Alfred North Whitehead & Philosophy of Language

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Abstract

Whitehead’s views on language are closely tied up with his views on perception. Unlike the modern philosophical analysts with their appeal to everyday experience, he believes that the world of perceived objects only gives us an abstract picture of the physical world. The subject-predicate form of expression, its linguistic counterpart, is considered by Whitehead to be a high abstraction coined to deal with such situations. Language, he points out, was designed to express such clear-cut concepts as “green leaf” and “round ball” (Process and Reality or PR, p.234). Nevertheless, as he readily admits, the abstract system of concepts embedded in ordinary language has proved itself to be of great pragmatic value in enabling us to come to grips with our common-sense world.

For Whitehead, then, as with Bergson, ordinary language merely gives us a useful abstract for the purpose of life, and cannot therefore by its very nature grasp the dynamic character of events. He traces the tendency to rely on ordinary language as a criterion for fact back to the Greeks; pointing out that excessive trust in common forms of language vitiated the philosophy and physics of the Greeks as well as that of the Middle Ages. Author discussed the language and philosophy and nature of philosophy. And also the three main stages (Romance-Precision-Generalization) Whitehead uses for education will be applied to his notion of language.

Introduction:
As language has such a marked interest for philosophers nowadays, it is worth noting the manner in which Whitehead’s views on this topic diverge from the current approach with its emphasis on ordinary usage. Whitehead believes that in the sort of philosophy in which he is interested (which has for its task the bringing together of the world of psychological experience and physical nature into one system) the meaning of common words and phrases has to be stretched and given a wider generality.

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of concepts embedded in ordinary language has proved itself to be of great pragmatic value in enabling us to come to grips with our common-sense world.

From his earliest writings onwards Whitehead crusaded against what he termed “the fallacy of simple location”- the conception of the world as made up of independent objects (or substances) characterized by qualities. He regards nature as a system of events rather than a mere collection of static objects, and as having the character of passage about it. Whitehead also contends that the structure of this system may be more accurately expressed by multi-termed relationships than by subject-predicate ones. Not only do we become aware that nature has this dynamic character through the information presented by physical science, but also, he would claim, by our awareness of the causal world around us via our perceptions in the mode of causal efficacy.

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**Language and Philosophy:**

Language plays a crucial role in mediating, interpreting, and constituting human experience. It is the tool of the philosopher, the medium that both crafts and conveys the philosophical world. Thus, we encounter some of the most striking parallels between Whitehead and Derrida as they examine its role and effect upon the work of the philosopher. This eventually leads them both to recognize that language itself carries limitations and interpretative presuppositions that influence philosophy (PR pp.11-13). Whitehead’s writings demonstrate a strong concern with language both as the tool of philosophy and as the means for conveying human experience (PR, p.11). It is the latter that emerges as a central interest of Whitehead’s empirical philosophy, leading him to explore the role of language in both the construction and expression of experience.

Whitehead notes that "an old established metaphysical system gains a false air of adequate precision from the fact that its words and phrases have passed into current literature" (PR, p.13), leading to a "false" presumption of descriptive precision that assumes the obvious simplicity of the philosophical statements offered.

Whitehead is reacting primarily to the popularity of logical positivism during the early part of the century, he also takes to task the presupposition that the method of philosophy should lead to "premises
which are severally clear, distinct, and certain; and to erect upon those premises a deductive system of thought" (PR, p.8).

Instead of a verifiable system of presuppositions that conforms to an external reality, Whitehead favors an ongoing, progressive, interpretive "scheme" that measures success by its pragmatic ability to interpret experience within a given context (PR, pp.8-9). Whitehead is indebted to Peirce and James for his conclusion. However, unlike Peirce who eventually came to believe that an absolute and final interpretation was attainable, Whitehead’s interpretive system maintains an ultimate non-finality to it. Whitehead’s interpretive system is dynamic in its rationalism and does not limit valid interpretation to philosophers and scientists. On the contrary, Whitehead acknowledges the role of poetic artistic insight and imagination in the advancement of productive thought. In addition, he sees it as necessary for transcending attempts to create a direct representation of what appears to be obvious (PR, p.9).

