LANGUAGE AND TRUTH: A STUDY OF NIETZSCHE'S THEORY OF LANGUAGE

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Abstract. *Nietzsche's theory marks a very interesting parallel with Saussure's theory of language. Saussure's formulation of linguistic sign as a combination of a signifier, a sound image and a signified, a concept, inseparably and arbitrarily joined with each other, does not leave any space for tracing the origins of this sign in being[1]. Thus, Saussure's theory does not address the relationship between being and language, in fact, it establishes the fact that being is not to be directly addressed or discussed in the study of language. Language always stands away from being. In Nietzsche's views about language, though language does not succeed in accessing being, it has a certain relationship with being, and Nietzsche's thought expresses this relationship in a clear manner. Following article presents the relationship between Truth and Language as envisaged in Nietzsche's thought.*

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Saussure says that though, in a sign, the signified and the signifier are arbitrarily joined with each other, the choice of using a signifier for a signified is not left to the caprice of the individual user of language. Rather, it is the convention that strictly decides which signifier is to be used for which signified. So, it is the convention that settles the rule for using a particular signifier for a particular signified and not for the other[2]. This notion of convention also appears in Nietzsche's views on language, and it is this notion of convention that clarifies the nature of truth.

According to Nietzsche, truth actually means designating things in a conventional manner[3]. So, if somebody calls himself rich while the convention does not allow the designation 'rich' to be used in his case; that person will be called a liar. In Saussure's theory of language, since the designation of a thing by a sign is not included in the scope of linguistic studies; therefore, this sense of truth and lie is not relevant. However, from Nietzsche's description of the meaning of truth and lie, it should not be inferred that he is taking the matter of signification away from the concept as a signifier, and bringing the idea that language

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[1] Ferdinand De Saussure, Course in General Linguistics, tr. by: alber Reidlinger, Open Court Publishing 1986, pg-114-115

[2] Ibid.

[3] Nietzsche, Truths and Lies From an Extra Moral Sense, Available online:
http://faculty.uml.edu/enelson/truth&lies.htm

actually designates things. In Nietzsche's thought the idea of designating a thing through a sign is only a convenience of expression; on the other hand a signifier actually signifies a concept and nothing else.

Nietzsche's views on convention appeared in his essay on Truth and Lies from an Extra Moral Sense. In this essay he says that it was in order to remove mutual discord that the inventors of language, on a pragmatic ground, decided that they would not designate anything against the convention. Nietzsche writes: "Man wishes to exist socially and with the herd; therefore, he needs to make peace and strives accordingly to banish from his world at least the most flagrant bellum omni contra omnes. This peace treaty brings in its wake something which appears to be the first step toward acquiring that puzzling truth drive: to wit, that which shall count as "truth" from now on is established. That is to say, a uniformly valid and binding designation is invented for things, and this legislation of language likewise establishes the first laws of truth. For the contrast between truth and lie arises here for the first time. The liar is a person who uses the valid designations, the words, in order to make something which is unreal appear to be real. He says, for example, "I am rich," when the proper designation for his condition would be poor."[4]

For Nietzsche it is the convention that actually bestows the sense of truth and lie to the expressions. Human intellect, says Nietzsche, works best to simulate or dissimulate something. So, for Nietzsche the concern for truth is not something that is expected from mankind. Nietzsche writes: "Insofar as the individual wants to maintain himself against other individuals, he will under natural circumstances employ the intellect mainly for dissimulation."[5]

But it is merely to avoid conflicts; perpetual conflicts that threaten the communal existence, man contrived a convention according to which everything is to be designated in a socially approved manner. In so far as one talks about things in a socially approved manner, according to a pre settled convention, one is considered as a truthful person. On the other hand, as soon as one starts defying the convention, one is no longer designated as a truthful person; one, in this case becomes a liar.

