

# Language, Thought and Reality



# **What I will not be doing today**

- **Dealing with any of the practical implications of language and the decision making process i.e. how the use of particular words effect ones working environment in particular ways.**

# What I will be doing.

- **I shall look at how philosophy of language may provide a theoretical basis for exploring how altering ones language alters ones working environment.**
- **The main focus of this conference is on 'improving the decision-taking process within an organisational learning context'.**
- **At the most fundamental level there are three main elements to taking a decision: the kind of thinking involved, the language used and the relationship of both to what we call 'reality'.**
- **In other words, the three most fundamental elements at play here are language, thought and reality. What they are and how they inter-relate to one another is the principal concern of analytic philosophy.**

# Language, thought and reality:

- **Perhaps the most interesting question is simply this: what comes first? There are problems whichever one we prioritise.**
- **If we say that reality generates language, this won't work. Language is not just a set of proper names for objects. If it were, then how, for example, could we get to grips with such abstract ideas as 'therefore', 'however', 'if...then' and so on, which are the very stuff of decision making.**
- **The 20<sup>th</sup> Century has seen a decisive rejection of the simplistic view that language simply labels things that are already there in the world.**

- **If we say that thought came first, this too won't work. How would we be able think  $x$  without already having some concept of  $x$  in place. As the philosopher Wittgenstein famously said: 'whereof we cannot speak, thereof we must be silent'.**
- **So where does this leave language - that invisible presence that permeates both the world and our experience of it?**

- **Without language, we could not even frame the idea of a 'thought', let alone 'reality'.**
- **This does not mean, of course, that language is all that exists. Clearly a punch on the nose is not just a linguistic entity!**
- **What it does mean, however, is that language is what makes thought and its relationship to an objective reality, possible.**
- **The question that now occurs is: what type of thing is 'language' itself?**

# Language is not subjective and internal.

- For the Oxford philosopher Michael Dummett, it was the 19<sup>th</sup> century German logician, Gottlob Frege who first made 'the linguistic turn'. It was Frege's great discovery that: 'the propositions of thought were translatable, without residue as it were, via the propositions of language' (TOE 449)
- Without language, we would have no method for the analysis of the internal (i.e. mental states). Indeed, such internal states could not even exist prior to language.
- There is no distinction between the concepts we use to think (communicate an idea to ones-self) and to communicate the *same* idea to other people (this includes all our talk about emotions).

# **Language is not objective, nor external.**

- **There is often a view that language simply labels or pictures an objective reality (this is called the 'ostensive theory of meaning' – the view that the meaning of a word is the object for which it stands).**
- **The naivety of this view can easily be seen if we look at the following famous thought experiment by the American philosopher of art, Arthur Danto.**

# Danto's Red Squares (TC ch1)

1. *Red Table Cloth* – a vibrant early work from Matisse.
2. *Kierkegaard's Mood* – A deeply penetrating psychological study of the moody Dane by the expressionist Sven Olag.
3. *Nirvana* – a serene Buddhist meditation on eternity by the 14<sup>th</sup> century monk Liu Chi.
4. An ordinary red square



# Implications

- **What philosophers traditionally refer to as metaphysical (objective and human-independent) reality is not conceivable independent of us.**
- **Nor does this mean we can interpret or create reality in any old way we want – you can interpret the squares in many ways, but not just in any way you want. You could not, for example, see such a red square as a green traffic light.**
- **Language, far from being a subjective or an objective phenomenon, exists prior to both these ideas and is that which brings both of them into being.**

# Implications of this view

- **Much of management thinking these days is driven by the idea of: ‘thinking outside the box’. But what does this mean? Just how creative can we be within the framework of the language we have to work with? After all, if there were no box there to begin with, there would be nothing there to get outside of.**
- **You cannot do what you want with language but nor is language fixed unalterably. Human progress cannot be separated from the enriching of language over time. Equally, all our human ills go with the impoverishment of language.**
- **As Wittgenstein argues: ‘The limits of my language are the limits of my world’ (*TLP* 5.6)**