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MUDDLING THROUGH THE LANGUAGE CLUTTER: SCOURING FOR A MIDDLE PATH

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Polarization for the sake of conceptual and ideological distinctiveness often spawns chasms so cantankerous, that the ramifications of further deliberation become counter-productive. Conflicting ideas pervade every domain of rational thought. But conflict is not a hindrance. It exists as an integral and indisputable undercurrent of thinking as well as human nature. Conflict degenerates into a frantic scramble for power when the premise is squeezed dry of its fertile potential. There would be an appalling dearth of ideas, interpretations and perceptions had conflict been crucified as the instigator of discord. It is justified to concur that where there is no conflict, there is no independent thought. However, this conflict is not to wrestle over an impasse, but to acknowledge all perspectives how-much-ever divergent they might be. The productivity of conflict can be realised, when in its aftermath, the rifts between the poles, have been neutralized and the quest for the middle path can ensue. In the Chinese martial tradition, when two swordsmen joust, it is not blatantly for striking or defending. When their swords meet, depending on where they collide and with how much force they strike, they produce distinct soundwaves, which over a period appears as melody to the martial artists and comprises the spiritual as well as aesthetic underpinning. The pinnacle of the art lies in producing this very melody by simply displacing air with the sword. This analogy delineates the mental picture behind the conflict of ideas, how it transcends into a virile force and ultimately leads one on the search for the Aristotelian ‘golden mean’.

Looking at language, formalists and non-formalists have for long hurled arguments to defend their hallowed grounds, without accepting limitations that affect dissimilar contexts. The stress on homogeneity, to look at language as a monolithic system, falling in

line with streamlined rules, is what primarily the formalists uphold. This fails to address the actual mess that exists when people interact in any social context in any domain. The messiness in language is where heterogeneity must be accepted. This incorporates transitional states, colloquial nuances, incomplete utterances, a ‘hybrid’ form of language use in the virtual domain and context-specific interpretations. However, while preparing a simplistic module for a foreign language learner, an instructor has to conceal this messiness preliminarily. Thereby, a homogeneous model is preferred to internalize the basic functionalities of its structure. So, neither a strict adherence to a formal model nor conforming to a messy reality seems to be optimal across different domains. They are extremes and huddling over a stalemate would be a futile exercise. An arguable ‘golden mean’ could be to accept the dynamic nature of our expressive as well as adaptive need, whereby we seek a certain centrality of mechanisms but deviate in the produced utterances conditioned by social, psychological and contextual factors.

If for the sake of argument, one doffs the geo-spatial cue, then from a Foucauldian pedestal (1984), a strictly homogeneous cognizance of language appears to be too utopian to surmise. The Greek assemblage of οὐ (not) and τόπος (place) posits a portal to a multitude of interpretations. It could simply be fathomed as no real place for uniformity in language use, or as no such real language subservient to the uniform lashes of a prescriptive whip. As Foucault decocts it, “...in any case these utopias are fundamentally unreal spaces” as they “have a general relation of ...inverted analogy with the real space...” (Foucault 3). The crux here is not an obsessive rant over language use, but rather addressing the gaps in the approach to describing it, gaps that intrinsically constrain the scope of introspection and shamelessly vilipend the dynamic possibilities that arise when we manoeuvre language in virtually countless ways. A particularly extreme instance from Archi language would be apt given the flow of arguments. Speakers of this community in a small village in Southern Russia conjugate any verb root in roughly 1.5 million different ways, conditioned by situational and

contextual factors. Clearly, uniformity encounters an outrageous facepalm moment. A fascinating Archi legend capturing the stunning complexity of its language, appears in a letter by Peter von Uslar:

“The God created nations and peoples; there were much less languages than peoples. The God was giving one shared language to several peoples, but all peoples were refusing to accept the most difficult language in the World, which finally became the language of the least numerous people in the World: Archi language and Archi people” (Uslar 34) (transl. from Russian).

