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A Study of Philosophical Use of Language Relevant to Wittgenstein's Use Theory and Early Buddhist Philosophy

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ABSTRACT

Language is a way of communication through which individuals coherently express and understand ideas using its structured constituents. Despite the gap between their time and space, early Buddhist philosophy and Ludwig Wittgenstein's philosophy, which appeared in twentieth-century philosophy, deeply examine the connection between language and philosophy. Furthermore, neither philosophical approach is concerned merely with formulating an abstract philosophical system; rather, both connect philosophical reflection with human understanding and the conduct of human life. In this regard, language serves an essential function in clarifying human understanding of the world. The Buddha discusses the importance of language in expressing his teachings to his disciples in Eastern India, while Wittgenstein, in Western philosophy and with a fundamentally different perspective, likewise examines the functions, core, and limits of language in philosophical analysis. In addition, both philosophies recognize the importance of language in articulating and investigating philosophical ideas, despite their fundamentally different frameworks. The study focuses on how the Buddha and Wittgenstein understand the use of language in philosophical inquiry. The primary objective of the study is to investigate comparatively how the Buddha and Wittgenstein conceptualize the role and use of language in their thought. This research employs a qualitative method: textual analysis of Buddhist discourses (suttas) demonstrate how language is used to articulate philosophical concepts, guide listeners toward understanding, and practice directed toward the realization of Nibbana. In comparison, Wittgenstein argues that philosophical problems are closely connected to the use of language. The conclusion of this study is that despite the fundamental historical, methodological, and philosophical differences between the Buddha and Wittgenstein, both philosophers recognize the importance of examining language in relation to philosophical inquiry.

1. Introduction

Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889 – 1951), an Austrian-born British philosopher, was a renowned thinker, considered by some to be the greatest philosopher of the 20th century (Monk, 2023; Biletzki & Matar, 2023). The emergence of Wittgenstein's philosophy in Western academia should be realized within the historical development in the intellectual context of the twentieth century. The two recognized phases of his thought, earlier and later, consist of different approaches to language and its connection to philosophy. The early Wittgenstein, in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, argues for a relationship between the logical structure of language and the world. Despite this, the Later Wittgenstein, in *Philosophical Investigations*, emphasizes the various uses of language games and the crucial role of context and meaning in the philosophy of language.

In a distinct time, space, and intellectual context, the Buddha (5th century BCE) is one of the greatest philosophers in ancient Indian philosophy (Velez, n.d.). Central teachings in Buddhism are dependent origination (*paṭiccasamuppāda*), the Four Noble Truths (*chattari-ariya-saccani*), and the cycle of births and deaths (*saṃsāra*), among other doctrines, which are primarily aimed at attaining Nibbana. Early Buddhist philosophy does not develop a systematic philosophy of language in a modern philosophical sense because the main purpose of Buddhist philosophy is not to actualize the primary goal in linguistic space. However, Buddhist discourses contain important concepts regarding the uses and limits of language in articulating the Dhamma and addressing deeply philosophical and practical issues.

2. Literature Review

Many scholars have studied and adopted multiple methods for investigating Buddhist and Wittgenstein's Philosophy, separately and comparatively, with regard to language. The following studies are examples of researchers' inquiries about it.

Walpola Sri Rahula Thero, in *What the Buddha Taught*, explains why language is limited in expressing the true nature of the absolute truth in Buddhist philosophy. His clarification mainly depends on Pali discourse rather than on a cooperative study of Wittgenstein's philosophy. Wimal Dissanayake, in *'The idea of verbal communication in early Buddhism'*, has examined the Buddhist tenet of language and communication as it pertains to early Buddhist thought. However, He does not concentrate directly on their relation to Wittgenstein. D. J. Kalupahana has focused on language from a historical approach in the study *A History of Buddhist Philosophy: Continuities and Discontinuities*. Furthermore, he examines his research holistically, namely 'language'. V. Nguyen Anh Tuan, Phramaha Hansa Dhammhaso, and S

Mahatthanadull, in A Buddhist approach to socially engaged Buddhism for skillful communication, have scrutinized the study on the sociological approach. However, a chronological explanation of J. Powers's analysis is available, namely, *Languages*.

Macarena Alamo Santos has studied Wittgenstein and Buddhism comparatively. However, it is especially based on Madhyamaka Philosophy. Sri Lankan Scholars, namely A.D.P. Kalansuriya and Kulasena Widanamage, discuss Wittgenstein's philosophy and use the analytic approach to study Buddhism in their books. Nonetheless, they do not primarily focus on a comparative study of both philosophies.