Whitehead explodes the boundaries of philosophy and denies it a privileged position over artistic and imaginative enterprises. According to him, the parameters imposed by philosophy’s formal and structural presuppositions constrain attempts to "stray" beyond their established limits (Adventures of Ideas or AI, pp.228-229). These limits prevent innovations in philosophy and criticize new expressions as unnecessary neologisms. Naturally, these presuppositions do not prevent Whitehead from manipulating language to create new metaphors that could open new philosophical perspectives. Whitehead notes how even simple subject-predicate propositional forms, such as "The whale is big," can "conceal complex, diverse meanings" (PR, p.13). The dependence of a statement’s meaning upon its context prevents a singular monolithic expression of truth in Whitehead’s philosophy. Truth is always and necessarily contextual. Even when Whitehead moves beyond language, he still locates meaning and "truth" within, the complex play of interrelatedness. Ultimately, the inter-connectedness of reality and form takes primacy over the Cartesian preference for substance and quality in Whitehead’s philosophy (PR, p.xiii).

According to Whitehead, language cannot be "the essence of thought." If language were the basis for thought any attempt at translation would be impossible. Instead, Whitehead states that thought originates from the way a particular fragmentary sense experience impresses us in relation to other experiences. In the constitution of our bodies and the way they relate to the environment there are certain common elements with which we can identify. However, Whitehead also contends that the retention, recollection, communication, and integration of thought into higher complex ideas is impossible without language. Like Derrida’s play of difference, Whitehead concludes that it is in the relating and contrasting of experiences that thought emerges. As a result, he recognizes that without language, thought would be impossible (Modes of Thought or MT, pp.32-36).

Whitehead maintains that language functions as a mediator of present experience to both the past and other experiences (MT, p.33). According to Whitehead, both language and thought emerge together, but logically thought must have primacy over language. The importance of language to Whitehead’s
philosophy is most clear in the final sentence of lecture two, entitled "Expression": "The account of the sixth day should be written, He gave them speech, and they became souls" (MT, p.41). Nevertheless, Whitehead does not go as far as deconstruction in placing language at the forefront of all thought and experience.

On the other hand, as this citation reveals, Whitehead still maintains a connection between speech and presence and a representational understanding of language -- both concepts that Derrida repudiates. For Whitehead, writing is an artificial and modern development while speech is the embodiment of human nature (MT, p.37). Even further, Whitehead gives primacy to speech because of its representative character. He writes that in the breath of speech, there is the intimation of the core of organic existence, hence, life (MT, p.32). However, in fairness to Whitehead, he also makes a distinction between writing and speech, indicating that the former is a beneficial innovation that in discussions about language often gets intermingled with the latter. As a result of this recognition, Whitehead calls for a more precise distinction between writing and speaking, but not for a dichotomy that places one over the other. According to Whitehead, symbols predate the onset of writing and play a crucial role in the formation of linguistic practices (MT, p.37). Even if symbols do not precede speech, Whitehead’s use of "symbols" in this manner indicates an awareness of a strong relationship between thought, writing, and speech that he felt other scholars had neglected.

Whitehead also makes a remark regarding linguistics that merits further attention. He notes in passing how the accessibility of writing and reading to the masses is a fairly recent innovation (MT, p.37). According to him, through countless eras, at least in Europe, writing had been primarily the domain of the aristocrat, the politician, and the academician. In this respect, we can add that writing can be both a source of power and a source of oppression. Scholars often ignore the socio-economic power of writing to disseminate, control, and shape ideas. The control of the written word by aristocrats, clergy; academics, and politicians skews our understanding of culture and history in the West -- a history portrayed by those in control of society. Our interpretive venture must continually recognize the inherently oppressive nature of written documents that were and often still are controlled by the educated and the powerful. Although Whitehead does not elaborate upon the theme, he opens the door to some of the socio-economic implications of writing which now play an important part in the hermeneutical concerns of deconstructionism and postmodernity.

Whitehead understands language as connecting different aspects of sense experience into a unity that reflects the connectedness of the world or a common activity. This suggests an external preferentiality to language. However, this suggestion should not be taken too strongly logo centrically. Language, according to Whitehead, still abstracts and reproduces elements of experience that can be "most easily reproduced" in human consciousness. Thus, the abstract quality of language in itself is already an interpretive enterprise. Humans continually use abstracted elements of experience, associate them with a contextual framework of meaning, and even suggest a particular world which they represent (MT, pp.33-34).
On the other hand, his assertion regarding the dynamic interconnected-ness of language as reflecting the interconnected activity of the world creates a new possibility for preserving a connection between language and the world without falling into logocentrism. In an article in the *American Journal of Theology and Philosophy*, Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki explores this connection and posits a viable thesis that connects language and reality as a response to American deconstructionists such as Carl Raschke and Charles Winquist.

