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Speaking for Others

Lauren Marino

Speaker location is a recent yet important discussion in the philosophy of language. It was suggested by Linda Alcoff in her article “The Problem of Speaking for Others” that a speaker’s location affects not only the meaning but also the truth of what is said.¹ With this in mind, there are two problems with speaking for other people that need to be resolved. The first is the relation of language to the self, and the access we have to the experience of others. The second is the political dimension that determines the effective and appropriate situations for speaking for others. I will argue that the self is constituted through language games and as such, when we speak for others we must be careful not to remove agency from the other, and force upon them our definition of who they are. I will argue that bell hooks’ argument for the oppressed to create new language games through organic intellectuals is the best struggle in which the oppressed can engage.

To determine the relationship between language and the self is to determine how language gains meaning. This is a strange endeavor to the non-philosopher. Lay people don’t need to question why others comprehend what they say. They are understood and understand others as well. To ask what they *mean* by their language is a superfluous investigation. Why? Because language hasn’t failed yet. Words seem so organic that it is often difficult to step back and try to understand how they work. A theory of meaning is not necessary for words to work. Yet philosophy does

¹ Alcoff, Linda. “The Problem of Speaking for Others.” *Cultural Critique* (Winter): 5-32. 1991

search for such a system. The danger is that philosophy will muddle a perfectly functional system.

The initial understanding of language is implied in the philosophy of Descartes. Descartes views the mind as a private place. The mind has thoughts that it conveys to the world through language. I have a thought inside my private mind which I then translate into language. Words stand in for these private ideas, ideas to which only the speaker has access. The outside world cannot know my mind except through the language I use to describe it. Language therefore gains meaning directly from the Cartesian mind.

Wittgenstein offers a different understanding of language and the self. He rejects the idea that language could gain meaning from a private objects in the mind of a speaker. He believes that language gains meaning through public use in a community of speakers. The classic example of this is Wittgenstein's king piece on a chessboard. To teach someone what a king is, we can point to a king and say, "This is a king," but she doesn't actually understand what the piece is until she understands the use of the piece in the game. The game metaphor is extended to language. As in a game, the use of language must be rule guided. In order to communicate with each other, we need to understand the rules of communication. The rules of chess make the game and define a use for the term "king." When we understand the rules, we are initiated and can play chess ourselves. Language functions in the same way. There are multiple language games, each with their own context and rules of use. The rules of use are specific to each game. Like games, language games are created and die; they evolve until we have no use for them. There are multiple language games, each specific to their form.

As a result, for Wittgenstein, there can be no private language that refers to objects accessible to the

speaker alone. In order to participate in a language game I have to be familiar with rules. I learn rules through socialization, because my community teaches me the rules. Just as I learned to play gin rummy by my family teaching the rules to me, my family also taught me how to use words in different language games. I was taught that the word believe in the sentence “I believe in God,” was used differently than in the sentence “I believe you.” I was initiated into the language games of religion and trust. But the rules I learned were contingent on my community. Correct usage was determined by the community’s understanding of the rules. Understanding this correct usage is being initiated into the language game.

As in regular games, I cannot play a language game when I do not know the rules. When I went to play gin rummy at a friend’s house, I lost a hundred points for holding the queen of spades at the end of a hand. An alien rule to me, I was upset that I lost, and from my perspective unfairly. We were playing two different games, because the rules were different. Language works the same way. The sentence “I believe in God,” means something different to a Catholic than to a Protestant. To understand the rules, we have to be initiated.

Private language cannot determine meaning in the manner Wittgenstein describes and others cannot be initiated into a private language. The objects, the thoughts of a Cartesian mind, are in an exclusive space that others cannot enter. As such we have an epistemological privilege where our own minds are concerned. Whatever seems to be the case is the case. Because we individually determine the use of a private language, there is no way we can be wrong. If everything is in accordance with a rule, it is doubtful we have a rule at all. In fact, not only do we not have a rule but the language would be meaningless even for

the person whose language it is. Without a rule following, no public consensus can be reached. Without a rule, a word can have no regular use and hence no meaning. Language is used to make connections between individuals and this requires that we follow rules. Wittgenstein writes that "If language is to be a means of communication there must be agreement not only in definitions but also (queer as this may sound) in judgments."² To base a language game on something the individual has exclusive access to, is a failing language game. It cannot use language because, "the individual words of this language are to refer to what can only be known to the person speaking; to his immediate private sensations. So another person cannot understand the language."³ Meaning is lost. Private language cannot follow public rules and cannot produce meaning.