3. Methodology

This study uses a qualitative approach, applying both contextual and textual analyses to examine relevant philosophical inquiries. The study primarily offers a fundamental critique of Wittgenstein's philosophy of language, including a philosophical investigation in which he clearly articulates his current stance on theories concerning the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. The research examines a specific and significant issue in Wittgensteinian and Buddhist philosophy: whether both traditions address the use of language equally, given their distinct historical and conceptual backgrounds. This comparison relies on primary sources and examines various Buddhist discourses identified in the Pāli canon (*Tipiṭaka*). This investigation addresses the philosophical issue by exploring its connections to relevant concepts and explaining Wittgenstein's philosophy. In addition, relevant textual and philosophical inquiries are presented as necessary to highlight points of convergence between the two, while acknowledging their theoretical differences.

4. Discussion

Wittgenstein determines, as with Bertrand Russell (1872-1970), to distinguish between philosophy and natural science: "*Philosophy is not one of the natural sciences... whose place is above or below the natural sciences*" (Wittgenstein, 2001, sec. 4.111). Even though both are endowed with knowledge and a grasp of the object, they do not articulate that their subject matter is the same as science does. If it grows away from natural science, one can ask whether philosophy, as in *Tractatus*, does result in the clarification of propositions (Wittgenstein, 2001, sec. 4.112), and also, he refers to "*All philosophy is a critique of language*" (Wittgenstein, 2001, sec. 4.0031), to show the correlation of language and philosophy. He, in later philosophy, responded to the aim of philosophy as "*to show the fly the way out of the fly-bottle.*" Although the two phases of Wittgenstein's philosophy consist of clearly distinctive concepts and theoretical frameworks between *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*

and *Philosophical Investigations*, language is regarded as central to both chronological stages in his philosophy. The early Wittgenstein considered the logical form of propositions and their relation to states of affairs and the world, in contrast to the later Wittgenstein, who examined the multiple uses of language, especially in relation to practical uses and forms of life.

The primary Buddhist thesis is to indicate the way to understand the reality of the world, leading towards the cessation of suffering and achieve the final goal. It is, however, only possible to articulate their thoughts if they conduct the language clearly and rightly. Wimal Dissanayake illustrates his idea of the Buddha's communication as readily understandable and grounded in the psychological background and perceivable disposition of his audiences. (Dissanayake, p.227) Everything it shows to convey the idea to others reflects how language functions. It is clarified at the end of many Buddhist discussions in which disciples (*Sāvaka*) comprehend the message as if set upright, lying face downward (*Nikkujjita*) (The *Dīgha Nikāya* I, 1976, p. 85). Some discourse, as a result, concerns how Buddhist thought treats linguistic accuracy as indispensable. Buddhist doctrine characterizes right speech as that which is spoken at the proper time (*kāla-vādī*), is truthful (*bhūta-vādī*), beneficial (*attha-vādī*), in accordance with Dhamma (*dhamma-vādī*), in accordance with discipline (*vinaya-vādī*), and well-grounded in context (*nidhāna-vādī*). In addition, the Buddha's teaching is described as well-preached, emphasizing clarity, coherence, and practical value in communication (*svākkhāta*) (Walshe, 1995, p. 458; Bodhi, 2012, pp. 355–356). It is, then, acceptable that Buddhist speech can be circumscribed in language by the fact that it deals with the ordinary community; if it can exceed the empirical usage of language, it becomes troublesome because it keeps all statements out of the visible world. Language is indispensable to the interpretation of propositions, as it helps ascertain the meaning relevant to the context.

A language that clarifies ideas without ambiguity and a word that does not embody various meanings, viz., one word consists of one meaning as well, is opposed to the natural language. If one can translate or at least paraphrase sentences of ordinary language into a wholly perspicuous formal language that reveals exactly what is being said without risk of misunderstanding, then one can lay bare to one's view the structure of legitimate thought about the world (Grayling, 2001). Whereas Wittgenstein does not admire the perfect language to inquire into reality, rather than ordinary language: '*deal*' is liable to mislead, for it sounds as if these languages were better, more perfect, than our everyday language,' (Wittgenstein, 2009, p. 43e). *Ordinary language is all right.* (Wittgenstein, 2007, p. 28)¹ Wittgenstein, in *Philosophical Investigations*, says that there is not one 'logic of language', but many; language has no single essence, but is a vast collection of different practices, each with its

¹He does not refuse "ideal language" as that should be abolished from philosophy.

logic (Grayling, 2001). Even though Wittgenstein's earlier concern was with logical form and the perspicuous depiction of propositions in language, his later considerations are based on ordinary language and its multiple uses.