Another relevant instance of conspicuous variation is witnessed in Tuyuca, whereby decryption of the sense of an utterance is contingent upon five evidentiality paradigms along with an incredible repertoire of roughly 140 noun classes. McWhorter (2014) remarks about this fascinating range of evidentiality markers in Tuyuca:

“...there must be something about being Tuyuca that conditions this close attention to sources of information: that the culture is feeding into the language. One could suppose it must have something to do with living in a rain forest where one must always be on the alert to dangerous animals, or to the presence of other animals on which one depends for sustenance. Wouldn't being a Tuyuca seem to require constant attention to whether one hears something, whether one can depend on someone's statement that there is a new source of a certain food somewhere far off, and so on?” (McWhorter 21).

A utopian visualization of linguistic processes would force a geometry onto a scattered constellation of events, often so divergent, that an attempt to unearth some perceivable pattern is just painstakingly redundant. The redundancy is incrementally amplified as the dynamics of interaction evolve further fuelled by parameters like a tendency to shift towards the variation with higher social capital, transitional phases where borrowings surpass indigenous expressions on a frequency plot, loss of functional transparency of

languages as well as overlap of domains. One of the prime limitations of homogeneity is that it holds a language hostage and imposes cruel restraints on its integrative capacity.

Wittgenstein, too, reformed his stance to one aligned with pragmatism by the 1930s. The onus is on how language is actually used. This epistemological break from logical empiricism followed from his exchanges with Ramsey, when he realized that logical scrutiny depends on an irreducible symbolism which predicates words and sentences to possess definite meanings. Wittgenstein's investigations can be extended to drag concerns over constructive adequacy. Constructive adequacy can be interpreted as a laterally-inverted realisation of van Fraassen's (1980) 'constructive empiricism'. In *The Scientific Image* (1980), van Fraassen lucidly outlines his idea:

"Science aims to give us theories which are empirically adequate; and acceptance of a theory involves as **belief** only that it is empirically adequate" (Fraassen 12).

The crux here is to question the formality of utterance structure, so that when coupled with Wittgenstein's reflections on the non-fixity of meaning, an open-ended space transpires, where the fluid nature of language is sonorously intelligible.

Following in van Fraassen's line of thought, it can be argued that language encountered by speakers trigger various structural and semantic possibilities which compete for selection factored by the interlocutor's contextual judgment as well as an intuition about the speaker's intention, effervescent from cues generated by the intonation. Attempts to impugn the necessity for uniformity can be further motivated by evolutionary inevitability. That static-ity was shunned and time ravaged the primitive form, led on to what is now used as language. Time is a crucial parameter which arguably validates that language exists and evolves in use.

Evidently, the second meaning (M2) and the second structural possibility (S2) are aberrations when language is dragooned into a structural jacket. A rupture of this symmetry supports the discovered as well as undiscovered possibilities in language use. Essentially, use starts shaping the manifestation when structure is relinquished:

“We may say ‘Thinking is operating with symbols’. But ‘thinking’ is...fluid... and what ‘operating with symbols’ is must be looked at separately in each individual case. I might also say ‘Thinking is operating with language’ but ‘language’ is...fluid...” (Wittgenstein 106). Structuralists and purists would shudder at such blasphemous frivolities. A sincere soul-searching could reveal that this reluctance to deal with the messiness of language, is more

profoundly tied to the apprehension over losing one's ideological foothold than the dreaded descent into madness. This is exactly the vexatious limitation of polarization. Existence becomes contingent upon an alignment with a specific pole or an irreducible cluster of ideas. So, a refrain could be sought to forego such a subconscious incarceration. Here, ideology is not so much the constriction, rather the nature of its deployment is problematic. To put forth my envisioned schema:

For a staunch structuralist, the above schema would be interpretable as a triangular and a square figure that appear to be in close proximity. What is salient, is the homogeneity of thought, in accordance with the homogeneity of language structure, that the structuralists so fervently safeguard. The perception of a triangle and a square, would consistently perdure, regardless of any juxtaposition or 'internal reconstitution'. This can be witnessed in V and VI, whereby the triangle gets displaced from the top into the frame of the square and further undergoes an inversion.

When homogeneity of thought is surrendered, the same configuration is translatable as an irregular pentagon and with further internal reconstitution, as a regular pentagon. Figures II and III illustrate the crux of internal reconstitution i.e. to modulate some internal property of the structure to engender novel structural possibilities. Both figures II and III are polygons and pentagons. But distorting the parallel configuration of the lines in an upwardly divergent manner, leads us to a regular pentagonal configuration in III. Although both II and

III continue to be polygons, they now vary uniquely in the perceptual dimension. There can be many more possible configurations and hence it is always open for further reconstitution. Uniting my mental schema with Derridean ‘deconstruction’, this can be deduced as reconstitution for the sake of ‘de-constitution’ (deconstruction).