Nietzsche, like Saussure, considers this convention as arbitrary. However, the arbitrariness in Nietzsche differs from the concept of arbitrariness in Saussure. For Saussure arbitrariness seems to be a property that gives convention a free hand to choose a sound image, rather any sound image for a concept. For Nietzsche arbitrariness means the freedom to connect a concept with an experience. Designations are arbitrary because a concept, a signified is itself an arbitrary reduction of human experience. In a concept what is conceptualized is not the thing itself; rather it is the human relationship with the thing that is conceptualized. Nietzsche writes: "What about these linguistic conventions themselves? Are they perhaps products of knowledge, that is, of the sense of truth? Are designations congruent with things? Is language the adequate expression of all realities?"[6]

Nietzsche questions whether there is a real correspondence between the thing and the notion? The answer simply is in negation. For Nietzsche there is no possibility of having an exact correspondence between the thing and its notions, because the concept in fact is an arbitrary abbreviation or reduction of human experience;

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[4] Ibid.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Ibid.

"In particular, let us further consider the formation of concepts. Every word instantly becomes a concept precisely insofar as it is not supposed to serve as a reminder of the unique and entirely individual original experience to which it owes its origin; but rather, a word becomes a concept insofar as it simultaneously has to fit countless more or less similar cases-- which means, purely and simply, cases which are never equal and thus altogether unequal. Every concept arises from the equation of unequal things. Just as it is certain that one leaf is never totally the same as another, so it is certain that the concept "leaf" is formed by arbitrarily discarding these individual differences and by forgetting the distinguishing aspects."[7]

Nietzsche presents the concept, the signified of a signifier in a sign, as an equality of the unequal, an arbitrary reduction of the totality of human experiences in an attempt to make them equal, or similar to each other. Thus, a concept is arbitrary, and consequently, all conceptualization in language is arbitrary. This renders the acceptance of a sign as a representation of a thing or a situation as arbitrary, since the concept that represents the thing or the situation is itself arbitrary. So, to believe in a convention that asks one to designate things or situations in a particular manner and not in the other, amounts to have faith in a lie, in an illusion as a truth. Thus, whenever a person tells the truth, says something according to the convention, he actually tells a lie, but without realizing the fact that what he has said in the name of truth, was actually a lie that was conventionalized as a truth. Nietzsche writes: "…to be truthful means to employ the usual metaphors. Thus, to express it morally, this is the duty to lie according to a fixed convention, to lie with the herd and in a manner binding upon everyone. ...he lies in the manner indicated, unconsciously and in accordance with habits which are centuries' old; and precisely by means of this unconsciousness and forgetfulness he arrives at his sense of truth."[8]

Thus, truth, the conventional truth, the whole convention itself, is a lie, a lie about which people have forgotten that it was a lie conventionalized as truth. To describe this situation, the actual meaning of truth, Nietzsche equates truth with a coin that has lost its embossment. He writes: "Truths are illusions which we have forgotten are illusions- they are metaphors that have become worn out and have been drained of sensuous force, coins which have lost their embossing and are now considered as metal and no longer as coins."[9] Here clearly, the coin is the illusion that is reckoned or conventionalized as truth, and embossment is the fact that it was actually a lie, only a convention.

In Saussure's theory, it is the convention that restricts the users of a certain language to use a particular sound image for a particular concept. So, here as well, truth means proper designation, a designation according to the convention, and lying means to designate against the convention. Since there is no moral motive behind Saussure's theory, therefore, the use of the term 'lying' for wrong designation is abandoned in the favor of 'error.'

In Nietzsche's thought, language appeared and developed in human society under the 'survival will' or pragmatic needs. Not only the convention that settled the conflicts of designation was developed under the 'survival will', but also the concept, or signified of the signifier in a linguistic sign, was developed under the influence of survival instincts. The reason for this lies in the fact that human experience in the world is largely carried out to fulfill pragmatic needs. All human experiences in the world are largely carried out to address

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[7] Ibid.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Ibid.

survival concerns and practical preoccupations. Thus, if a concept is a reduction or abbreviation of some human experience, and all experiences are carried out for practical concerns, then there is no chance of getting anything out of these experiences other than the practical concepts.

