

Language and Reality – The Challenge

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We love our words! Our words permit us to identify with some precision what things and actions we are referring to. In addition, we can “flavor” our words with adjectives and adverbs to provide emphasis. And through grammar in our language, we can announce relationships between the concepts that our words “capture” and place them in time. Add writing to oral forms of language and we get the option for greater precision and expression in a much more permanent form. All of this is in behalf of communicating more efficiently and effectively – a great asset, which seems to be much more elaborated and refined among humans than in any other life form of which we are aware. Our non-verbal forms of communication are important but they are much less precise. And, importantly, aural based communication complements rather than interferes with our ability to act. Our worldviews as individuals and societies are “contained” by the options that our language provides/allows. As such, language is always housing, communicating, and perpetuating our conception of reality.

So, what’s the problem?

LANGUAGE IS A TOTALLY ARTIFICIAL CONSTRUCT!!

Words create separate categories in what are continua in reality. Moreover, we love our oppositions – slow/fast, light/dark, good/bad, liberal/conservative, but oppositions exacerbate the problem by reducing continua to merely either/or. Take one opposition – light-dark. In fact, there is a huge range of light intensity from “blinding bright” to “pitch black” and all grades inbetween. Most obvious are the categories that we create to describe the visible light continuum – red-orange-yellow-green-blue-purple and the fact that we apply this sequence to characterize color in general. Consider the enormous number of the “shades” of green or blue as colors: when exactly does green become blue? This problem pervades all language because our words make artificial distinctions in what are really continua. Then, we rely on these words to make “claims” about how these artificial word based categories interact – an additional level of artificiality! Keep going and consider complex statements that evaluate these sentence level claims of interactions, and we arrive at another meta level of removal from reality. We do this all the time as we speak just conversationally, all the more so when we get to hyper meta levels as we use language in writing to propose complex theories in science.

As humans, we need language to communicate, and we cannot avoid these problems, but we can be aware of the shaky ground on which our language based assertions and conceptions about the nature of reality are based.