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The Fly is Trapped Inside the Bottle: A Semiotic and Epistemological Critique of the Idea of Disability

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## Abstract

This article is about “disability” understood as a stand-point of view whose high performative power has influenced the identity of people with various disabilities whom we have called “disabled.” From the philosophy of language, using the tools of semiotics, we will try to make a critique of the social model of disability, a constructive criticism and philosophical-hermeneutical root with the invaluable help of Frege, Wittgenstein or Austin. All this with the aim of getting the fly out of the inside of the bottle.

Wittgenstein, in his *Philosophical Investigations*, expressed in aphorism 309 that “the aim of philosophy was to show the fly the exit orifice of the bottle” (2017, 123). For the philosopher, the words with which we refer to the world are those bottles in which we are trapped.

We will use this poetic metaphor in our article to make a semiotic and hermeneutic critique of the high performative power of the words with which we define people. Calling someone retarded, handicapped, disabled, handicapped or diverse is not a mere naming but a declaration of intentions that affects citizens and public policies. And, given that we are facing a problem of a clear philosophical and political (and not only psychological or social) nature, we wanted to investigate those authors who, in a logical and formal context, have rigorously approached this question of the names with which we refer to what things are, to what people are. If we manage to unravel, in the light of the philosophical reflections of these authors, some of the keys to the problems of identity, reference or the meaning we give to the names with which we designate reality or the world, we will be in a position to justify our critical reflections.

“How do words relate to the world?” is the question with which John Searle begins *Speech Acts* (1990, 7). Without this relevant question, which has been the subject of study by the most prominent 20th century philosophers of language, we would not be able to approach a philosophical approach to “disability” understood from a new comprehensive paradigm that tries to explain the reality of millions of people who are being alluded to by that model, by that map, by that model whose name, among others, is that—disability.

In our opinion, any philosophical attempt to understand the idea of disability requires a semiotic approach that involves studying the ideas of the philosophers of language who, since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, have put this necessary question on the table: how do words relate to the world? Namely, how does “disability” relate to the existence of disabled subjects? This general question, of course, will lead us, among others, to the most complex question that philosophers of language have asked: how can we know whether the propositions with which we designate the world are true or false?

The problem of “verification” has given rise to different theoretical currents. We note that our argumentation will follow the paths of those philosophers of language who have been

critical of the naturalistic model that defends the logical possibility of establishing clear and distinct criteria of truth or falsity of signs with respect to their references. Our sources will go from the second Frege to the second Wittgenstein, passing through Searle and his teacher Austin; that is, those philosophers who have developed non-naturalistic theories that relate language to the world.

Let us follow the trail of some concepts of philosophical origin that we need to clarify in order to better understand our contributions.

### **The Limits of Language are not the Limits of the World**

How does Wittgenstein, Frege's most advanced disciple, advance in this semantic understanding of the world that forces us to give the words with which we name reality a new meaning? Because this is what it is all about, it is not only about words but also about names understood as external forms that describe reality, names and forms that construct reality. The author of the *Tractatus* follows his own path and in his work he draws up a plan for describing what happens in the world. And what happens, he tells us, can be said quite clearly. What happens is what we say. The saying is the naming of the real, an isomorphism similar to the Fregean attempt in his concept of knowing the real.

It can be said that the "figurative theory" of the *Tractatus* starts from a basic premise: world and language correlate without solution of continuity. Thus, the limits of language are the limits of the world. The figure that reflects like a faithful mirror the facts of the world (reference) is the proposition (the sign). The function of language is to say what happens. And any other language, such as, for example, poetic or philosophical language, not being isomorphic, says nothing and that nothing, even if it is important for the speaker, is pure unnecessary subjectivity. "To understand a proposition means, if it is true, to know what happens" says aphorism 4.024 of the *Tractatus* (2017, 150). The function of language according to this pictorial theory is to represent reality in a formal but not naïve way as claimed by the Viennese positivism represented for example by Carnap (who was a student of Frege).

Wittgenstein read Frege and knew his theory of the third world of Sinn, of sense, and this variable, although he develops it in his mature work, it is also incorporated in the *Tractatus* when he expresses that the "sense" of a proposition can also be incorporated into language but it cannot be said, it must be "shown". "What can be shown cannot be said" (aphorism 4.1212). This aphorism is the basis of sense understood as the meaninglessness of saying since when the "proposition shows its sense" (aphorism 4.022) the logical consequence of this is: the proposition does not and cannot say its sense. This assumes that the language with which we refer to the world can clearly and precisely describe the facts that happen (not the things or objects) and that is why modern science is a powerful explanatory framework whereas philosophy or religion are the fruit of the absence of isomorphism and are therefore irrational. If I say "light is a wavelength" I am explaining what light is (describing a fact) and if I say that "faith is the light of the world" I am not saying anything but showing a meaningless non-world without reference to any fact or state of affairs.