Nietzsche contrasts the survival will with another will which he termed as the will to truth. According to the belief of metaphysicians, an experience and the concepts resulting from that experience can represent the thing itself or being, in case the experience is carried out under the will to truth, merely under a concern for knowledge, under a theoretical concern as opposed to a practical concern. But, for Nietzsche, such a will has not successfully executed or, somehow such a pure will to knowledge has not remained the basic impetus behind the conscious human activities. In his Beyond Good and Evil he writes: "…behind all logic and its seeming sovereignty of movement, there are valuations, or to speak more plainly, physiological demands, for the maintenance of definite mode of life."[10]

Conceptualization is done largely under the instinctive drives, and even philosophical understanding is not an exception. Nietzsche writes: "…the great part of conscious thinking must be counted amongst the instinctive functions, and it is so even in the case of philosophical thinking."[11] Hence, for Nietzsche, even the purely theoretical concerns are not pure enough and there is a great influence of survival will on such efforts.

What then is the nature of language that we use for communication? Is language capable of showing the truth in its purest sense? Is it possible to access being in its purity through language? Is the thing in itself accessible through language? Nietzsche's answer to all these questions comes in negative. The reason is language is not developed under the will to knowledge(though this will to knowledge is merely a refinement of will to ignorance which, in Nietzsche's words is a necessity for survival); rather language is developed under the influence of survival will. Let us see what does that mean.

In his essay *On Truth and Lies from an Extra Moral Sense* Nietzsche clearly says: "The "thing in itself" (which is precisely what the pure truth, apart from any of its consequences, would be) is likewise something quite incomprehensible to the creator of language and something not in the least worth striving for. This creator only designates the relations of things to men, and for expressing these relations he lays hold of the boldest metaphors."[12]

For Nietzsche language does not conceptualizes the thing itself, rather it conceptualizes the human relationship with the thing, and leaves the thing itself unknown. According to Nietzsche, "we obtain the concept, as we do the form, by overlooking what is individual and actual; whereas nature is acquainted with no forms and no concepts, and likewise with no species, but only with an X which remains inaccessible and indefinable for us"[13]. Hence, for Nietzsche,"…the genesis of language does not proceed logically in any case, and all the material within and with which the man of truth, the scientist, and the philosopher later work and build, if not derived from never-never land, is at least not derived from the essence of things"[14].

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[10] Nietzsche, Beyond Good and Evil, tr. by: Hellen Zimmern , in The Philosophy of Nietzsche, edited by; W. H Right(New York; Modern Library, 1954) pg-383
[11] Ibid.
[12] On Truth and Lies
[13] Ibid.
[14] Ibid.

Language, instead of conceptualizing Being, the thing in itself, conceptualizes human relationship with Being. In his Beyond Good and Evil Nietzsche writes,"…the history of language is the history of a process of abbreviation"[15] Language actually is an abbreviation or symbolization of experiences. A similar sense is expressed by him in his essay on Truths and Lies from an Extra Moral Sense, when he described language as a graveyard of experiences[16]. This expression can be traced back to Hegel's description of linguistic sign as a tomb in which the sound image is the tomb and the concept is the dead. So, language as a totality of these tombs is equated with a graveyard.

If language is a symbolization or abbreviation of human experiences, then, in order to understand the scope of language, one should also assess the nature of this experience. Human experience is directed by survival instinct, thus, we experience this world as it is related to us through this instinct. We define water, in our common language, as a liquid that quenches our thrust, as an essential of our life, and not as a chemical compound; a flood as a human catastrophe, and not as a mere event in nature. Thus, language conceptualizes our relationship with being and not the being itself. In his Genealogy of Morals, Nietzsche writes: "…but he who thinks in words, thinks as a speaker and not as a thinker(it shows that he does not think of objects or thinks objectively, but only of his relations with objects—that, in point of fact, he only thinks of himself and his audience)".[17] Nietzsche thinks that language always thematizes human relationship with things and not the things themselves.

