

A Critical Assessment Of The Linguistic Turn Movement In Philosophy: With Special Reference To Wittgenstein

Dr. Debosmitha Chakraborty

Assam University, Silchar.

Abstract

The philosophical quest to know the unknown has resulted into the discovery of numerous methodologies from time to time. Different methodologies dominated the discipline at different eras. Analysis of language is one such methodology suggested by the school of analytic philosophy in the modern period. This linguistic analysis of philosophical concerns was the outcome of the widespread movement called 'linguistic turn' which impacted not only philosophy but also other disciplines like literature, sociology etc. Frege, Moore, Russell and Wittgenstein are the prominent philosophers who have ignited the wave of linguistic turn movement in philosophy. In this paper my primary aim is to discuss at length the importance of the linguistic turn movement in philosophy and how the works of Wittgenstein have motivated the domain of philosophy to take a turn towards the analysis of language. This paper highlights the contributions of Wittgenstein and the impact of his works in prompting the linguistic turn in philosophy.

Keywords- analytic philosophy, language, linguistic turn, Frege, Wittgenstein etc.

Introduction

In every philosophical outlook, whether it is epistemology or metaphysics or ethics, etc., there is a unique approach to know the reality. Such diverse approaches adopted for knowing the unknown has enriched and strengthened the philosophical body of knowledge. One such attempt to find a novel answer to the problem of philosophy was through the analysis of language. The linguistic turn in philosophy considered linguistic analysis as the potential approach to deal with philosophical problems.

The linguistic turn aims to discover the truth through the analysis of language. An anti-metaphysical attitude can be noticed in the initial works of the school of linguistic philosophy. It was also highly inspired by the Vienna Circle and their theories of logical positivism and verification theory. It is quite clear that the school of linguistic philosophy was much concerned about applying scientific methods in philosophy to discover the truth. It marked a transition in the point of discussion in

philosophy, from getting to know what is the reality to that which describes the reality, i.e., language. Linguistic philosophy considers that reality is reflected through language. The linguistic turn focuses on describing the world by analysing a suitable language.

The analytic or linguistic philosophy adopted 'analysis' of language as a method through which it can uncover the philosophical truth. By the term 'analysis', it means to find the meaning of a sentence or proposition through the process of reducing it to the simplest terms, i.e., a state in which it is further irreducible. The application of this technique of "analysis" in philosophy was a unique contribution on the part of the analytic philosophers. They brought into focus the importance of the analysis of language and hence indirectly, initiated the linguistic turn.

The background for the linguistic turn was set up in the mid-nineteenth century. The focus was laid on language when the philosophers began to see language as a central point in

understanding the notions of belief and representation. The language was taken to be accepted as a medium of conceptualization. Primarily, the linguistic turn holds that the world is accessible to us by our thoughts and what makes these thoughts accessible is the language. Hence, the best possible way to know about the nature of the world would be to investigate the nature of language.

The works of many philosophers can be taken into consideration for motivating the discipline of philosophy to take a turn towards the language. The analytic philosophers, the logical positivists, the Oxford philosophers and many others have either directly or indirectly contributed to the linguistic turn. They adopted the linguistic method of analysis to deal with the problems of philosophy instead of applying philosophical techniques to study the language. All these philosophers individually put forward specific ideas which shed light on the importance of language, and thus they indirectly became the backbone of the linguistic turn in philosophy.

The articulation 'The Linguistic Turn' was first used by Gustav Bergmann. While writing a review to Strawson's 'Individuals', he came through this expression. This term was again used by him in his following articles like 'The Glory and Misery of Ludwig Wittgenstein' and some others. Bergmann considered the linguistic turn to be "a fundamental gambit as to the method on which ordinary and ideal language philosophers (OLP, ILP) agree"ⁱ. The 'gambit' which Bergmann refers to can be considered as adopting a methodology through which, by discussing an ordinary language, one can discuss the world itself.

Bergmann put three significant reasons for taking the turn towards language. To start with, he says that words are utilised in two different senses, either it is used practically, or it is used philosophically. The words which philosophy employs are often found to be muddled and thus in need of a common-sensical elucidation. This is the prerequisite of the strategy. Again, a

significant part of the lack of clarity of pre-phonetic reasoning stems from the inability to recognise semantic articulations from meta-semantic explanations. This technique is the most secure approach to stay away from the resulting perplexities. Lastly, there are a few things which any language can just manifest. Such things are most certainly not unutterable. Alternatively, maybe they can be talked about in a meta-phonetic discourse of the linguistic structure and understanding of a language.