Language can never capture the fullness of reality, nor can any linguistic function ever predict the total possibility of its meaning. On the contrary, language presents a distorted picture of reality in which single words, "bounded by full stops, suggest the possibility of complete abstraction from any environment". This tendency gives the false appearance that philosophy can conceive of the interconnection of things, discretely understandable, without making reference to other things (MT, p.66). Whitehead’s rejection of this presupposition denies the philosopher the possibility of absolute unbiased descriptions of reality devoid of any interpretive system. In recognizing the limitations created by our finite perspectives, he acknowledges the need to move beyond a "narrow" epistemology based merely upon sense-data and introspection, and appeals to literature, ordinary language and practice as other sources (AI, p.228).

Whitehead understands language as originating from the characteristic functions of "emotional expression, signaling, and the interfusion of the two. In both instances, these characteristics are reactions to particular situations within a particular environmental context. The origins of language are predominantly functional rather than representational. In addition, Whitehead notes that the characteristic functions of language fade into the background as language advances, leaving a suggestion (trace?) of something which has lost its dominating position (MT, pp.37-38). Since the specific context in which language originates is no longer present, language can never be identically reproduced in its original function. Only certain elements, abstracted from their original context by the linguistic function, can be repeated, thus leaving the appearance that something has disappeared from the language. Eventually linguistic functions move toward higher levels of abstraction that both facilitate civilization and obscure the abstract, and hence, the interpretive nature of language. Thus, Whitehead recognizes the dilemma of philosophers who must use language to express their philosophies, but cannot escape the biases and interests inherent in their language.

Like Derrida, Whitehead rejects the possibility that language might express "propositional truths" outside of its linguistic context. Thus, Whitehead writes in *Process and Reality*:

> . . . every proposition refers to a universe exhibiting some general systematic metaphysical character. Apart from this background, the separate entities which go to form the proposition, and die proposition as a whole, are without determinate character. Nothing has been defined, because every definite entity requires a systematic universe to supply its requisite status. Thus every proposition proposing a fact
must, in its complete analysis, propose the general character of the universe required for that fact. There are no self-sustained facts, floating in nonentity (PR, p.11).

Although the last sentence points toward Whitehead’s "ontological principle" that grounds every aspect of reality on actual entities, it also provides insights into the problem of interpreting human experience. There is no detached, discrete "fact" in itself. It is always part of the interrelated complex of entities. In the above statement, Whitehead does not simply mean that propositions require metaphysics. He means that all propositions already imply metaphysics. Therefore, philosophical assertions are not simple, objective, detached descriptions of objects or of the external world. They are already enmeshed in a presupposed context that defines them and their usage. Since all propositions presuppose a system and context, it is impossible to reduce linguistic assertions to a simple definite signification of reality. Thus, Whitehead writes that "language is thoroughly indeterminate by reason of the fact that every occurrence presupposes some systematic type of environment" (PR, p.12).

Whitehead and Derrida present us with similar concerns about language and its relationship to philosophy. These concerns force philosophers to explore both the manner in which philosophy uses language and the impossibility of escaping the abstractive, interested, and contextual nature of language and its interpretive play. While Derrida concerns himself primarily with writing and its liberation from logo centrism and onto-theological claims, Whitehead concerns himself with language and its role in the interpretation of experience. Nevertheless, they both reject the representational role of language, as simply conforming to some external reality; and they both reject static and self-evident notions of language. Any utterance or symbol is already an interpretive activity.

Nature of Language:

The contextual and interrelated nature of language leads Derrida and Whitehead to recognize both the interrelated nature of the signifier to its context and the dependence of meaning upon their interplay. According to Whitehead, the interrelated nature of meaning allows for the differences in meaning that can occur between the speaker and the hearer, and more importantly, between the writer and the reader. Our language, both spoken and written, allows us to abstract particularities from their immediate context. As a result, we are able to place them in different contexts that give those particulars new meanings. Due to a different context, both in speech and in writing we are able to arrive at different conclusions even though we share a certain identity of meaning for a given word. For instance, Whitehead notes wisely that the expression "a warm day" is "very different for speakers in Texas, or on the coast of England bordering the North Sea" (MT, p.39). The words "a warm day" might share certain common meaning, but convey a different feeling for speakers in these different climates. In the case of a book, this goes even further since the book can be far removed from the context in which it is written, conveying different feelings and moods to different readers. As a result, language bears an elliptical character in which there is a hermeneutical play between the interpreter and the originator of a proposition (Concept of Nature or CN, pp.1-25).
The contextual nature of language leads Whitehead to conclude that there are "no brute, self-contained matters of fact, capable of being understood apart from interpretation as an element of a system" (PR. p.14). Like Derrida, Whitehead recognizes that meaning results from a complex interplay of differences and contrasts that distinguish one thing from another, even if that play is not limited to language.

