

CANDIDATE 1 ASSIGNMENT 4

“The limits of my language means the limits of my world.”

In this quote, Ludvig Wittgenstein presents a thought not uncommon in philosophy: That our understanding of the world is fundamentally shaped through our understanding of language. Through the language, we can understand and discuss concepts and ideas that do not exist separately from humans. According to this interpretation, language is the only thing that connects us to the world around us, but it is flawed in both its variation and its limitations. We simply can not understand what we can not describe. But does it really have to be that way?

To understand how our language affects us, one ought first to reflect over what the function of a language is. The functions of a language can for instance be divided into two categories: Practical communication and the description of concepts. Practical communication would cover all uses of a language that are related to actions and the physical world, while descriptions of concepts would cover all abstract ideas one can describe and discuss. A common assertion among historians is that with the written language came the abstract use of language to discuss ideas, or that this was at least essential to strengthening it. What this function of language does it to make ideas tangible, it gives us a way to discuss thoughts that are not easily explained. To “remove” this function from a language can be a way to dehumanise the users, such as the long-withstanding misconception that the Romani language does not have words for concepts like “beauty”. It is a way of insinuating that they lack something fundamentally human, the ability to think and reflect beyond their senses. Through this we can see that both functions of a language are essential.

The limitations of a language can also be seen in two ways. On one side, the barriers between languages, and on the other hand, the barriers between language users. Starting with the latter, German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche wrote about what he called “the problem of communication”. According to him, we are all in a manner trapped within our own language, and because our understanding of the language is individual and highly subjective, we can never correctly communicate our ideas, not even to another person who speaks the same language as we do. A part of the problem is that a word is not simply an objective description. The way we use it is shaped by our associations. Because of this, a word can mean something else to me than to someone else, even though we are both fluent speakers, and we will use the word with slightly different intentions accordingly. This means that while we may have the same vocabulary, the same tool case so to speak, we will never end up with the exact same

result, and the problem is not only that people do this, but that they do it without even realising.

The other barrier is as mentioned the one between languages. The obvious problem is that communication between different languages is challenging because the words are not understandable, but there is more to it as well. When one begins to learn a language, every word and expression is taught as a translation of words and phrases from a language already known to the learner. However, as one learns a language more fluently, there is also a growing understanding that the language is not a translation or extension of the known language, which is used as a passageway to understanding. The language exists on its own, and in the same way different language users are bound by their associations, different languages are bound by their connotations as a culture. Even though an English and a Norwegian word has the same meaning, it does not necessarily mean the same when used. This is partly because while they may have evolved into the same meaning, these two words do not have to share etymology or history. The words can have different backgrounds, they can come from different roots with different meanings, and they can have been used in different ways. A word that is neutral in Norwegian, can have negative connotations to a predominantly English speaker, even when the words are the same in meaning. Thus the problem becomes that languages aren't really translatable. While it's possible to translate a word literally, it is more difficult to translate the value a word has. This speaks in Wittgenstein's favour, that we are more bound to our mother tongue than we may realise.

While we are bound to our language, it is also natural that our language is bound to us. Wittgenstein compared a person's language to their world, and in the sense of vocabulary, this is certainly true. It is not necessary to know many languages to understand that they do not all share the same vocabulary. Rather the language adapts to the needs of the people using it. It is no coincidence that English has a broad technical and financial vocabulary, Norwegian possesses many words that describe natural phenomena, or that Latin has many different ways to describe the act of killing. Languages are, to some extent, specialised. What we see here is that languages tend to reflect the societies they are used in, and that their vocabularies displays both dominating values and ideas, and more practical words and phrases that are relevant due to how they live.

Based on all this, it seems that Wittgenstein's notion is correct. We are limited by our language, and our language is in return limited by us. However, there are some logical flaws attached to this. If we are shaped by the language and the language is shaped by us, we end up

thinking in a circle. But is that even possible? The first problem here is that a circle has no beginning. If we think that the emersion of written language was a turning point for abstract thinking, then abstract function of the language must have at one point have started. This will logically mean that the ideas were already there, and that the words to describe them came into being because of a need to formulate already existing concepts. Moreover, languages do not as a rule stagnate. Wittgenstein's idea is that we can't think outside our language, but someone must have, for the languages to develop to the point where they are today. This poses questions like do we exclusively think in language, or can concepts be understood without words? It seems to me that while an idea that the language can not yet describe is not unavailable, but rather somewhat intangible. For an idea to be discussed and fleshed out, there must be a way to describe it, both to oneself and others. However, an idea can emerge without being part of the language – it is what makes the language move forward.

To come back to Wittgenstein's quote: Are the limits of my language the limits of my world? In many ways, yes. We use language every day, without necessarily being aware of how much meaning we put into the language ourselves, both as individuals and as a culture. But while I agree that we are more limited by our language than we perhaps realise, I do not believe these limits are impossible to overcome. They are more like borders. Within them is what you know and understand, what you take for granted. Outside are the things not yet known to you.