Nietzsche does not recognize the will to truth as something standing on its footing, as something independent from the practical concerns. Thus, says Nietzsche, the will to truth actually is a refinement of a more basic will, the will to ignorance, the will to forgetfulness. For Nietzsche, lies are an essential condition for living, without lies life is neither easy nor bearable.[18]

While considering the case of a priori synthetic judgments, Nietzsche contends that such judgments are illusory, however, we have to have a faith in the veracity of such judgments, for without a priori synthetic judgments we cannot survive as specie. He writes: "The falseness of an opinion is not for us any objection to it …The question is, how far an opinion is life furthering, life preserving, species preserving…we are fundamentally inclined to maintain that falsest opinions (to which the synthetic judgment a priori belong), are the most indispensible to us…that the renunciation of false opinions would be renunciation of life."[19]

Then from where appeared this will to truth? Nietzsche contends that this will to truth appeared because of a forgetting of the fact that truth actually was a mere convention. Initially truth was established merely as a convention, a convention that restricted people to use a particular designation for a particular concept. However, by the passage of time people forgot that truth merely was a convention and they started considering it as a property inherent to the assertion. Moreover truth was also defined as a correspondence between the thing and its notion.

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[15] Beyond Good and Evil, pg. 592
[16] On Truth and Lies
[17] Nietzsche , Genealogy of Morals, tr. by: Horace B. Samuel, in The Philosophy of Nietzsche, Edited by W.H Wright (New York: Modern Library,1954), pg-733
[18] Beyond Good and Evil, pp. 382-383
[19] Beyond Good and Evil, pg. 384

Nietzsche's views on language suggest that the meaning of truth followed a certain dialectical process. The first stage in this process was the stage when people settled a convention that restricted them to designate a particular signified with a particular signifier and not with the other. Thus, in the first stage of this process means to signify a thing according to convention. The second stage in this process is the stage when people forgot the fact that truth was a merely a convention, and they started a search for the logical grounds for truth. This search for logical grounds for truth is different from judgment making when a person judges something to be a specific case of a general concept or form. This sort of judgment making can be equated to the idea of reason or dianoia in a Platonic sense, whereas the search for the logical grounds for truth, and rejecting any truth that falls short of these standards, can be understood as dialectics.

People who were exposed to different conventions, started realizing the contradictory claims made in different conventions about the same thing or situation, this situation led to dialectical thinking. Dialectics, as Plato has defined it in The Republic, is different from reason or Dianoia, in it that the later hypothesizes something about the reality and tests whether the hypothesis corresponds with the reality or not. On the other hand dialectics starts from a hypothesis, a conventional claim and then proceeds to over throw it.

In the use of reason one tries to test a hypothesis in order to reject or accept it against the reality. Whereas in dialectics, one does not at all refer to the reality and considers the concepts alone, through comparing the different claims about the same thing or situation, one proceeds to overthrow these claims to arrive at a higher synthesis. This suggests that dialectics works through concepts alone.

The second thing about dialectics that differentiates it from reason is the impulse behind its use. Dialectics does not start from practical concerns; rather it initiates because of a theoretical concern. A theoretical concern, in the likeness of Nietzsche's will to truth, is something that considers the thing in itself, without considering any practical consequences. Socratic dialectics is a vivid example of it.

In Husserl's Philosophy and the Crisis of European Man, this situation is clearly spelled out. Husserl differentiated practical and theoretical concerns, and contended that philosophy actually emerged from a theoretical concern. Philosophy started with thaumazein, the Greek word for wonder. Husserl Writes: "There is a sharp cleavage, then, between the universal but mythico-practical attitude and the 'theoretical', which by every previous standard is unpractical, the attitude of thaumazein [Gr. = to wonder], to which the great men of Greek philosophy's first culminating period, Plato and Aristotle, trace the origin of philosophy. Men are gripped by a passion for observing and knowing the world, a passion that turns from all practical interests… In other words, man becomes the disinterested spectator, overseer of the world, he becomes a philosopher. More than that, from this point forward his life gains a sensitivity for motives which are possible only to this attitude, for novel goals and methods of thought, in the framework of which philosophy finally comes into being and man becomes philosopher."[20]

This new drive that resulted in theoretical efforts was based on an experience of diversification, the experience of a world that was highly diversified. Husserl writes: "With an attitude such as this, man observes first of all the variety of nations, his own and others, each with its own environing world, which with its traditions, its gods and demigods, with its

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[20] Husserl, Philosophy and the Crisis of European Man, available online:
http://www.users.cloud9.net/~bradmcc/husserl_philcris.html

mythical powers, constitutes for each nation the self-evident, real world. In the face of this extraordinary contrast there arises the distinction between the represented and the real world, and a new question is raised concerning the truth - not everyday truth bound as it is to tradition but a truth that for all those who are not blinded by attachment to tradition is identical and universally valid, a truth in itself"[21]. So, for Husserl, the will to truth or a theoretical concern focused on the universal truth, it thematizes the world as given to the consciousness without any practical concerns. Thus, the convention that emerged from the practical relationship with the world and reduced the practical and commonly held experiences to ideas, was abandoned in the favor of a desire for universal truths, equally valid and acceptable to all. Consequently, this type of thinking paved the way for dialectical method as well.