Kalupahana's recognition of the Buddhist view of the world as akin to linguistic entities reflects the idea that everything is in flux and shows that language is not a representational entity, as in other Indian traditions that contemplate the incorrigibility of language (Kalupahana, 1992, p. 61). The assumption that is interpreted as a Buddhist teaching requires a single privileged linguistic medium to be challenging because the Buddha's response to the requests for a standardized linguistic form of his thought is rejected by him. Yamelu and Tekula, both monks, respectfully requested that all the discourse be translated into the Vedic language because it is marred by the many native languages. The Buddha here refuses the request and insists on continuing to teach *dhamma* in his dialect, *sakāya nirutti*. In this disagreement, it is understandable that the Buddha encounters the problem of ideal language and rejects it, as it fails to convey the original meaning when it is removed from its context. The Buddha gives the speech under *Aneka Pariyāya* (*Various instructions, going out of one's way*) (*The Dīgha Nikāya I*, 1976, p. 85), so there is no need to presuppose a select group of people with ideal language. This feature of early Buddhist thought rejects intellectually authoritative language, namely the *Veda*, which concerns itself with the exactness of meaning. Buddha acknowledged the original medium of discourse without linguistic bias.

There are two types of discourse: (1) Direct discourse (*nītattham suttantaṃ*) and (2) indirect discourse (*neyyattham suttantaṃ*) (*Aṅguttara Nikāya I*, 1976, p. 60), delivering the method under the condition of the variety of the hearer's skills, time, and situation. First, it easily navigates day-to-day life and aligns with the consensus of communal opinion regarding language. The issue with indirect discourse in the realistic exploration of the world is not equivalent to that of direct discourse, because it does not account for communal norms about the world that extend beyond what can be perceived. Irrespective of whether the indirect discourse is contrary to ordinary language, the point is that Buddha accepts communal existence, which helps protect their ethnic identity, including language and so forth.

Language and thoughts comprise similar characters. Wittgenstein elaborates on how they go the same way in the Notebook "*Now it is becoming clear why it is thought that thinking and language were same. Thinking is a kind of language. For a thought too is, of course, a logical picture of the proposition, and therefore it just is a kind of proposition.*" (Wittgenstein et al., 1961, p. 82e). Wittgenstein, in this parenthesis, gets across the idea that the main constituent of language is a proposition, and that it is included in the thought. Furthermore, if something goes beyond language, it is beyond thought. The existence of the thought insofar as it corresponds to the world,

by account of that proposition, then, the word proceeds in the world.

Language is the mainstream of the community; all word meanings may rely on the context. The Buddhist view of the history of words holds that communal norms make language the standard.

“Chosen by the whole people, Vāsettha, is what is meant by Māha Sammata; so Mahā Sammata (the Great Elect) was the first standing phrase to arise [for such an one]. Lord of the Fields is what is meant by Khattiya; so Khattiya (Noble) was the next expression to arise. He charms the others by the Norm—by what ought (to charm)—is what is meant by Rāja; so this was the third standing phrase to arise.” (Davis, 1921, p. 88).

The Buddhist doctrine of language, regarding the above-mentioned implication, assumes that the phrase and its meaning together account for social agreement. It does not mean it was the first word to appear; it means this was a specialized term invented and applied specifically to them (Sujato, 2018). This may imply that it emerges from thought because it is a product of society, and that, first (the Great Elect), second (Noble), and third (to charm), in turn, embody the various uses related to social norms. Therefore, the evolution of the state of *Great Elect* clearly illustrates how language changes in relation to thought.

Even though language expresses ideas parallel to words about the world, the question is whether it consists of a whole sense related to the world, or whether all uses of language are embodied in what the speaker encounters through their grammatical order and rules. However, Wittgenstein’s view supposes that the whole of the word is not expressed by language because there are limits in articulating what is situated in a word, and it goes beyond language as well. Wittgenstein, in notebooks, distinguishes what could be sayable or not, using picture theory, as “There cannot be an orderly or a disorderly world so that one could say our world is orderly.” (Wittgenstein et al., 1961, p. 83e). Concerning the foregoing parenthesis, the concatenation of the order in the world depicts the structure of the language and yet it is clear that language is restricted by the order of what it consists of, even though there are many reflections in the world. In later philosophy, Wittgenstein refused picture theory, “but whether it ‘is a word or a sentence’ depends on the situation in which it is uttered or written” (Wittgenstein, 2009, 28e). He, in *Philosophical Investigations*, pays close attention to the *situation*. When meaning is situated in its context, it becomes recognizable as the statement’s clear idea, which accounts for its sense.

