is only partially true. The appeal of cause and effect is that we intuitively believe that what went before is connected with, indeed explains, what is now and that what is now will result in what will come. the problem with the story of cause and effect is that it rips a complex organic whole in two and then is astonished when the question “what connects the two parts” is difficult to answer. the two are one. The separation is a figment of language. You rip them apart when you call one cause and one effect. you rip time and space apart when you talk of moments or locations. We need a story of cause and effect because without it we have no stories to guide our actions, explain our present or predict our future. But we need to recognize the limits of such a story.
 8. Mental Discourse
 9. Creativity / What does it mean ‘to know’ something
 10. The Mind as Language Generator / Processor
 11. Do we have access to the contents of our mind before they are captured/expressed in language?
 12. Written Discourse
 13. Interpretation 2. How does this theory resolve conflict???
4. Demonstrations of the Discourse Theory 2. Logic
 3. Symbolic
 4. Math
 5. Rational

2. Science

6. Bayesian Statistics

7. Idea is that you have some observable phenomenon (A) that you discover with some given regularity if you go looking for it. And you tell a story where A is related to (caused by) some other (hopefully more easily) observable phenomenon (X), such that when you observe X you expect with some degree of certainty ($P(A|X)$) to observe A as well. Bayes formula provides an algorithm for refining $P(A|X)$ as new observations of A and X are made – it tells you how much observing X and A or X but not A should affect the certainty with which you predict A the next time you observe X.

8. There are many problems. 5. You have already made decisions when you decided to carve the world into A's and X's. Perhaps that division of reality is not the most helpful. 5. Bayes algorithm is built out of a probabilistic algebra that is itself very dubious. Are there random processes? Or are there merely processes the outcomes of which we are not yet able to predict/explain with certainty? Is a coin flip random or do we permit it as a simulation of randomness because we are unable to control or predict accurately how many times the coin will flip in the air? 5. Considers Zeno's haybale. You have a button that dispenses nutter butters with every press until it doesn't. Bayes doesn't provide a good guess for when it will stop dispensing nutter butters, nor what certainty you should have that it will spit one out the next time you press the button.

9. Einstein - not talking about what is, but rather about what we can observe. Our observations, he predicts, will change when the thing being observed is moving relative to the position from which we observe it.

2. Theology – A handmaiden's tale (Aquinas)

10. Core Principle of Church as Political Organization: Scriptural Authority as derived from Divine Authority

11. Core Principle of Church as Spiritual Organization: Christ's Living Lordship

12. Core Principle of Gospel: Salvation by faith in Christ alone through grace of God.

5. Law

6. Education

7. Philosophical Practice

Quotes

Words are the most subtle symbols which we possess and our human fabric depends on them. The living and radical nature of language is something which we forget at our peril. – Iris Murdoch's *The Sovereignty of the Good*, cited in <https://tinyletter.com/lmsacasas/letters/the-convivial-society-no-15-fortnite-and-the-good-life>

Helplessness guides the wandering thought in their breasts; they are carried along deaf and blind alike, dazed, beasts without judgment, convinced that to be and not to be are the same and not the same, and that the road of all things is a backward-turning one. – Parmenides B 6.5-9

If anyone supposes he knows something, he knows not as he ought. – 1 Corinthians 8:2

We need not be ashamed to limit our ambitions to the reach of humanity. – Cosmopolis, P. 30

All abstract sciences are nothing but the study of relations between signs. – Diderot

Man acts as though he were the shaper and master of language, while in fact language remains the master of man. – Heidegger

What is truth? – John 18:38

When I use a word, Humpty Dumpty said in rather a scornful tone, it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less. – Lewis Carroll

We invent the world through language. The world occurs through language. – Man Pancoast

Thinking and the thought that it is are the same; for you will not find thought apart from what is, in relation to which it is uttered. – Parmenides (B 8.34-36)

Thinking is the talking of the soul with itself. – Plato

Is this all we get to be absolute? – The Fray

The unread story is not a story; it is little black marks on wood pulp. The reader, reading it, makes it live: a live thing, a story. – Ursula K Leguin

An enormous part of our mature experience cannot not be expressed in words. – Alfred North Whitehead

The limits of my language are the limits of my mind. All I know is what I have words for. – Wittgenstein

Your life is what your thoughts make it. – Marcus Aurelius

Words are not like scalpels: they can't cleanly separate one thing from another molecule by molecule. Words are rather more like hammers: you can swing them and make contact with some thing, but it is never precisely the thing separated from all other things that you wanted to hit, and if you keep hitting you're either going to destroy that which you wanted to talk about or you will come away with a bruised thumb. – Me