Stages and Language:

In order to understand Whitehead's novel phraseology, one must understand his views of ordinary language, his desire for more precision in philosophical dialectic, and his belief in the need for a revised and enhanced philosophic vocabulary. In this essay, the approach that I will suggest to comprehend and appreciate Whitehead's writings will be the method Whitehead delineated in his book The Aims of Education. The function of Whitehead's formula in AE is to offer an outline of the progressive developmental levels in a child's education in accordance with the attendant unfolding psychological maturity. The three major stages Whitehead uses for education will be applied to his notions of language. The terms Whitehead uses for the stages in education are romance, precision, and generalization. This essay will attempt to demonstrate that the characteristics in those learning phases correlate to the varied and unique modes of expression in much of Whitehead's philosophical corpus. For coherence and better apprehension of the undertaking of this essay, the categories of romance, precision, and generalization will also be utilized in the explication Whitehead's ideas concerning language.

The Romance of Language:

In his first reference to language in RM, Whitehead claims that society and language "grew together" (Ibid. p.34). It has only been recently, about four thousand years or so, that language had evolved enough to contain an adequate amount of general terms-the type of terms required for higher, or speculative, thought. The medium for preserving and advancing general terms is, according to Whitehead, permanent literature. This literature was able to facilitate the definitions of those general notions; thereby providing "habits" that made generality of thought a viable possibility (Ibid. p.35. The next observation Whitehead mentions regarding language is radically different from anything else he writes on this topic. It is included in this essay to demonstrate Whitehead's thoroughness of thought on any given topic. In a brief passage, Whitehead examines the ideas of Christ and how they are expressed in his words. Whitehead notes that Christ's sayings are the "lowest abstractions that language is capable of" without them being just the "... fact itself" (Ibid. p.57). Christ's words appear more as actions than conceptual assertions, and a "rationalism derived from direct intuition and divorced from dialectic" (Ibid. p.57). And, therein lays the power of Christ's words, for according to Whitehead, in their "absence of force" they are imbued with a "decisiveness of a supreme ideal" (Religion in the Making, p.57). And
thus, the chronological dividing line in Western history, Jesus of Nazareth and his ideas and words, are given, by Whitehead, a cursory yet unique interpretation. Here the importance of literature, in the history of the evolutionary rise of human thought, evolves from expression. Expression is a "fundamental sacrament" or the "outward visible sign of inward grace." That 'grace,' for Whitehead, is the intuitive response between the speaker and the listener, wherein the listener "extends his apprehension of the universe by penetrating into the inner nature of the originator of the expression." Yet, expression is more than an intuitive interpretive response, it is creative. Expression is creative in that it is evocative; it evokes an intuition, which would not otherwise emerge in either the giver or the receiver. Whitehead is careful to note that this creative interpretation is an element already within the recipient of the proffered expression; it can't evoke what is not already there. The example Whitehead offers is a tuning fork and a piano, where the tuning fork elicits a response from the piano, but the piano already has in it the string that responds to that note (Ibid. pp.131-133). The originality of expression is then this literary genius. Very few people over the course of human history have demonstrated this particular 'grace.' The expression these people give to the world is something new "once and for all."

In AE, Whitehead outlines the progressive stages in a child's acquisition and mastery of spoken and written language, and the importance of a comprehensive literary curriculum for a "complete" education. This essay will focus on Whitehead's comments on literature as a factor in a well-rounded education and its implication in other areas of knowledge.

Great art and literature, in Whitehead's opinion, "gives vision to our lives," and also has the importance of being the repository of the wisdom of the world. It is in the subtle relation between language and feeling, and the ongoing development of the senses that imbues a person with aesthetic appreciation. But that is not the only function of the classics; they are also seen by Whitehead as a preparatory device for the mind for the advanced study in logic, history, and philosophy (Aims of Education, pp.58, 63).