The Buddha regards all the discourses as, at the beginning, middle, and the end, constructively fitted by themselves, comprising coherent meaning

and so forth (Walshe, 1995, pp. 159–170), to lay bare thought to the listener. The Buddhist illustration does not confine the exploration of the world to the mere depiction of an object; the meaning of what one indicates becomes comprehensible only insofar as it is given a detailed explanation, an entire account of the situation. The articulation in Pañha Vyākaraṇa-sutta explains how to answer a philosophical problem using four types of responses (*Aṅguttara Nikāya II*, 1976, p. 46). The question to be put aside (*Ṭhapanāya Paññā*), in Buddhist philosophical study, is more significant in seeking out the meaning of how to ascertain a proposition. The Buddha avoids eliciting responses to *Ṭhapanāya Paññā* because it raises transcendental questions and excludes the philosophical essence. Furthermore, it misleads followers about the true path to what they attain, and it proposes that this kind of question cannot be conceived through language, since language operates within limits. According to Walpola Rahula Thero, discussing the ultimate truth or ultimate reality in language reveals language's limits, as human language is inadequate to express the true nature of Absolute Truth. Linguistic representation of Nibbana is beyond the human experience, and it does not belong to ordinary experience (Rahula, 1978, p. 35). This approach is an effective way to comparatively study Wittgenstein's views on the limits of language and the world.

D. J. Kalupahana claims that Buddhist philosophy and Wittgenstein are similar in illustrating the basic reason of traditional metaphysics. The issue stems from a superficial understanding of ordinary language usage, e.g., the Buddhist consideration of 'self' as a mistaken understanding of ordinary language (Kalupahana, 1976, p. 159). According to his explanation, it is clear that misunderstanding of language is a significant problem in metaphysics, and the Buddha endeavors to reject its misuse to achieve what his discourses express.

Wittgenstein claims language as an activity, not a body of doctrine (Wittgenstein, 2001, sec. 4.112). There is, as a result, no way to make spurious dogma about the illustration of the empirical world, far beyond, due to activity belonging to the real context. If it does not work under genuine conditions, merging the statement becomes troublesome. In addition, the Practical use of language produces utterances that either convey meaning or serve a particular purpose. He suggests, "*practice in the use of the rule also shows what a mistake in its employment is.*" (Wittgenstein, 1969, p. 6e) *All the clarifications, expressed in language, coexist with its use to enable understandable communication among those who endeavor to be comprehensible.* Even if the use of language is right or wrong, rightness is a moral evaluation; practice in the use concerns the expression of natural language as a way of getting coherent ideas. Moreover, many ordinary speakers do not use language solely to state what is true or false; thus, a theory of propositions is not a general theory of meaning, nor even the basis for one (Monk, 2023). Making mistakes, therefore, is not implied as the cardinal problem of philosophy because mistakes, be they grammatical,

semantic, orthographic, and so on, shed light on the case.

The fact that application in language, as with Buddhism, is more acceptable lies in communal consensus. The following Buddhist conceptual analysis elucidates how the local language works.

And how, bhikkhus, does there come to be non-insistence on local language and non-overriding of normal usage? Here, bhikkhus, in different localities, they call the same thing a ‘dish’ [pāti], a ‘bowl’ [patta], a ‘vessel’ [vittha], a ‘saucer’ [sarāva], a ‘pan’ [dhāropa], a ‘pot’ [poṇa], a ‘mug’ [hana] or a ‘basin’ [piṣiḷa]. So whatever they call it in such and such a locality, without adhering [to that expression], one speaks accordingly, thinking: ‘These venerable ones, it seems, are speaking with reference to this.’ This is how there comes to be no insistence on the local language and no overriding of normal usage. “So it was with reference to this that it was said: ‘One should not insist on local language, and one should not override normal usage. (Ñānamoli & Bodhi, 1993).