The concept of a self within this framework shifts from Descartes self inside a private mind, to a self that is public, constituted within language games and the self becomes contingent. Each person is familiar with her own set of language games. While each person may have a unique combination of language games, none of the language games within the set is unique to that individual alone. There is no private self, within this understanding of language. Rather our experience is constituted through a public language. Therefore the self is not an isolated private mind, but rather the self is constituted by language games. Richard Rorty argues that a self constituted by language games is itself *contingent*, because if I change my languages games I change myself. This also means that selves cannot exist outside of language because

² Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Philosophical Investigations*. Englewood, NJ: Prentice Hall. 1958 (#242)

³ *Ibid.* (#243)

language comprises the self. In this interpretation, a private Cartesian self is nonsensical.

The experience of oppression is usually perceived to be a private language. Only an individual knows how she is oppressed and how it affects her. The problem is that because no one else has access to my mind, whatever seems to be the case is the case. As far as my thoughts are concerned, my use of language to describe my internal feelings is the only language that can be used to describe them, and the distinction between correct and incorrect rule following collapses. This is not to say we should doubt a person when she says she feels oppressed. Rather, Wittgenstein believes this form of skepticism is embedded in a Cartesian understanding of the mind. When I speak, I play a language game that no one has been initiated into. I define meaning. This is suspect foundation for a language game, because language is not a private activity. We use language to make connections between individuals. The problem is that oppression takes the form of oppression of individuals. For example, torture is not a common experience within a community. The experience does not gain voice within a community because it is not an experience that others will share. Hence, no language can be developed to speak about it.

However, there is hope within Wittgenstein's arguments if we apply a new political dimension with Rorty and Alcoff. These views of language implicate the philosophical relationship between language and the self. The Cartesian sense of self means that only I can accurately speak for myself, because my thoughts are in a private space no one else can enter. It is not created by speaking, but rather it simply exists as a stable entity. This extends to the problem of speaking for others, because only an oppressed group knows how they are oppressed and how it affects them. The problem is that

because no one else outside the group has access to their subjective state of oppression. The language they may use to express it functions as a private language to the rest of society. All specific language games function this way. However, the language game the oppressed use to express their oppression is one that necessarily needs to transcend its community to spur change. But, no one but the oppressed can play it, and therefore no outside connection can be made. It cannot produce public meaning.

However, if language gains meaning from use, then access to the private objects of the oppressed group's language game is not hopeless. There is no longer a private self but only the public self. We, including the oppressed, become our descriptions of ourselves. Groups can fall into dominant language games and descriptions, but in doing so we allow others to define who we are. We must determine what is true of and for ourselves. I conclude with Rorty that:

It was Nietzsche who...suggested that we drop the idea of "knowing the truth."...He hopes that once we realized that Plato's "true world" was just a fable, we would seek consolation...in being that peculiar sort of dying animal who, by describing himself in his own terms, had created himself. More exactly, he would have created the only part of himself that mattered by constructing his own mind. To create one's mind is to create one's own language...⁴

There is no privileged truth but rather truth is relative to our adopted language games. Truth becomes not objective Truth, but something that is agreed upon; it is contingent.

⁴ Rorty, Richard. Contingency, Irony and Solidarity. Boston: Cambridge University Press. 1989

This brings us to the political issue. The intuitive response is to do everything possible to allow the oppressed to speak for themselves. This is not always possible. But, if language constitutes the self, then who can speak for the oppressed and how can she do so? Alcoff's understanding of speaking for others is a good starting point.⁵ Her general argument is that the location of the speaker affects the meaning and truth of what is said. Moreover, the location of the speaker affects the speech itself. Language is a creative activity and what we create is contingent on where we are located within society. Alcoff's arguments can be added to Rorty's interpretation of the self. When we speak we are not only creating new truth relative to the language games we employ, but we create ourselves. Hooks uses this idea of selves to create a political program for oppressed groups. She extends the metaphor of language as a game. If language is a game then it has elements of competition and power, and even playfulness. These elements can be used to make a speech for others a speech to their advantage, but with a few caveats. The first is that we initially resist the urge to speak for others and listen to them. This ideally allows the speaker to share agency with the oppressed by including them in the creative process. Secondly, we must account for our location and context when we speak. President Bush's analysis of Iraq is very different from that of an Iraqi. Each should account for the way their location affects his speech. Third, the speaker must be responsible for her own speech. Speaking on behalf of someone else doesn't enable the speaker to speak without thought. Finally, the speaker must attempt to take account of the affects of the speech. Ultimately, we must recognize that speaking and

⁵ Ibid.

silence are always a political decision. We must use our voice consciously.

If the self is located within language games there is a commonality between those who share language games. This removes some of the barriers between selves and I do have access to the experience of those with whom I share language games. Sharing language games means sharing experience. I am able to speak for those who language games I play. There are some problems with this understanding. Alcoff thinks membership in a group is not precise or determinate. It is unclear which groups I could belong to and which of those groups I should single out to affiliate myself. More importantly, membership in a group doesn't necessarily mean an authority to speak for the whole group. However, if we accept that the self is constituted within language, then those who share language games with me have direct access to my experience in away that no one can ever have access to a Cartesian mind. We do not need to ask for absolute identity, language and experience between speakers but just a commonality. Furthermore, Bernstein argues that we cannot speak without speaking for other people.⁶ The speaker's location is necessarily a location in relation to other people. The relationship cannot be removed, and we cannot avoid it. Speaking at all makes speaking for others inevitable.