Whitehead considers every language as an "incarnation of the mentality of the race which fashioned it." As a result of the particular genesis of each language, there can be no true synonyms between the differing languages, thus rendering all translation as approximation (Ibid. p.66). Every word and phrase embodies the soil, the air, the ideas, and the villages of the people that developed their language. Not only is mentality and language inextricably intertwined, they also appear to be, according to Whitehead's claims of linguistic evolution and development, self-identical. Whitehead would probably argue against so strong a claim, but his statements regarding the lack of true synonyms between languages and verbal expression as a manifestation of a race's mentality argues in favor of such a claim. If that is indeed the case, then Whitehead's use of language and his revision and development of vocabulary in his metaphysics should prove to be a rare opportunity to "see" into the mind of a great philosopher.
The Precision of Language:
In the very beginning of Symbolism, Whitehead states that…
There are deeper types of symbolism, in a sense artificial, and yet such that we could not get on without them. Language … is such a symbolism" (Symbolism, Its Meaning and Effect, p.2).

Whitehead goes on to note, however, that symbolism is very fallible, and yet is the primary factors in the way us, as human beings, function. Because of its integral role in human affairs, it is essential to examine and expunge, when necessary, symbols that are found to be ineffective or detrimental (Ibid. p.88)
The fundamental symbol in language is the word, either written or spoken. In both forms, a word is a sort of two-way referent. Whitehead uses the example of the word "tree." The word 'tree' can symbolize the external objects we recognize as trees as the meaning of the word "tree," and the external objects, trees, can become the symbol, and the word "tree," the meaning. For most humans the word "tree" is the symbol and the object, tree, the meaning. Whitehead notes, however, that for the poet and other literary artists, the tree becomes a symbol for the word "tree." They are people for whom words refer "symbolically to the visual sights and sounds and emotions" the writer wants to elicit in his or her readers. This leads to what Whitehead refers to as the double symbolic reference of language, where language goes from objects to words on the part of the speaker or writer, and from words back to the objects for the listener or reader.
The relationship of words to things is for Whitehead a subset of a more general fact: our perception of the world. This begins language's tie to Whitehead's fundamental metaphysical concepts Presentational Immediacy and Causal Efficacy. And since language is so intimately linked to perception, according to Whitehead, perception must be analyzed in order to apprehend the function of language more clearly (Ibid. pp.10, 11, 57).

Presentational immediacy and causal efficacy are the two modes of perception Whitehead ascribes to our experiences; they objectify the actual things of our environment. Of the two modes of perception, causal efficacy is the mode present in all entities, including inanimate objects. As a "pure" mode of perception, it does not involve consciousness or life, and it transmits feelings that are vague, inarticulate, and massive. The feelings of this mode pervade the entire physical world, and is experienced in humans viscerally-a headache, or the "brute givenness of memory" (A Key to Whitehead’s Process and Reality, p.236). Presentational immediacy is a mode of perception that is only experienced by "high grade organisms," like humans, for instance. It is the mode that is usually referred to as sense perception due to the fact that its appearance is affected by qualities such as colors, sounds, smells, tastes, etc. (This is the mode that Whitehead claims most philosophers pay attention to, while they completely ignore the mode of causal efficacy [this notation is not found in Symbolism but in Process and Reality, 185].)
Humans experience the mode of presentational immediacy by feelings that are vivid, precise, and barren. It is the mode that is an "elaboration upon certain aspects of what is present already in causal efficacy." The mode of presentational immediacy seizes upon the vague emotional feelings in the causal efficacy mode and transforms them into intense qualities that are then "projected into the contemporary
region of that percipient occasion." We not only feel our pain, but we can also locate it, grade it, and precisely describe it. In the mode of presentational immediacy, we begin to objectify things in our experience ((Symbolism, Its Meaning and Effect, p.21).

Whitehead claims that causal efficacy arises from without, the vague feelings of this mode of perception disclose the character of the world from which we emerge and around which we form ourselves. Since causal efficacy arises from the past, it is from the experiences in this mode of perception that "enriches with emotion and purpose its presentation of the contemporary world: and it bequeaths its character to the future." Presentational immediacy, by contrast, arises from within us and arouses "intensifications and inhibitions and diversions" which humans accept or reject. It is only when both modes are present there is, what is commonly called, ordinary awareness. It is in this "mixed" mode that symbols become apparent to the percipient. Symbols not only become apparent, but we also understand their meanings. Whitehead believes that a symbol does not create its meaning; it "already exists for us in its own right."