Apparently there are two prominent possibilities that can follow from theoretical efforts. First, a person, under the influence of this new sense of truth can go to defend the conventional meaning through providing them with a rational ground. An example is the effort to rationalize faith on rational grounds. Here, one can see the involvement of reason in a purely Platonic sense. Nietzsche, in the first sections of both Human All too Human and Beyond Good and Evil, criticized the metaphysicians for searching otherworldly grounds for good things like knowledge, truthfulness, disinterestedness and honesty. Thus, for Nietzsche, the attempts to ground conventional beliefs on reason are only illusory.

Second, in Nietzsche's views, one can abandon the tradition and can strife for more viable truths. These more viable truths are not accessed through the will to knowledge or the will to truth, or through a theoretical attitude; rather these truths are the products of a will to power or will to create. In his Zarathustra, in the section Immaculate Perception, Nietzsche criticized the pure will to knowledge in a poetic manner. In his Beyond Good and Evil, in the section titled We Scholars, Nietzsche described the true philosopher as the one whose will to knowledge is essentially a will to create. Who does not say thus it is; rather a true philosopher is the one who says, thus shall it be. Nietzsche writes: "The true philosophers however, are commanders and law givers; …they determine first the whither and the why of mankind , and thereby set aside the previous labor of all philosophical workers…they grasp future with a creative hand , and whatever is and was , becomes for them thereby a means, an instrument, and a hammer. Their knowing is creating, their creating is law giving, their will to truth is – Will to Power". This leads us to the conclusion that truth cannot be achieved until it is conventionalized or created or created and conventionalized.

The age of theoretical attitude is the age of method and proof. Theoretical reason tries to establish a truth on the basis of logical necessity, and not on any utilitarian ground. But one can see that such efforts have always been challenged and one example is Kant's critique of pure reason. On the other hand Husserl seems quite optimistic with his phenomenological method to construct essences that are not based on any pragmatic foundations and that are perfectly logical; essences whose veracity can be established through a rigorous method.

Nietzsche, on the other hand is not so optimistic towards such efforts. For him the thing in itself always remains unknown, but this does not amount to deny the possibility of knowledge in the manner of skeptics. Skepticism for Nietzsche is a disease that prevails in a society when old values and conventions are breaking. For Nietzsche, will to truth corresponds to forgetting the fact that truth merely is a convention. It is only after forgetting

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[21] Ibid.

that truth is a lie people started efforts to find logical basis for it. Thus, most of the philosophical efforts of this class are, for Nietzsche, misguided.

However, as soon as one again realizes the fact that truth is a mere convention, one starts thinking in a proper way. This stage corresponds to revitalize all philosophical debate of past, not for a concern for absolute truth, but to know the way how previous philosophers conventionalized new truths. Thus, this dialectical movement in the history of truth can be summarized as follows. The first stage of this movement is the stage when truth was conventionalized, and convention was the sole reason why one should consider something as true. The second stage lies in forgetting the fact that truth merely was a convention. Previously, truth was an effect of convention; in the second stage it became a cause for convention. In the second stage, truth became the property that allows a piece of knowledge to be conventionalized. However, in the third stage, the fact that truth was a convention, again revived. Thus, Saussure's and Nietzsche's theories of language correspond to this third stage.

In the wake of these theories, one can easily see how Heidegger's emphasis on language as a way to being is defeated. If language has an inner reference, and it never refers to the thing itself, then there is no possibility of knowing being through language, especially when the inner reference, the concept is an abbreviation of Dasein's preoccupation with the world in a natural mode of existence.