It is, in light of this parenthesis, rather certain that language consists of various paraphrases, synonyms, and so forth, intending to acquire what it says, not to take the words and propositions as the absolute essence of the meaning. This pragmatic explanation points out two sorts of characters: (1) non-insistence on local language and (2) non-overriding of normal usage, to leave out the philosophical issues in its subject matter, once language is used in the proper way. Lingual explorations on Buddhist doctrine, probably, assume that they give meaning to statements on how people use words to eliminate senselessness from genuine propositions; otherwise, the prime thought on philosophy is conveyed and held back in deep concepts, which are excepted from the ordinary way, in the bottom of vaguely expressed remarks. It is not an arduous task to clarify that consideration of day-to-day use in Language, equivalent to Buddhist thought, is derived from society, since propositions go on insofar as they are consistently employed with the community (here, it does not mean any remarks are out of usage, but it is one way to make certain either they are applicable or not). Unless the application ensures its actual use, it excludes what it seeks to imply. Furthermore, Variations, a synonym for delivering the idea clearly in the language, are not to mislead; they ascertain any fact in its context, and they imply what it properly leads to give away meaning within boundaries.

Ascertainment of the use (of a word, of a proposition), however, is not given to any constructive theory building, as in the *Tractatus* (Biletzki & Matar, 2023). As same to Wittgenstein, the Buddha does not create the principle on the use of language and yet pay close attention to how language

works because language is not something complete and autonomous that can be investigated independently of other considerations, for language is woven into all human activities and behavior, and accordingly our many different uses of it are given content and significance by our practical affairs, our work, our dealings with one another and with the world we inhabit – a language, in short, is part of the fabric of an inclusive ‘form of life’ (Grayling, 2001). Buddhism, in order to avoid erroneous discourses, not only claims that language is involved but also all the parts included in the discussion, between the speaker and the hearer, since that consideration raises the level of usage of language. For instance, Buddhist thought recognizes different types of individuals according to their cognitive capacities: those who understand immediately (*ugaṭitaññū*), those who understand through detailed explanation (*vipacitaññū*), those who require guidance (*neyya*), and those who can grasp only the literal meaning (*padaparama*). (Bodhi, 2012, p. 515; (*Aṅguttara Nikāya* II. p135). These categories indicate that individuals differ in their ability to comprehend and adhere to the intended message within discourse. In this context, mental capacity plays a crucial role in receiving and retaining the Buddha’s teachings. Furthermore, another classification identifies three types of wisdom: inverted wisdom, superficial (or lap-like) wisdom, and expansive wisdom (Bodhi, 2012, p. 225). Taken together, these distinctions suggest that meaning in discourse is not independent of context but is shaped by individuals’ cognitive and interpretive capacities. It, on the other hand, elaborates on communal activity by interconnecting with grammatical orders, ordinary phrases, utterances, truth, time, the nature of meaning, and so forth.

The claim that philosophy introduces new facts is arguable, as new facts may either establish new truths or merely reassert old truths. Wittgenstein, in opposition to previous dogma, defines philosophy, i.e., “Philosophy is, in fact, the synopsis of trivialities,” in a way that runs counter to ancient philosophical approaches to the holistic idea of philosophy, rather than consigning philosophy to a subordinate position among other subject matters. Moreover, the language of values and value judgments is learned and given its standard uses in the context of real-life problems and situations (Janik & Toulmin, 1973, p. 265). The use of “it” in “the stream of life” (Monk, 2023) clarifies day-to-day activities.

The Buddha explains that social diversity arises because racial diversity is not a biological fact but a designation (*sāmañña*). It is merely linguistic because social consensus circumscribes linguistic limitations. Even though one is racist, and the other suggests that races are either autonomous or biological. It is likely that examining language use provides a way to infer or conceptualize society’s transparency.

The Buddha explains that social diversity is a constructed phenomenon, and that distinctions such as race are not grounded in biological reality but

are instead conventional designations (*sāmañña*). (*Sutta-Nipāta*, p. 119) From this perspective, such categories are fundamentally linguistic, arising from social consensus that both shapes and limits language use. Although some may adopt essentialist or racist views that treat race as autonomous or biologically determined, this framework challenges such assumptions by emphasizing the conventional nature of these distinctions. Accordingly, an analysis of language use provides a critical means of examining how social realities are constituted and how the apparent transparency of society is, in fact, mediated by linguistic practices.

5. Conclusion

While Ludwig Wittgenstein develops an explicit philosophical account of language within twentieth-century thought, the Buddha, in the sixth century BCE, does not formulate a systematic theory of language. Nevertheless, key features of linguistic reflection are implicitly embedded in his teachings, particularly in the pragmatic and contextual use of discourse. Both traditions, despite their historical and methodological differences, engage with the problem of how language relates to reality and understanding. In this sense, they converge on the insight that language is not merely a neutral medium but an active instrument through which meaning is shaped, communicated, and interpreted within specific contexts.

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