The two modes of perception, the foundation for our recognition of symbols and their meanings, re-connect with language by way of the impact that the "enveloping suggestiveness and emotional efficacy" of words and phrases have on us. Whitehead also suggests that in language there is a particular vagueness of symbolism. A word carries historical content: its various meanings throughout the course of its existence (the OED always serial dates meanings of words), and its usage and status in literature over the course of its existence. In this manner, words also gather emotional content; its past history is carried over symbolically for its current use. Examples of the rehabilitation words are numerous. It is often a marginalized group in a society that re-appropriates a word that the dominant group has used against them. For example homosexual males now use the word "queer" to describe themselves in slogans to promote their rights. The intent of such a process is to neutralize the negative emotional content of that word. Whitehead ends his treatise on symbolism by stating that no highly evolved and complex society of "high grade organisms" could exist if their systems of symbols were not effective; symbolic systems that range from works of art to codified law. He also exhorts that community to not just carefully preserve their symbolic systems, but to constantly revise and re-examine their code (Ibid. p.57-58, 87, 10).

Process and Reality, published in 1929, is Whitehead's primary metaphysical work. It is considered by Whitehead scholars to be the cornerstone of his entire corpus. It is also the primary target of the criticism leveled at Whitehead, specifically the style of his prose. For those reasons, it will be used as a source for a deeper understanding of Whitehead's approach to language. In the preface of PR, Whitehead lists nine "myths and fallacious procedures" that he believes most characterize nineteenth century philosophy. His intention is to "repudiate" these habits. The second "myth" Whitehead cites is the "...trust in language as an adequate expression of propositions." This statement not only points out the problem of language as a medium for doing philosophy, but also sets the foundation for Whitehead's approach towards language.

Whitehead acknowledges that language is the necessary tool for philosophy. Although this tool works admirably in literature, it "breaks down" exactly at the point where metaphysics begins. Language, as
tool, is almost incapable of expressing the required generalities of terms that metaphysics demands, and therefore, Whitehead believes, philosophers cannot and will never be able to formulate complete metaphysical principles. Scattered throughout PR Whitehead highlights and illustrates language's role as a hindrance in the philosophic process, specifically the metaphysics. He also delineates how most metaphysicians fall into language's traps. In Part Two, chapter seven of PR, Whitehead states that the Greek philosophers only used common language in its generalizations and became victims of some of language's many errors. An example Whitehead uses to illustrate the flaws inherent in language is the statement, "the stone is grey." From this simple proposition, the Greeks evolved a generalization that the actual world is a collection of primary substances that contains universal qualities such as, greyness, largeness, etc. Whitehead claims that this notion of substantiality and its participation in universal qualities has always influenced speculative thought and unfortunately continues to. There are two misconceptions inherent in the proposition "the stone is grey": first, there is the "concept of vacuous actuality without subjective experience," and second, the concept of a universal quality inherent within a substance. Whitehead agrees that both misconceptions have "pragmatic" use and that this is what language was primarily formed to do-give expression to such concepts. It is for this reason that Whitehead states that, "language ... penetrates but a short distance into the principles of metaphysics." The chief reason for language's inability to pierce the depths of metaphysical thought adequately is its almost exclusive reference to the perceptual mode of presentational immediacy in its attempt to interpret symbolic reference. Whitehead uses the proposition "We see the stone" as an example of language's difficulty. "Stone" is really an interpretation of stone-image. If we say "We see the stone-image with our eyes," it is then an interpretation that integrates the causal efficacy of the "antecedent eye in the vision," the presentational immediacy of the stone-image itself, and the presentational immediacy of "the eye-strain." Here, Whitehead, in an effort to clarify ordinary language, is using "words and phrases ... foreign to their ordinary usage."

