

Eastern Philosophies Around Language

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For as long as mankind has had the ability to ponder, the question of language has been brought up a multitude of times; whether or not language and the words within languages are meaningful or meaningless, or whether or not language and words can truly represent the items and theories sufficiently as they ought to be embodied.

While there are numerous amount of languages and one needs to be able to speak the same dialect of the same language to truly converse with one another – to have the same shared meaning across parties, schools, or societies, to create a dialogue where both parties have a complete understanding of what the other is saying, or lastly, to write words of reason down onto paper to present and future generations – there are still many circumstances in which language is both meaningful and representative of a shared truth.

Language is as natural as mankind is animal; while words within languages were created by man, that does not make it any less natural, or even instinctual. There are creatures in the wild, and while they do not use words as humans do, they still use either their mouth or body to articulate messages to one another. Language carries great meaning whether it is natural or not – words allow us to share how we feel and think about concepts, words express what we are doing or what others should do, they make up the thoughts inside our heads, and words help us be the sociable and knowledgeable species that humans have always been.

The depth of language is immense and shapes the world around us. Even though using language is deemed as limited because there are only so many ways to convey messages, that does not deem language as any less meaningful or representative of truth because words are symbolic of commonly known schemas and thusly carry great meaning to those who use them.

Words within languages are defined both denotatively and connotatively: meaning that words assume a definition denotatively with a society-accepted meaning that is written and published in a book called a dictionary, as well as connotatively, which is a definition that comes from social observation, experience, stories, and if societies use the word in a positive or negative way. Out of these two ways to define terms, language is more commonly used with the connotations of words. And whether we are talking to another person or to ourselves, the applications that society gives language is the platform in which language finds its meaning and how it is an agent of shared truth.

The overall question of this paper is if mankind has given such grave meaning to the words used within languages across major nations and cultures, are the words used meaningful and illustrative to truth, an absolute truth? Or are they meaningful without being close to representing a truth? Words make us feel things, words can make us cry or smile, words can even carry varying amounts of meaning and power depending on the person who is saying them – but to our own selves and in our own minds, words can shape our own personal philosophies and ways of life when the words are being read or heard and carry significant meaning to the reader or listener, therefore can represent what truth can be described as in words.

In the source book *A Short History Of Chinese Philosophy*, author and philosopher Fung Yu-Lan expands on the former Ch'an Buddhist master Tao-Sheng and his sentiments on attaining "Sudden Enlightenment." Fung quotes Tao-Sheng from the *Collected Commentaries to the Parinirvana Sutra*, "By gaining freedom from illusion, one returns to the Ultimate, and by returning to the Ultimate, one attains the Original.' The state of attainment of the Original is the state of Nirvana." Within Ch'an Buddhism, Fung explains, the use of language and words is seen

as something that is unable to represent truth; that language leads to fixation on words and semantics and therefore must be moved past from in order to attain enlightenment. What Tao-Sheng describes can be applied to all things tangible or intangible, all things external as well as the many things external that find themselves within the internal, and this includes language. And through this process, language can be understood more accurately and for that reason language expresses as closely as it can to many forms of truth.

The term ‘truth’ is used often in the philosophies and schools of Buddhism, as well as many other philosophical studies and carries several different meanings. Within the schools of Buddhism, the term ‘truth’ cannot be clearly defined as simply as ‘what is fact’ because any attempt to define the word leads to a circular and objectively explanation. Nevertheless, it is possible to expound on the Buddhist Truth using words and language, that is, with less circulatory terms and more descriptive and illustrative expressions.

In *The Gospel of Buddha*, author Paul Carus interprets ancient Buddhist teachings into a digestible English collection of inspiring prose. “Welcome the truth. The truth is the immortal part of the mind. Establish the truth in your mind, for the truth is the image of eternal; it portrays the immutable; it reveals the everlasting,” Carus wrote in the opening of his novel, his picturesque explanatory definition of truth goes on for pages as he proved the difficultness of expressing the true truth in words, while also proving how defining truth is just as possible as it is difficult. “The Buddha has proclaimed the truth; let the truth of the Buddha dwell in your hearts. Extinguish in yourselves every desire that antagonizes the Buddha, and in the perfection of your spiritual growth you will become like unto him,” Carus continued, “Cleanse yourselves of evil and sanctify your lives. There is no other way of reaching truth.”

With this, Carus was able to take an incredibly complex philosophical phrase and explain the meaning behind it to a connotative level; using a poetic and almost hypnotic writing style, Carus defined the Buddhist Truth as the Buddha Nature by shaping his words into a clear and readable experience within our minds. To imagine ourselves as the Buddha allows the reader to understand what truth is on an emotional and affective degree, which will further allow for a deeper connection to the Buddhist teachings, and this is through words from language.

“Sudden Enlightenment” of the Ch’en school of Buddhism can be read in ancient texts called ‘koans,’ as explained in *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy* by Wing-Tsit Chan, “literally *koan* means an official document on the desk, connoting a sense of important decision and the final determination of truth and falsehood.” Meaning that within the philosophy that deemed language as limited in explaining the truth, they had still abode by the normalcy of writing scripture in the form of stories. The koans, translated by Chan, expressed two main characters: a master and a pupil, and the pupil was often arrogant in his practice while the master had to show him the way toward enlightenment. Exemplifying that enlightenment and truth can be taught through speech and words.

In reading about religions, philosophies, or other types of written doctrines, we are able to see both into the past and history (of the writer) and then bend further the thoughts and ideas from learnable knowledge that is written in words. And these two items put together creates great meaning to the act verbal or written language — without reading Carus’ *Gospel of Buddha* or the like thereof, it is possible that one could still be meditating on the question of “what is truth?” And while this young student may have become fixated on finding the answer by hearing the words, they will be better for knowing (even if they are told directly or read it in a book) because

they will no longer be fixated on it. They will simply know and then be able to move forward with the practice and philosophy of becoming one with truth, with Buddha.

While the meaning of the truth is too elaborate to put into words, offering illustrative and experiential guidance to the meaning and the purity of the Buddhist Truth does not take away the meaning to the words that are used in the explanations; in turn, the language used and the words added to the connotative, spiritual, and/or emotional definition of Truth is what has given it immense meaning for thousands of years.

In conclusion, I have found that language can both convey great meaning and has the ability to represent truth, the truth, a shared truth, and the ultimate Buddhist Truth. And in final analysis, language can carry as much meaningfulness as societies lay upon it, or 'them' in the case of individual words, and the meaning behind the words may fall onto human intention and the aim to give language meaning or give meaning through language – in either case, meanings of messages are shared and represent a truth.

Works Cited

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