Knowledge is in the end based on acknowledgement. – Wittgenstein

Knowledge can be conveyed, but not wisdom. It can be found, it can be lived, it is possible to be carried by it, miracles can be performed with it, but it cannot be expressed in words and taught. ... any truth can only be expressed and put into words when it is one-sided. Everything is one-sided which can be thought with thoughts and said with words, it's all one-sided, all just one half, all lacks completeness, roundness, oneness. ... But the world itself, what exists around us and inside of us, is never one-sided. ... These are things, and things can be loved. But I cannot love words. Therefore, teachings are no good for me, they have no hardness, no softness, no colours, no edges, no smell, no taste, they have nothing but words. Perhaps it are these which keep you from finding peace, perhaps it are the many words. Because salvation and virtue as well, Sansara and Nirvana as well, are mere words, Govinda. There is no thing which would be Nirvana; there is just the word Nirvana. ... I don't differentiate much between thoughts and words. ... I prefer the thing over the words, place more importance on his acts and life than on his speeches, more on the gestures of his hand than his opinions. Not in his speech, not in his thoughts, I see his greatness, only in his actions, in his life. – Herman Hesse, Siddhartha

Language is no longer regarded as peripheral to our grasp of the world we live in, but as central to it. Words are not mere vocal labels or communicational adjuncts superimposed upon an already given order of things. They are collective products of social interaction, essential instruments through which human beings constitute and articulate their world. – Roy Harris

describing the work of Ferdinand de Saussure.

The real problem in speech is not precise language. The problem is clear language. The desire is to have the idea clearly communicated to the other person. It is only necessary to be precise when there is some doubt as to the meaning of a phrase, and then the precision should be put in the place where the doubt exists. It is really quite impossible to say anything with absolute precision, unless that thing is so abstracted from the real world as to not represent any real thing. Pure mathematics is just such an abstraction from the real world, and pure mathematics does have a special precise language for dealing with its own special and technical subjects. But this precise language is not precise in any sense if you deal with real objects of the world, and it is only pedantic and quite confusing to use it unless there are some special subtleties which have to be carefully distinguished. – “New Textbooks for the”New” Mathematics”, Engineering and Science volume 28, number 6 (March 1965) p. 9-15 at p. 14

we know ourselves by internalizing others’ perceptions of us. This starts with the earliest formation of the self, and it continues throughout one’s life. (See, for example, Kaye 1982; Vygotsky 1978; Wertsch 1985, 1991.) That is why you are best advised to associate with sane and perceptive people. In particular, when you speak, you do not know what you have said. You may know what you *intended* to say, but you cannot know how much of your intention was actually conveyed by your words. As a result, you only know what you have actually said by listening to your interlocutor’s responses. Once you internalize those responses, be they understandings or misunderstandings, you can anticipate them, and as your voice integrates the various anticipated responses it will become more complex. Faced with the rhetorical challenge that those potential responses pose, you will automatically grab hold of useful fragments of voice from your environment – others’ words and phrases, turns of speech, and so on. You appropriate these fragments and make them your own, to serve your own purposes. This is the complex relationship between individuals and their cultural surroundings: it is hard to escape the discourses around you, but you can use the elements in ways that nobody expects. – Philip E. Agre <http://polaris.gseis.ucla.edu/pagre/zine.html>

We can know more than we can tell. Ex. Explaining how we drive a car in traffic. – [Polanyi’s paradox](#)

Most philosophical problems are to be solved by getting rid of them, by coming to the point where you see that such questions as “Why this universe?” are a kind of intellectual neurosis, a misuse of words in that the question sounds sensible but is actually as meaningless as asking “Where is this universe?” when the only things that are anywhere must be somewhere inside

the universe. The task of philosophy is to cure people of such nonsense. . . . Nevertheless, wonder is not a disease. Wonder, and its expression in poetry and the arts, are among the most important things which seem to distinguish men from other animals, and intelligent and sensitive people from morons.

No considerate God would destroy the human mind by making it so rigid and unadaptable as to depend upon one book, the Bible, for all the answers. For the use of words, and thus of a book, is to point beyond themselves to a world of life and experience that is not mere words or even ideas. Just as money is not real, consumable wealth, books are not life. To idolize scriptures is like eating paper currency. – Alan Watts, *The Book On The Taboo Against Knowing Who You Are*

reading Wittgenstein is very like engaging with works of art: it is a process deeply resistant to paraphrase. You have to experience it for yourself. And it not just what but how you think that will change. – <https://www.the-tls.co.uk/articles/public/ludwig-wittgenstein-honesty-ground/>

Our lives pass at such remoteness from its symbols, and it's metaphors and tropes are necessarily so far-fetched... The dinner even is only the parable of a dinner, commonly. – Thoreau, *Walden*.
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