His primary purpose is to lessen the inherent ambiguities of language. Whitehead believes that propositional ambiguities are so deep-rooted in language; it is completely futile to make a claim for a single meaning of any verbal statement. "Caesar crossed the Rubicon" is used by Whitehead to illustrate this point. The words "Caesar" and "Rubicon" are actual entities in the actual world, and the word "has" can be viewed from numerous perspectives of the judging subject, such as, a retired soldier who fought with Caesar and is now reflecting on a past event, or a modern traveler reflecting on that past event while standing near the Rubicon, a small stream in Italy. (The phrase "cross the Rubicon" has its own independent meaning in modern usage-to take the "final step," a limit, or a boundary line.) Whitehead further states that a proposition has no "particularity of feeling." Instead, a proposition is a "datum for feeling, awaiting a subject feeling it." In other words, the proposition "Caesar crossed the Rubicon" could never have been "felt" by Hannibal, or anyone else who died before Caesar crossed that stream.

To end this segment of Whitehead's considerations on language in metaphysics, it seems appropriate to quote a passage from Section One, Chapter One of PR: "But no language can be anything but elliptical, requiring a leap of the imagination to understand its meaning in its relevance to immediate experience ...
no verbal statement is the adequate expression of a proposition... deficiencies of language stand in the way inexorably (Process and Reality or PR, pp.xiii, 4, 11, 13, 158, 167, 173, 195, 259).

The Generalization of Language:

To elucidate Whitehead's generalized views of language that integrate his metaphysical notions of language in PR and S we now turn to Adventures of Ideas (AI) and Modes of Thought (MT). These two texts are also collections of lectures that follow, in chronological order, Whitehead's previously cited works. In AI, Whitehead expounds upon his philosophy of language in a more generalized way than in PR. In MT, he brings to a close his dialogue on language's impact not only on philosophy, but its role in the rise of human development and evolution. In the section entitled "Philosophic Method" of AI, Whitehead writes that he has reached the "heart of the topic," and the topic is the "...methods that can be usefully employed in the pursuit of speculative philosophy." Before he begins this discussion, he poses a question: What is the store-house of that crude evidence on which philosophy should base its discussion, and in what terms should discussion be expressed?

This "crude" evidence is found in three main sources: language is the first source, the second is social institutions, and the third source of evidence is found in action. According to Whitehead, language delivers the evidence for philosophic discussion in three major ways; first, there is the meaning of words, second, there is the meaning of words in grammatical forms, and finally, meanings that go beyond individual words and grammatical forms-the "meanings miraculously revealed in great literature."

After considering language's integral role in the philosophic endeavor, Whitehead in the next sentence restates the usual warning about language's inadequacy due to its incomplete and fragmentary nature, and he then goes on to write that language "merely registers a stage ... beyond ape-mentality." This comment, taken superficially, appears extremely harsh, but viewed in the context that language's strength, which resides in the mode of presentational immediacy-a mode of perception that can only relay information that is precise, vivid, and barren- Whitehead's description of language is in keeping with his metaphysics.

Whitehead notes that Plato too acknowledged the limitations of language in his dialogue The Sophist. The mark of the sophist for Plato is "mere dialectic"; linguistic discussion should only be a tool in any philosophic enterprise, never a master. Whitehead then reiterates his claim that one of the errors of the philosophic method is that an "uncritical trust" is the adequacy of language. Whitehead also states that to hold the belief that there is a stable and set philosophic vocabulary is absurd. He continues by noting that other sciences constantly revise and append their various vocabularies. Philosophy should be no exception if it is to thrive or be relevant within the operations of civilization.