One of the prime bulwarks erected by prescriptivists and purists is the fallacy of preserving the appropriacy of structure, and resisting changes (or internal reconstitutions). An impeccable blow to this formation comes from Watts (2011):

“Imagine a world in which the goals of linguistic perfection and purity were achieved. Of what use would the perfect language be? It would still need to change and be adaptable to suit the needs of a changing world. Johnson’s position in *The Plan of an English Dictionary* (1747) was that any change must inevitably be change for the worse. Reaching perfection, therefore, is equivalent to arriving in a static world in which no further change is possible” (Watts 300).

The notion of ‘internal reconstitution’ extraneously corresponds from internal reconstruction. The analogy of internal reconstruction, as an approach in comparative and historical linguistics, is pertinent since both the ideas revolve around assumption. In the process of internal reconstruction, it is speculated that the researchers would trace the lost preceding forms. It is also presumed that following a pattern reversal would undo a change. The very premise is based on assumption. And assumptions can be decreed in formal, investigative procedures only when there is a certain flexibility or openness about the consequent findings. So, although the process of internal reconstruction employs uniform, ratiocinative operations for predictive modelling of proto-forms, the outcome is not obliged to conform to any pre-set template. The noteworthy point here is the very nature of this process. It would be hard to label it as plainly uniform, as one can never be absolutely sure about findings that are based in assumptions. Contrarily, branding it as non-uniform would be against its methodology. On a roughly parallel stretch, ‘internal reconstitution’,

conceptualised by me, is a visuospatial rearrangement. It requires a rupture or an opening up of the skeleton of an utterance, to realize feasible configurations that remain uncharted while looking through the structuralist glass. Reconstitution is also postulated on assumption; the assumption concerns the credibility of reconfiguring the frame without jeopardizing its cardinal aspects. So, reconstitution for the sake of ‘de-constitution’ (deconstruction), would necessarily imply internal ($\approx$ mental / $\approx$ linguistic) reconfiguration of schemas to unravel hitherto unexplored possibilities ($\approx$ interpretations / $\approx$ usages).

From structural confinement, a reckless plunge into pandemonium could startle even the most gallant post-structuralist. The limitless linguistic maneuvers executed in the brutal social arenas prompt the analogy to ‘dystopia’, whereby everything is chaotic and degraded. Utterances exist in a de-formed state. Utterances are also constantly scrutinized for further deferment. Dealing with the messiness that actually prevails is one thing, but how to go about it is another. A mere acknowledgement of language use being messy would not facilitate anything. In tandem with the Foucauldian perspective of references brewing a dystopia of discourse, it can be argued that extremes of messy indulgence create dystopia of language.

As Foucault astutely opines, discourse is “caught up in a system of references to other books, other texts, other sentences” (Foucault 92), on a similar note one can contend that language is caught up in a storm of haphazard maneuvers, jigs, and pragmatic twists. There needs to be a certain centrality to the infinite volitions effected by users as they exploit language with all its nuances across dissimilar domains. This can be envisioned as a whirlpool, without specifying the centripetality or centrifugality of its force. The focus is to shatter configurational limitations. So, the nature of the force while visualising the whirlpool is kept open for endless contemplations:

The idea behind the proposition of centrality is that like every tremor has an epicentre, every distortion in use has a causality. While acquisition proceeds without paying heed to the poverty of the stimulus, learning a language is a separate ball-game. There arises the need for a curriculum. The answer to whether there is a faint suggestion of uniformity here, would be in the negative since learning modes and capacities are conspicuously disparate. Without further ado, the opposition between centrality and uniformity must now be addressed.

Uniformity demands adherence, obedience and is overtly discernible. Centrality is obscure (an assumed central tendency) and does not inflict any undue compliance. Uniformity is specific, whereas centrality is presumptive. So, incorporating the notion of centrality in the rabble of heterogeneity, makes it susceptible to deconstructive endeavours.