After Bergmann, the term linguistic turn remains unheard for many years until Richard Rorty adopted it for the title of his edited work 'The Linguistic Turn: Essays on Philosophical Methods'. In his most widely debated book 'Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature', Rorty aptly put forward his essential thoughts on the linguistic turn. From his writings, it was quite evident that Rorty reasoned the linguistic turn to be a progression of turns, all indicating diverse goals and persuaded by various philosophical impediments. Nevertheless, Rorty never stuck his commitments to specific research programs in the linguistic investigation. Instead, he adopted the mishap of linguistic strategies as showing together an imperative meta-philosophical exercise.

It was this exercise about which Rorty was most enlivened to express in the introduction of the 'Linguistic Turn: Essays on Philosophical Methods'. He writes, "I should wish to argue that the most important thing that has happened in philosophy during the last thirty years is not linguistic turn itself but rather the beginning of a thoroughgoing rethinking of certain epistemological difficulties which have troubled philosophers since Plato and Aristotle."ⁱⁱ Rorty always credited linguistic turn for bringing into light the issues which traditional epistemology was concerned with. For Rorty, the startling meta-philosophical outcome, as opposed to the planned philosophical undertaking, was what that matters most to the linguistic turn.

The primary motivation to take the path of linguistic turn can be credited to two different trends; one is from the German-speaking tradition especially Frege and the other belonging to the English-speaking tradition consisting of the philosophers, viz, Moore, Russell and Wittgenstein.

Frege was the first philosopher who unintentionally contributed towards the linguistic turn. We find many elements in his writings that might have influenced the linguistic turn in philosophy. First, the notion held by Frege that the structure of the sentence must help in expressing the structure of thought and not mere encoding it, forms the basis of the linguistic turn. Precisely, to understand the thought- structure, it must be expressed in some language; otherwise, it would be impossible to hold grasp of the structure of the thought without the mediation of language. Human understanding results from the grasping of the semantic properties of a sentence by thought. Secondly, in deciding the truth value of a particular sentence, Frege's notion of sense and reference played a significant role. Thirdly, Frege held that expression always carries an objective sense, and that is why the only way for human beings to access thoughts has been either through language or symbolism. These thoughts of Frege paved the way for the linguistic turn in philosophy.

Apart from Frege, there were many prominent philosophers like Moore and Russell who indirectly contributed in the Linguistic turn movement. But it was from the works of Wittgenstein that the linguistic turn movement in philosophy gained the momentum. He highlighted the importance of the usage of language in the philosophical sphere. Wittgenstein's theory of language game altogether turned the direction of philosophical concerns and focused on the importance of the linguistic analysis in philosophy. In this paper, I would like to discuss in details how Wittgenstein's Philosophy impacted the linguistic turn in philosophy.

Contributions of Wittgenstein in the Linguistic Turn Movement in Philosophy

Tractatus is considered to be the most crucial contribution of Wittgenstein to the linguistic turn in philosophy. Wittgenstein profoundly believed that all the pertaining problems of philosophy could be solved by following the ways suggested in the 'Tractatus'. Wittgenstein through 'Tractatus' wanted to put the logistic turn at the centre of philosophical discussion. He says that his work, "extended from the foundations of logic to the nature of the world".ⁱⁱⁱ

Frege considered that artificial language is devoid of mistake. Unlike natural language which lacks logical perfection, artificial language is logically perfect. Wittgenstein, as opposed to this view of Frege, "conceived of language as a transcendental condition of representation and hence as constituting the depth grammar of any possible language."^{iv} Wittgenstein claims that if a language is considered as logically defective, then, it cannot be considered as language at all. Because a logically defective language cannot express any sense through its expressions. To quote Wittgenstein, "Logic takes care of itself; all we have to do is to look and see how it does"^v and "The logic of the world is prior to all truth and falsehood."^{vi} The natural language was acceptable to him. Wittgenstein was concerned about the core grammar of the natural language. As grammar forms the necessary foundation of any language, so, philosophy should adopt the method of analysis to disclose its core grammatical structures and rectify its errors.

For Wittgenstein, "All philosophy is a critique of language".^{vii} Moreover, this approach of him can be considered as the fundamental concept of the linguistic turn in philosophy. Wittgenstein did not follow the path of analysis which was chiefly adopted and applied by Moore and Russell. In a much different manner, he introduced in analytic philosophy the concept of the linguistic turn, without inclining solely on the method of analysis. Wittgenstein

considered that most of the problems in philosophy were the result of the incapability of the person concerned to grasp the exact sense or meaning and also the logic behind the language used. As a solution to this problem, he suggested applying the logico-linguistic approach of analysis which would be able to resolve the difficulties that arise due to the confusing nature of the surface grammar involving the natural language. Philosophy should aim to provide a logically bright and vivid conception of thought. Wittgenstein believed that it can be achieved through the clarification of sentences.

