

IS TRUTH RELATIVE?

HZT4UI - Mr. Wittmann - Unit 4 - Lecture 3



WHAT ABOUT LANGUAGE?

- Many philosophers, anthropologists, and historians have accepted Kant's concept of Transcendental Idealism (mind structures everything experienced into reality).
- However, there are different ways of structuring the space & time experience, which are employed by different people, cultures, or linguistic groups.
- Thus, "everyday reality" will be different for them.
- **Truth Relativists** claim that since language is so important to our experience of the world, differences in the grammar of a language, make different words and thus concepts, available to different linguistic groups.
- But if no objective truth exists, then the consequence is that any claim accepted by a group becomes truth (i.e. Hitler's beliefs were just as true as Mother Teresa's)

DEFINITION OF LANGUAGE

- Purely human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions and desires by means of voluntarily produced symbols. Grammar is the system of how these symbols function (syntax, morphology, phonology and semantics).

(Edward Sapir, Language: An Introduction to the Study of Speech. Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1921)

- Linguists **Edward Sapir** and **Benjamin Lee Whorf** state that speakers of different languages may think and construct reality differently.
- Language shapes even the most fundamental dimensions of human experience: space, time, causality and relationships to others.



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RKK7wGAYP6k>

How Language Works

LANGUAGE

- Approximately 7000 languages on planet Earth, so knowledge and truth may be relative.

For example...

- Greek (abstract, flexible) and Latin (concrete, regular)
 - Greek has 4 words: **agápe** (impersonal) **éros** (lust) **philía** (friendly) **storgē** (family)
 - **Kuuk Thaayorre** only uses compass directions
 - **Hopi** Indians have no grammatical tense
 - **Pirahã** (Amazon) has no words for exact numbers
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- Because of the structure of language, or of culture, or some combination of both?

LANGUAGE (CONTINUED)

- The development of language gave us the ability to invent and rearrange conceptions of the world, to suit changing goals and environments.
- Thus great diversity of languages that have emerged around the globe, each providing its own adaptive cognitive toolkit.
- Each encapsulates the knowledge and worldview developed over thousands of years within a culture.
- Each contains a way of perceiving, categorizing and creating meaning in the world.

SYMBOLIC INTERPRETATION & INTENTION

- **Hermeneutics** is the study of interpretations.
- When we interpret books, poems, legal texts, religious scriptures, and people's words and actions, we must make sure that our interpretations are true.
- But what defines a true interpretation?
- **Thomas Aquinas** (1224–1274) claimed that a text could have several true interpretations, including the literal interpretation and at least three kinds of symbolic interpretations.
- How are we to know exactly which one God intended?

SYMBOLIC INTERPRETATION & INTENTION (CONTINUED)

Martin Luther (1483-1546)

Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834)

Wilhelm Dilthey (1833–1911)

- Rejected symbolic interpretations
- Only the literal interpretation of a text could be true, if it corresponded to reality.
- Must know the author's historical context to know what he intended the text to mean.
- True interpretation of a text is what the author intended.

IDEAL CLEAR LANGUAGE

Gottfried Leibniz (1646–1716)

- Many possible ways of interpreting texts = language problem
- We should develop a perfect language, which express our ideas with complete clarity
- Mathematic symbolic language

Ludwig Wittgenstein, Tractatus-Logico-Philosophicus (1889–1951)

- The world consists of perceived facts is made up of atomic facts
- A ideal language should communicate on the atomic level
- A statement is true when it unambiguously corresponds to the structure of the atomic facts it represents
- Today: quantum language

IDEAL CLEAR LANGUAGE (CONTINUED)

TARSKI'S DEFINITION OF TRUTH



Alfred Tarski (1901-1983)

- Correspondence theories do not explain what “facts” and “correspondence” are.
- Truth theory should not refer to “facts” or “correspondence”
- Truth is a property of sentences.
- A sentence is true when things [in reality] are as it [the sentence] says they are.
 1. The Latin sentence “**nix est alba**” is true in Latin (*conditions in a certain language*)
 2. *if and only if*
 3. snow is white (*conditions in the real world*)
- But is it true in another language?

TARSKI'S DEFINITION OF TRUTH (CONTINUED)

1. a language = **L**
2. a sentence in that language = **S**
3. a statement stating the conditions making a sentence true in that language = **P**

*Thus a **S** in a **L** is true, if and only if **P***

- It is true in one language (i.e. Latin), if we can make the same statement in another language (i.e. English), and make use of that notion of truth in the other language (English).
- Tarski argued that this is the best definition we can hope for is...

A statement is true if it can be communicated and agreed upon, not only because of correspondence to external reality.

- But if correspondence doesn't matter, neither does coherence nor the pragmatic theories.

DEFLATION THEORY



Hilary Putnam
(1928-present)

- Any attempt to find one characterization of truth that covers every kind of truth, is a failure.
- “As long as we think that everything that’s true or false has to be a description of some physical realm, we won’t understand ethical truth, logical truth, or mathematical truth.”
- Ethical truth, logical truth, or mathematical truth have nothing to do with physical reality.
- We should reject all of the theories because truth really doesn’t refer to anything important.
- Truth is a man-made concept and doesn’t have a physical nature

THE END