To illustrate the point that philosophy has no closed set of technical terms, Whitehead explains the reasoning and etymology behind a new philosophic word he originated, "concrescence." It is a word derived from a Latin verb that means "growing together." Concrescence also suggests the participle "concrete," which ordinarily connotes a complete physical reality. Therefore, concrescence is able to
convey to the recipient a notion of "many things acquiring complete complex unity." What that word does not convey is the creative novelty involved in Whitehead's new use of the word. It omits the notion of the discrete character emerging in the "concrescence" of the original data. To illustrate the problem of how ordinary words fail in the task of advancing philosophic discussion, Whitehead takes a close look at the word "together." Whitehead charges that "together" is a generic term used to denote an "endless variety of species," and as such is one of the most misused words in philosophy. To claim that there is only one true definition of this word, regardless of the diverse contexts in which it is employed, is "sophistical." To lessen the ambiguities of the terms for a philosophic generalization, (a final actuality in the "guise of a generalization of an act of experience"), Whitehead offers a solution, which superficially appears as an overabundance and confusing set of terms-together, creativity, concrescence, prehension, feeling, subjective form, data, actuality, becoming, and process. Whitehead states that whatever ambiguities are inherent in each one of these terms, when used together the terms will correct "each other" (AI, pp.226, 228, 229, 236). In MT, Whitehead continues his criticism of language's general terms as used in philosophic discussion. The word "and," and any other word used as a conjunction, is a "nest of ambiguity" and a "death-trap" for reasoning. Any sentence containing a conjunctive word must be very closely read, and re-read. Whitehead notes that there are also certain words not formally considered conjunctions, but convey conjunctive meanings, such as the word "class." (MT, p.53) These words also warrant close attention. The greater portion of MT, however, reviews language in a broader and more generous light. In it Whitehead states that language is the most efficacious way to express thought, and without its aid, retention, and recall (memory), the entwining of thought into intricate complexity would be severely limited. Language also empowers freedom of thought which "releases" the human being "from the bondage of the immediacies of mood and circumstance." Whitehead also states that a philosophic outlook is the very foundation of thought and life itself:"as we think, we live." Whitehead goes on to state that the development of this philosophic thought is an appeal to human experience. It is human experience found in law, moral and sociological habits, literature, the arts, and the sciences. To conclude Whitehead's generalization phase of language, its importance and interconnectedness with human mentality, the opening quote of this essay from MT best captures Whitehead's view. He states that mentality and language of "mankind" created each other, "... the souls of men are the gift from language to mankind ... He [God] gave them speech, and they became souls" (MT, pp.35, 40, 63, 70). Despite the many severe limitations of language that Whitehead exposed within philosophy, he concedes that language is the condition, or gift, that makes us human.

Conclusion:

With Whitehead’s distrust of ordinary language as a guide to the true nature of “reality” there goes a belief in the value of poetic language. He thinks that poetic language, by its stress on the aesthetic and dynamic side of our experience, will give us some measure of insight into the real efficacious world of events. But this, as he is acutely aware, is not confined to poetry. Certain symbolic devices such as the
burning of incense and religious ceremonials have often a greater efficacy in eliciting aesthetic experiences than have written or spoken words.

There may appear to be some inconsistency between Whitehead’s emphasis on the efficacy of poetic and literary language in giving us an insight into the dynamic and aesthetic aspects of nature and his stress on the adequacy of mathematical formulae for describing the physical world (As he puts it, algebra, unlike ordinary language, endeavours to exemplify in its written structures the pattern which it is its purpose to convey {Mays, p.51}). However, the conflict is only apparent. He would argue that whereas mathematical description largely concentrates on the structure of events, poetic language emphasizes the dynamic aspects of our experience (Ibid. pp.51-53). Whitehead believes that sentences are ambiguous as to the exact propositions (meanings) they indicate. The reason for this is not far to seek. He considers a proposition to have a specific reference to psychological elements- to thoughts and images- as well as to the context of utterance. The meaning of a sentence will thus vary in accordance with its psychological and environmental contexts.

Whitehead thus differs from those moderns who tend to identify the sentence with the proposition, and who also believe that one can study language as a pure science apart from any direct reference to thought and things. For example, the modern semanticist seems to assume that, by the device of quotation marks, language can be studied as if it were another type of object. As a result of his emphasis on context, Whitehead regards language as being highly elliptical. He illustrates this by pointing out that, according to the context of utterance, the word “Caesar” may mean a puppy dog, a Negro slave or the first Roman Emperor. Whitehead, however, thought he stresses context, would not, like some philosophical analysts, take it as a complete substitute for any psychological reference. In his approach to language; then, Whitehead emphasizes the need for interpreting language in its psychological as well as environmental setting. Most modern work on communication, for example, is not interested in the psychological processes underlying the communicated symbols. If the linguistic symbols are the same, the two processes are usually regarded as similar. However, we cannot always deduce from a simple examination of the linguistic elements involved the precise meaning which the speaker or writer intends to convey.

Whitehead’s views on language diverge from the current approach with its emphasis on ordinary usage. His position is closely linked with his theory of perception. The philosophical account of perception in terms of substances qualified by predicates only gives us, he argues, an abstract picture of the real world. Whitehead distrusts ordinary language as a guide to the true nature of experience, as it fails to grasp the dynamic character of events. He argues that poetic language, with its stress on the aesthetic and dynamic side of our experience, gives us a deeper insight into reality. But such an account, he would go on, needs to be supplemented by logico-mathematical description, which makes clear to us the structure of things.
Reference: