

THOUGHTS ABOUT LANGUAGE . . .*

WORDS, SENTENCES, CONCEPTS, PRESENCE, AND UNDERSTANDING

Contemplation 7 [*What is it that we translate?*] can show us that the meaning of a sentence being translated (and we do translate the meaning, not the words) can exist, at least for moments, without words and outside of any language – in the passage from one language to the other. This may be less surprising if we take into account the following Contemplation.

Contemplation 8: If we put something into a sentence, whether out loud or inwardly, how do we know what word to begin with, what word should come second, and so forth? How do we know which grammatical form to use? At times, you can find yourself deciding the language into which to translate it. It is not uncommon to be dissatisfied with the way we have expressed something. What is it we compare with the unsatisfactory expression?

Pursuing these questions, it becomes obvious that the meaning or the sense of the sentence must already “be there” before I can choose the language, the words – that is, the signs – for the meaning. It is also well known that understanding a text goes beyond the understanding of the words. It can happen that we understand all the words of a sentence, but not the sentence itself. Or, just the reverse; we can fail to understand some of the words in a sentence, while we do understand the sentence as a whole; and that whole sheds light on the words not understood. This happens often in dealing with foreign languages.

The meaning or sense is present wordlessly, super-linguistically, before its appearance in signs. To understand it, the “understander” regains the spiritual form of the meaning. Even when we translate a single word, or replace one word with another in a given language, it is clear that we can separate the meaning from the sign or from the sound, and that the meaning exists independently of these sense-perceptible appearances. The next stage in the purification of thinking would be to think uninterruptedly, without words. This, and more, does in fact take place during moments of presence of mind, as if thinking took place with infinite speed, not step by step in time. For most adults today, to think intentionally, wordlessly, and without interruption, requires prior exercise. Exercise, however, can indeed bring it about.

Contemplation/Meditation 9: Words come from the wordless.

Behind words there stand “conceptualities:” a word is a sign for an understanding. You can also use words without really, fully understanding them in their essence (which is by no means rare), but even then we understand the word to mean something. Thinking in words really means thinking in concepts. The conceptuality of the words given in specific languages (not those in technical and scientific use) is never unambiguous. They can be used very flexibly, and can express new concepts¹.

We can also designate new concepts using old words. This shows that concepts can exist even without words. The first concepts of a small child are given through the mother tongue; later, thinking emancipates itself from language and can arrive at new concepts. All this shows that human beings can think conceptually, yet without words. Generally, we think in finished, received concepts (not new ones), whether or not we are thinking wordlessly. Thus, the next step in the purification of thinking is to think without such fixed concepts.

* From Georg Kühlewind: *Gentle Will: Meditative Guidelines for Creative Consciousness*. Translated by Michael Lipson.

Most concepts in the adult's repertoire are of the received, linguistically determined kind. These concepts, too, must be attained in the course of a life; that is, they must be understood, just as much as those relatively rare concepts that one has found on one's own. Understanding (the actual forming of concepts) occurs through a kind of thinking that does not itself proceed by means of concepts.

In early childhood, it is this kind of concept forming in thinking that predominates and through which the child understands the concepts that are given to it. To do so, the understanding, which is itself a continuum, must come to a halt. Where the process comes to a (temporary) halt, a concept arises. In adulthood, it is almost the reverse. Thinking takes place by means of already familiar concepts, between which there exist one or several gaps; just there, a new understanding arises and a new concept is formed.

An example of concept formation: We show a three- to five-year-old child objects that are circular, triangular, rectangular – and also others that have no familiar, named shapes. We show the child these objects in various sizes, colors, and materials. Until children have formed the concepts of circle, triangle, square, and colors, they cannot sort objects according to these characteristics. Concept formation occurs through selective attention. To grasp the concept of circle, for example, you have to disregard all the other qualities of the object, such as size, material, weight, color, and so forth, and direct your attention only to “that” one quality, the form. In the same way, attention must narrow itself down to form the concept of color, since a color never appears in isolation. Concept formation is always a narrowing of the stream of attentiveness. The history of words in every language demonstrates that in earlier times words designated greater, more comprehensive concepts; and the earlier we look, the broader the concept².

Contemplation 10: Is the shrinking of our concepts irreversible? Can concepts also increase in their content?

We have spoken here about a change in the conceptual life, and not about a change in the meaning of words, which is much easier to document historically. Yet this change in word meanings is only partially identical with the shrinking and simultaneous sharpening of concepts³.

If we consider the phenomenon of understanding, we find two striking traits: it happens with lightning rapidity, and it cannot be repeated. We cannot think the same thing twice; either the first understanding is completely forgotten, or we understand something new or different at the second attempt.

The speed of understanding has to do with its immediacy and its unmediated quality. Understanding may be prepared for long in advance; it can even take place step by step. Still, the act itself (at each step) is, finally, instantaneous—as with every kind of finding. You can look for a long time, but you cannot find for a long time. Nor can understanding be analyzed, because it is itself the basis of all analysis, and of every kind of thinking. The real and purest thinking is understanding. Normally, it is brief (hence, too, the non-continuity of our thinking), and is accompanied by an unusual feeling of happiness or contentment: a process of leaps and bounds.

Contemplation/Meditation 11: In understanding, we touch our heavens.

¹ For example, the Latin word *focus* meant the hearth or the fire in the hearth. Kepler used the word to mean “focal point” in its modern sense.

² For example, the Greek word *thymos* meant: breath, life force, the soul’s power of spiritual activity, sensibility, heart, feeling, orientation, attitude, way of thinking, drive, desire, lust, tendency, decision, courage, passion, anger, reluctance. But it signified as one these meanings that appear listed separately in our dictionaries. Today, the original, huge meaning is split into many concepts.

³ Examples for the horizontal shift of meaning: in seventeenth century English, subjective meant something that belongs to the essence of the thing, to reality; in the nineteenth century, it became the expression for something that exists only in consciousness, without reality.