Otherwise, the messiness of the mess itself may act as a closure. Hereof, an interesting analogy from the domain of encryption would be germane. An approach resorted to by covert organizations to insulate highly sensitive information is that of ‘security through obscurity’. It basically creates layers of messy, redundant strings to conceal confidential data. The idea is to frustrate any possible intruder into believing that there is nothing significant there. So, if a parallel interpretation is attempted, one could debate that the societal language mess somehow conceals a core by thwarting and blocking trespasses at the periphery. Further curiosity over what could actually consist such an incursion, can be dispelled by looking at attempts by outsiders to internalize foreign languages. This could very well be forwarded as a justification to why native fluency can never be attributed to foreign learners. There is something yet to be fully understood about every language that obscures its core (only accessible to the indigenous population) to learners, alien to that specific speech community. However competent a foreign learner be, there is some miniscule proportion that is always elusive, that always remains out of grasp and thus the striving eternally persists.

Considering the utopic landscape of homogeneity and the dystopic delirium of heterogeneity as implausible extremes, my argument is in favour of dissolving this futile gridlock, so that the search for a middle path can ensue. The philosophy of the middle path is born out of Mahayana Buddhism. The ‘madhyamaka’ school of thought affirms a centrality (a middle disposition) which culminates on a plane higher than the metaphysical extremes, whose constraints it surpasses. The critical element here is the ‘centrality’ and not a tenacious centre. This keeps the middle path in state of flux. It is always in the process of being found and never exactly found. It is in this incessant navigation towards a middle path, that a seeker rises above the impediments of the polarized conglomerates. As has been relayed in the first series of ‘discarding pairs of extremes’:

“...the tirthikas (30) assert a extreme that takes [the aggregates of] form and so forth to be permanent, and the sravakas assert a extreme that takes [the aggregates of] form, and so

forth, to be impermanent. The middle path completely discards both of these [extremes], and one becomes used to (31) the absence of mental fabrications, [a state] where there is no conception of form and so forth, as permanent nor as impermanent. It is stated in a sutra, “Form is not permanent, nor is it impermanent.” (Maitreya 28)

The implications of this understanding are intriguing for an attempt to resolve the impasse between structuralist and post-structuralist approaches, between homogeneity and heterogeneity. So, if Maitreya’s claim of form being neither permanent, nor impermanent is mulled over, it appears that much of how a seeker wants to grasp it, depends upon perspective. To a certain seeker, a fluid may have a form in the sense that it assumes the form of its container; likewise, a concept or an idea too has a form since it assumes the form of an interpreter’s understanding or use. To another seeker, a fluid may possess no form in the sense that it copies the spatial geometry of anything that possesses it; likewise, a concept or an idea too would have no form since it keeps on changing in interpretation or use from one individual to another. Now, a third way to cognize the nature of fluid could be that it dwells somewhere between form and no-form; in all practicality, it has no form but when we see it contained, it appears to have the form resembling its vessel. Hence, its nature does not encounter a closure; optimally, it could be argued that its nature goes beyond the parameter of structure. Language, too, on a parallel stream of thought, could be envisaged as beyond the consideration of structure. The fluidity of its functioning could illuminate the search for the elusive middle path between the valleys of homogeneity and heterogeneity. Another magnificent idea lies in the second series of ‘discarding pairs of extremes’:

“One extreme is the concept that an entity exists, and the other is the concept that an entity does not exist. The middle path is taught as a remedy for these two extremes. How is this? It has been extensively taught that since [the view of non-existence] completely destroys the individual, it is not [true] emptiness, and [one should further understand that true] emptiness is empty of [any conceptualized] emptiness. [In this way,] the former extreme [is rejected by

seeing entities as] empty [of existence] and the latter extreme [is rejected by seeing entities as] empty [of non-existence]. (38)” (Maitreya 32).

In this exposition, there is a disjunction between ‘thinking there is nothing’ and ‘there being actually nothing’. So, if this observation is extended to language, claiming that no pattern exists would demolish the very premise of there being a need for a way to communicate and that would be different from true nothingness of pattern. True non-existence of pattern would be devoid of any ‘conceptualized’ non-existence of pattern, as then there would be nothing whose patterned or non-patterned being can be debated. To keep things realizable, a middle path of pattern being fleetingly deceptive can be carefully treaded, with continual deferment.

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