A. Ambiguity and its consequences

Read the poem below and discuss what it tells you about language, meaning and communication.

As a background to the poem, some historical accounts claim that towards the end of World War II, after the Potsdam Conference where the Russians agreed to declare war on Japan and attack it from Siberia, the United States demanded the surrender of the Japanese. The Japanese reply was “mokusatsu” (to keep silent), a word which could have meant one of two things as the poem shows. The interpretation given by the United States may have been such as to cause the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In this instance, the historical accuracy of the poem is less important than what it implies.

Mokusatsu by Heathcote Williams

Asked what he would undertake first,
Were he called upon to rule a nation,
Confucius replied: “To correct language ...
if language is not correct,
Then what is said is not what is meant,
Then what ought to be done remains undone;
If this remains undone, morals and art will deteriorate;
If morals and art deteriorate, justice will go astray;
If justice goes astray,
The people will stand about in helpless confusion.
Hence there must be no arbitrariness in what is said.
This matters above everything.”

Asked to surrender in World War II,
The Japanese employed the word “mokusatsu”
In replying to the Potsdam ultimatum.

The word given out by the Domei news agency
Was interpreted in Washington as “treat with contempt”
Rather than “withholding comment” - pending a decision -
Its correct meaning.

The Americans concluded that their ultimatum had been rejected;
The boys in the back room could play with their new toy.
A hundred and forty thousand people lay round in helpless confusion.

Today “peace” is mis-translated, and means a seething stalemate
Instead of calm;
“Strength” is mis-translated, and means paranoid force
Instead of right-minded confidence;
“Defense” is mis-translated, and means maniacal extravagance
Instead of attentive foresight;
“Capability” is mis-translated, and means the psychotic accumulation of weapons
Instead of the exercise of skill;
“Testing” is mis-translated, and means the detonation of a nuclear device,
and the release of radioactive clouds,
Instead of tentative experiment;
A “dis-armament treaty” is mis-translated,
And means dismantling obsolete weapons in the face of economics constraints,
Ritually attended by a spurious euphoria;
“First-strike” is mis-translated,
And means last strike;
“Safety” is mis-translated,
and means danger.

An extract from Alice in Wonderland by Lewis Carroll

“If any one them can explain it”, said Alice, “I’ll give him sixpence. I don’t believe
there’s an atom of meaning in it”. “If there’s no meaning in it”, said the King,
“that saves a world of trouble, you know, as we needn’t try to find any.”

“That is not said right”, said the Caterpillar. “Not quite right, I’m afraid”, said
Alice timidly; “some of the words have got altered”. “It is wrong from beginning
to end”, said the Caterpillar decidedly, and there was silence for some minutes.

“Then you should say what you mean”, the March Hare went on. “I do”, Alice
hastily replied; “at least - I mean what I say - that’s the same thing, you know”. ”Not the same thing a bit”, said the Hatter. “Why you might just as well say that ‘I see
what I eat’ is the same thing as ‘I eat what I see’”.

“You might just as well say”, added the March Hare, “that ‘I like what I get’ is the
same thing as ‘I get what I like’!”

“You might just as well say”, added the Dormouse ... “that ‘I breathe when I sleep’
is the same as ‘I sleep when I breathe’!” “It is the same thing to you”, said the
Hatter.

An extract from Through the Looking Glass by Lewis Carroll

“I don’t know what you mean by ‘glory’”, Alice said.

Humpty Dumpty smiled contemptuously. “Of course you don’t – till I tell you. I
meant ‘there’s a nice knock-down argument for you!’”

“But ‘glory’ doesn’t mean a ‘nice knock-down argument’”, Alice objected.

“When I use a word”, Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, “it means
just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less”.

“The question is”, said Alice, “whether you can make a word mean so many
different things”.

“The question is”, said Humpty Dumpty, “which is to be master – that’s all”.

CBoyce, Languageambiguities
Questions for thought, discussion and writing:

- Do vagueness and ambiguity shortcomings of language need to be eliminated in the interests of knowledge, or can they be also viewed as positive aspects of language?

- What do we mean when we talk about meaning? Can we distinguish between different kinds of meaning, such as literal verses symbolic, the dictionary definition of a term verses its everyday use?

- What problems are encountered in translating words and meanings from one language to another?

### B. Language and thought

Read the following poem and discuss what it tells you about language, meaning and thought.

*Nothingness* by Aharon Amir (translated from the Hebrew by Abraham Birman)

> I woke up at night and my language was gone
> No sign of language no writing no alphabet
> nor symbol nor word in any tongue
> and raw was my fear - like the terror perhaps
> of a man flung from a treetop far above the ground
> a shipwrecked person on a tide-engulfed sand bank
> a pilot whose parachute would not open
> or the fear of a stone in a bottomless pit
> and the fright was unvoiced unlettered unuttered
> and inarticulate O how inarticulate
> and I was alone in the dark
> a non-I in the all-pervading gloom
> with no grasp no leaning point
> everything stripped of everything
> and the sound was speechless and voiceless
> and I was naught and nothing
> without even a gibbet to hang onto
> and I no longer knew who or what I was
> and I was no more.