Wittgenstein in 'Tractatus' put forward the idea of limits of thought but based it on the edifice of limits of language. The limits which he puts to language was the line which he draws between sense and nonsense. Putting this boundary in the usage of language, he brought the topics into the centre of philosophical discussions such as language, its nature, the forms of language, the sense and their conditions, the connection between reality and language.

Another important topic which was discussed by Wittgenstein in the 'Tractatus' is about the metaphysical assertions which he terms as illegitimate. He claims that every effort to express the metaphysical notions in language would inevitably surpass the limits of language. Though the metaphysical truths cannot be expressed in any language, Wittgenstein says that they can be only shown with the help of well-formed linguistic propositions.

From all these views expressed by Wittgenstein, we can extract the yearnings of philosophy. The inability of philosophy to provide metaphysical truths or to confer anything about the world and its essence leads to the conclusion that there exists no philosophical proposition. Any effort to establish philosophical propositions would be nonsensical because it would inevitably make use of formal concepts, as material concepts. Again, formal propositions are accustomed to

untying variables, which would ultimately result in a sequence of ill-formed words. Philosophy would then be considered as a critical and an explanatory discipline rather than a cognitive one. Philosophy through analysis is not able to discover any new truth about the world. The only task which it can fulfil is the clarification of propositions which are already existing and also the disclosure of nonsense concerning meta-philosophy. This striking intention was crucial resulting in the linguistic turn.

The works of Wittgenstein are divided into two phases. All we have discussed until now is considered as the first phase of his work. After that, he took a brief break from philosophy and returned in 1929. Wittgenstein was now critical of his first philosophy and started to deconstruct it. He began to work on evolving his second phase in philosophy and presented it before the world in the form of his book 'Philosophical Investigations'. Here we will focus on the areas in which the middle and the later Wittgenstein's work influenced the linguistic turn.

In his later works, Wittgenstein opined that "the major source of philosophical problems lies in the form of natural languages and the immense difficulty of attaining a survey-able representation of the meaning ----- determining rules of grammar familiar though they are".^{viii} It is worth mentioning here that with the publication of Wittgenstein's "Philosophical Investigations" in 1953, the world started to look into philosophy through new lenses. Analytic philosophy was put to investigation but from a new viewpoint. The subject matter was still the same and concerned with language only, but the analytic philosophers were impelled to look into the nature of language from a distinct perspective.

In 'Tractatus', Wittgenstein provided a very lucid and elaborate account of language. However, in the later phase of his career, he was not satisfied with the claims which he made about the theory of language and considered it as inadequate. Such inadequacy as he believed

was based on the assumption that the sole task of language is the statement of facts. Further, he considered that it is through the statement of facts, the sentences were mostly capable of finding their meaning.

Wittgenstein was under the impression that logic is the framework of all language. Wittgenstein changed his view in his later works and denied his claim that language has only one function of 'picturing' reality and considered it to be multi-functional. It is always in a context that language is used; therefore, language must have as many functions as many contexts were there.

Wittgenstein says that at some point in time, each one of us falls under the prey of our intelligence being enchanted by language. To quote Wittgenstein, "The limits of my language mean the limits of my world."^{ix} The erroneous picture, which represents language is the outcome of grammatical illusions. By grammatical analysis, one might be able to know the logical framework of language. However, then also, it would be challenging to justify that one single rule and one single function is followed by all languages. What made him believe that language is only concerned about stating facts and that logic forms the framework of language was the predominance of thought but not observation. Under the influence of thought, he simply took into consideration that apart from a few superficial differences, all languages are alike. However, later he changed his views and understood that language could perform multiple functions. By acknowledging this fact, Wittgenstein imminently reformed the core of philosophy. To quote Wittgenstein, "Philosophy is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language."^x

Unlike his previous view in which he took the metaphysical statements to be nonsense, we found that he did not discard the metaphysical statements outright in his later works. The nature of metaphysical language is to create perplexity, says Wittgenstein. He associates

philosophy with the task of solving such confusions and provide a clear and vivid account of knowledge. However, philosophy can only provide clear descriptions about knowledge as it is incapable of adding any new information. Wittgenstein says that the confusions in metaphysical assertions are rooted on our misinterpretations of the form of language which "have the character of depth. They are deep disquietude; their roots are as deep in us as the forms of our language, and their significance is as great as the importance of our language".^{xi}

Wittgenstein's work had a massive impact on the linguistic turn in philosophy. The turn took many elements from both the phases of his career. In a way, he changed the pattern in which language was looked upon and utilised in the philosophical domain. With the works of Wittgenstein, the emphasis on analysing the importance of language began to develop, and it ultimately got shape through the linguistic turn. After the second world war, linguistic philosophy was dominated by Wittgenstein's works, and it led the philosophy of language to flourish in a significant way. To quote Wittgenstein, "Language is a part of our organism and no less complicated than it."^{xii} Followers of Wittgenstein led to the growth of his ideas, thoughts, and methods both in Cambridge and in the U.S.A. Ambrose, Vonwright, Black, Malcom, Anscombe were the prominent names.