We return to the intuitive response to the struggle of oppressed groups: have the group speak for itself. Speaking becomes a type of agency in which I construct myself because contrary to a Cartesian self, selves do not exist prior to or separate from language. To lose my speech is to lose myself. The oppressed have the ability to communicate with each other and through their language game they are able to discuss

⁶ Bernstein, Susan.

their struggle with one another. Sharing languages games enables the oppressed to a specific, limited dimension of power. Their language game will always fail to communicate their struggle to those who have not been initiated into it. They have direct access to the experience of oppression and their agency, but they can only reach their own group. Those on the margin cannot reach those in the center. On the other hand, those in the center, the elites, share a language that can reach the majority of society. It is a language game they are familiar with and can use adeptly. However, they do not have the experience with or access to the language game of the oppressed. They have the power to use their language but nothing to say. The catch-22 is the choice between a group who embodies the agency and the dimensions of political struggle against oppression without a way to communicate it to the larger community, and a group with the language to reach society but is ignorant of the political struggle. There lies a need for a synergy between the experience of the oppressed on the margins and the language game of those in the center.

The synergy requires a speaker who comes from the oppressed but has knowledge of the language game of the center. Such a person could incorporate the experience of the oppressed into a new language game that could be accessed by those in power. The concern is what is lost and sacrificed in translation. If the language games are so disparate that initiation in one, offers no insight into the rules of the other, than there is doubt that translation can be done at all. If translation cannot be done, the best to be hoped for is cooption forcing the margins into the mainstream.

What then is the solution? I agree with bell hooks that the oppressed must celebrate their position on the margins. The oppressed should not try to move into the center but appreciate their counterculture. The

oppressed must produce intellectuals so that the dominated can speak to the dominating. The idea goes back to Antonio Gramsci's concept of the organic intellectual.⁷ The elites are indoctrinated in the ruling ideology and have an investment in the current order. No matter how progressive their politics may be, the elite will always be the elite. Their investment in the current social order precludes offers of true systemic change. Gramsci writes of the need for the working class to develop its own intellectuals who are organically tied to their class. This argument is similar to hooks' argument. The margin must produce organic intellectuals. It might be thought that these organic intellectuals should translate between language games. But as hooks points out, using "the oppressor's language" is not adequate because it cannot articulate the experience of the oppressed. Yet, it is the only language game the oppressing can play. Organic intellectuals affect the center from the margins if they are able to incorporate multiple voices in the texts they create.

The goal of the organic intellectual according to hooks is to "identify the spaces where we begin a process of revision" to create a counter-ideology.⁸ Hooks relates this agency to language. "Language is also a place of struggle."⁹ The counterculture can produce a counter-language, which is able to produce a new language to mediate between the margins and the center. Necessarily the new game must include portions of both old language games or no one will understand it. It must use old understandings to create

⁷ Gramsci, Antonio. The Prison Notebooks. The Intellectuals. New York: International Publishers. 1971 p.3-23

⁸ hooks, bell. "Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness." Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics. Between the Lines. 1990.

⁹ Ibid.

new meanings. These counter-languages can function as the intermediary language games that the oppressed and the elites can be initiated simultaneously. A new language game must be created.

A good example of this is Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech. He used concepts of freedom and democracy familiar to the center to explain the experience of the oppressed within in the mainstream language game, as well as created new metaphors and linguistic form, i.e. the preacher's sermon, to bring the voice of the oppressed and the oppressors into a realm of communication. (bell hooks uses the preachers sermon form in her refrain 'language is also a place of struggle').¹⁰ One famous metaphor is freedom as a bounced check to African Americans. This created a new understanding of the situation. It worked between the language of oppression understood by African Americans and the center's understanding of freedom and the promises of democracy. King was able to include multiple voices, building a bridge between the margin and the center.

The conclusion of hooks is that the margin can be more than a place of oppression and alienation. It can be "a site of radical possibility, a space of resistance," that is not open to those in the center. It is the space to produce counter-hegemonic culture that the organic intellectual is looking for. The oppressed can retell their story, and if we accept Rorty's argument that the self is contingent, the oppressed create themselves in the process. To speak for the oppressed is to silence them. Moreover, in their absence of voice, we define them. We can define them in many ways, but they will always be a "they" and not an "us." They will be the other. We must have faith in the margins to produce new language games to communicate with us.

¹⁰ Ibid.