*Question for thought, discussion and writing:*

- If communication with others is taken as the major purpose of language, are there other uses too, such as developing inner thought, arguing with oneself, or creating memory?

- Is it possible think without using words?
The American behavioural psychologist J.B. Watson wrote in 1915 that ‘Thought processes are really motor habits of the larynx’, and the Russian Schenov argued, in 1863, that ‘When a child thinks he invariably talks at the same time ... which is also true of thinking adults’.

Polanyi claimed that “All human thought comes into existence by grasping the meaning and mastering the use of language. Little of our mind lives in our natural body; a truly human intellect dwells in us only when our lips shape words and our eyes read print”. Francis Bacon said “Men imagine that their minds have the command of language, but it often happens that language bears rule over their minds”. Someone else has said that “Language is like fixed rails upon which all our thought must run”.

Einstein, on the other hand, said that “The words of language as they are written and spoken do not seem to play any role in the mechanisms of my thought”. Polanyi also claimed that “I know more than I can say”.

Consider one of the many statements Wittgenstein made about language – “If we spoke a different language, we would perceive a different world”. If you speak more than one language fluently, you may know whether the grammar or the vocabulary of one language makes you perceive or think differently from when you are using the other. Discuss your views on these statements.

Questions for thought, discussion and writing:

• Can one plausibly argue that people who speak different languages live in different worlds? What exactly would this mean?

• Is it reasonable to argue that one language is better than another as far as knowledge is concerned?

C. Language, knowledge and behaviour

Read the following pieces and consider the relationship between language and knowledge.

Reported Missing by Barry Cole

Can you give me a precise description?
Said the policeman. Her lips, I told him,
Were soft. Could you give me, he said, pencil
Raised, a metaphor? Soft as an open mouth,
I said. Were there any noticeable
Peculiarities? he asked. Her hair hung
Heavily, I said. Any particular
Colour? he said. I told him I could recall
Little but its distinctive scent. What do
You mean, he asked, by distinctive? It had
The smell of a woman’s hair, I said. Where
Were you? he asked. Closer than I am to
Anyone present, I said; level with
Her mouth, level with her eyes, Her eyes?
He said. What about her eyes? There were two
I said, both black. It has been established,
He said, that eyes cannot, outside common
Usage, be black; are you implying that
Violence was used? Only the gentle
Hammer blow of her kisses, the scent
Of her breath, the ... Quite, said the policeman
Standing. But I regret that we know of
No one answering to such a description.

An extract from *The Name of the Rose*, by Emberto Eco.

“First, words are our tools, and, as a minimum, we should use clean tools: we
should know what we mean and what we do not, and we must forearm ourselves
against the traps that language sets us. Secondly, words are not (except in their
own little corner) facts or things: we need therefore to prise them off the world, to
hold them apart from and against it, so that we can realise their inadequacies and
arbitrariness, and can re-look at the world without blinkers. Thirdly, and more
hopefully, our common stock of words embodies all the distinctions men have
found worth drawing, and the connections they have found worth making, in the
lifetime of many generations.” … “… Such is the magic of human languages, that
by human accord often the same sounds mean different things.”

A quote from Noam Chomsky (1968)

With writing, history begins; humans reflect on themselves and philosophy is born.
All knowledge as we know it today is built on writing. Writing holds empires
together by enabling them to be governed centrally. Writing indeed effected a full-
scale revolution of culture.”

An extract from *Words and their Meanings* by Aldous Huxley

“The consistency of human behaviour, such as it is, is due entirely to the fact that
men have formulated their desires, and subsequently rationalised them, in terms of
words. The verbal formulation of a desire will cause a man to go pressing forward
towards his goal, even when the desire lies dormant. Similarly, the rationalisation
of his desire in terms of some theological or philosophical system will convince
him that he does well to persevere in this way. ... 

For evil, then, as well as for good, words make us the human beings we actually
are. Deprived of language we should be as dogs or monkeys. Possessing language,
we are men and women able to persevere in crime no less than heroic virtue,
capable of intellectual achievements beyond the scope of any animal, but at the
same time capable of systematic silliness and stupidity such as no dumb beast
could ever dream of.”
A quote from *Word Play* by Peter Farb

“No society can plan ahead to gather food, to undertake public works, or prepare for an afterlife without the capacity of expressing the future tense. Nor can it prohibit or encourage behaviour which it is unable to name. Who is permitted to marry whom in any society is determined by blood relationships or by membership in various clans and castes - rules which can only be transmitted by language.”

Questions for thought, discussion and writing:

- How far can language be used to express what we know? Does language place limitations on knowledge? How?
- How much does language influence our behaviour? How does the use of metaphor and how we categorize things influence our behaviour?

**To conclude**

Two quotes from Confucius

“For one word a man is often deemed to be wise, and for one word he is often deemed to be foolish. We should be careful indeed what we say.”

“Without knowing the force of words, it is impossible to know men.”

And another from Lewis Carroll

“Take care of the sense, and the sounds will take care of themselves.”

One from *The ABC of Reading* by Ezra Pound

“The sum of all human wisdom cannot be contained in any one language, and no single language is capable of expressing all forms and degrees of human comprehension.”