Before the emergence of these bunch of analytic philosophers, it did not come to the attention of the philosophers that language can also become a distinct part of philosophy. Nobody imagined that philosophy could be a part of linguistics and believed that the analysis of the usage of language was to be considered as the primary technique for doing philosophy. From 1945 to mid-1970s, the scholars of Oxford and their students and supporters all through the Anglo-Saxon world brought the 'linguistic turn', especially its branch of natural language to its highest point of development. Even though no one utilised the term 'linguistic

turn' and barely anyone of them considered themselves as belonging to the group of 'ordinary language philosophers', there was a remarkable unanimity concerning their ideas of the nature of philosophy and their approach to philosophical examination.

During the 1920s 'the linguistic turn' was helpful to flag an imperative move in meta-philosophical reflection and philosophical methodology. It converged for some time with the logistic turn that had emerged in the mid-19th century, which resulted in the formation of the branches of logical positivism and logical pragmatism. It offered to ascend to the quest for the meaning theories concerning the natural language.

Since the time of Plato, the philosophers were deeply concerned to know 'What is the foundation of knowledge? What exists there independently of the knowing mind?' etc. The traditional philosophers were also engulfed in the discussion concerning the mind-body dualism, about appearance and reality and also the issue related to the basis on which the absolute truth is grounded. However, the evolution of Wittgenstein's philosophy was capable of putting forward the idea that the linguistic turn was successful in producing a drastic change in the practices, aims, and limits of philosophy. In contrast to the aims and methods of traditional philosophy, he reduced philosophy to the notion of merely finding a ground of meaningful language. The meaningfulness of sentences was determined based on how they related to the objective facts. So, philosophy would look like the meticulousness of scientific language.

The linguistic turn was a series of stages of development in the field of analytic philosophy in the 20th century. The claim made by many philosophers about the confusing or deceptive nature of natural language, as the cause of philosophical problems, is not a new topic of discussion in philosophy. Both Plato and Aristotle pointed to this issue many years before the analytic philosopher focused on it. However, what put all these observations into the philosophical discussion was the linguistic turn in philosophy. How far the linguistic turn was successful in fulfilling the concerns of philosophy was questionable.

Linguistic turn, of course, was successful in solving philosophical problems which arise due to the misuse of everyday language. The criteria they held for considering a statement to be meaningful was that the language must accurately correspond to the objects or facts. Thus, they excluded many philosophical issues which the traditional philosophy deals with. The yardstick which analytic philosophy held was not enough to discuss the concepts of God, Soul, Time, Space, Beauty, Good, Just etc. Because it is impossible to represent these facts through language, and if all such facts were eliminated from the philosophical discourse, then the branches of philosophy like ethics, metaphysics, religion, justice and aesthetics would become meaningless. It was quite evident that the analytic philosophers like Wittgenstein did not want to indulge in the concerns which traditional philosophy had. In a way, they marked their departure from the issues of traditional philosophy and adopted a fresh approach in philosophy.

References

i. Bergman, Gustav. *Logic and Reality*. Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1964, p-177.

ii Rorty, Richard. Ed. *The Linguistic Turn*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1967, p-39.

iii Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Notebook, 1914-1916*. 2nd ed. Ed. (s) G.H. Von Wright and G.E.M Anscombe with an English translation by

G.E.M Anscombe. University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1984, p-79.

^{iv} Hacker, Peter M.S. "The Linguistic Turn in Analytic Philosophy." *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Analytic Philosophy*. Ed. Michael Beaney. Oxford University Press: UK, 2013, p- 932.

^v Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Notebooks, 1914-1916*. 2nd ed. Ed. (s) G.H. Von Wright and G.E.M Anscombe with an English translation by G.E.M Anscombe. University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1984, p-26.

^{vi} *Ibid*, p-32.

^{vii} Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. Trans. David Francis Pears and Brian McGuinness. Routledge: London and New York, 2001, p-23.

^{viii} Hacker, Peter M.S. "Later Wittgenstein and the Linguistic Turn". in *The Oxford Handbook*

of History of Analytic Philosophy. Ed. Michael Beaney. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, p-938.

^{ix} Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. Trans. David Francis Pears and Brian McGuinness. Routledge: London and New York, 2001, p-97.

^x Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Philosophical Investigations*. Trans. G.E.M Anscombe. Ed(s). G.E.M Anscombe and R.Rees. Oxford: Blackwell, 1953, p-109.

^{xi} *Ibid*, p-111.

^{xii} Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Notebooks, 1914-1916*. 2nd ed. Ed. (s) G.H. Von Wright and G.E.M Anscombe with an English translation by G.E.M Anscombe. University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1984, p-5.