Let us take this rationalist figurative theory back to the terrain we are dealing with in order to continue trying to elucidate our problem with the guidance of these classics of philosophy. When I say that “John is a Down’s syndrome” and I understand that such a proposition describes a fact (not an object, person or thing but a fact, a relation) the veritative value of the proposition will have to do with its objective reference. John is qualified with a designation that is a substitute for what is designated, producing an isomorphism between a fact and its enunciation. This relation of equality produces an identity that clearly explains the fact and is the basis of the explanations with which we refer to the world. It is the basis of science or social sciences (in this case psychology) that wish not to be mere poetic disciplines. The proposition “John is Down’s syndrome” says what happens in reality. It does not show us reality as other languages do.

Is this argument valid? Our answer is two-faced: yes and no. Yes because it is necessary to find in the multiplicity of statements with which today we designate the real one that possesses veritative values following the model of modern science as a relevant epistemological discourse. A scientific explanation is not worth the same as an exercise in vacuous superstition. Sign and reference must always have the counterpoint of meaning, but meaning cannot derive in pure self-referentiality devoid of veritative criteria. Truth understood as the verifiability of certain statements cannot be abandoned if we do not want to fall into a repetition of infinite difference. However, the ‘no’ of our argumentation has as much or more weight than the ‘yes’ because, in this desire to explain the real, the statements that annul meaning and derive it to the terrain of relative subjectivities acquire a power of saying (dominant discourses) that fully affect not only the facts they describe but also their content, things, objects, in this case, affect concrete people, the real-world Johns who have been performed by the power of discourses, thereby annihilating the real voices of the subaltern subjects they were intended to represent and annulling the narrative possibility of autonomy.

John is and will always be, in his social and symbolic interactions, a down, he will be defended by his down associations and will fight for his rights as a down and, if his defenders have the ability to make these demands visible and give them strength, this being-down will be another new identity-power that will not need John at all, that the real John who, from a very young age, was told that he should be proud of being what he was, of being the way he was.

Our radical epistemological approach, based on the real listening of subaltern subjects in contexts of cognitive disadvantage, supported by this semiotic tradition, tries to avoid isomorphic statements that tell us what is going on in the world. And he tries to avoid them not because he considers them false but because their veritative value is concentrated in the explanation and description of the world but that they are ineffective and not very useful for the plans of human development and flourishing (that is, in human interactions) whose basis is the use we make of language. Language, following the Marxist explanation of the commodity, has an exchange value, an isomorphic exchange with the real that is very useful for describing what happens; for example, isomorphic exchange is useful for clinical

diagnoses but is useless when we come up against the meaning of utterances or the use value of language, which is based on the flow of human relations with a high symbolic value. The polite does not take away the brave, and opting for this second modality in our approach does not detract from what modern psychology has managed to discover. The fact that John has Down's syndrome is useful for a correct interpretation of reality that advances with respect to other less scientific denominations (for example, mongolism) but this same document of civilisation, by avoiding the richness that meaning gives to signs from their use, does not show reality nor does it capture John's open and narrative identity.

This idea of use and meaning related to showing rather than saying thus takes us back to the second Wittgenstein, the author of the *Philosophical Investigations*. The use of signs is their meaning and therefore their reference in the world of life (the "forms of life", 1.241). It is the use that gives meaning to the sign, to the grammar. The result refers us to the levers with which the locomotive works, as the same author expresses in the first part of *Philosophical Investigations* (2017) by relating words to those levers that open a valve or slow down the train. Those levers are their "language games", the uses we make of them and the ends we pursue. "The meaning of a word is its use in language"(1,43). And those games are always plural, contextual, vital. Just as the term "game" in the singular says nothing about the games that are played, but it is necessary to say the type of game, so the words-words say nothing about what things are. There are, then, no universal definitions but a "native land" (1,116) of words that play, like piano keys, the sonata of life. And these "forms of life" are not trapped by isomorphisms and cannot be represented by pictograms (pictorial theory) but are part of human action and interaction. The philosopher himself realises the possible epistemological consequences of his new theory and wonders:

So, are you saying that human agreement decides what is true and what is false? -It is what human beings say that is true or false; and they agree on the language they use. It is not an agreement of opinions but of a way of life"(1, 241).

Taking the subject to the case that concerns us, we can say: there are no labels that express better than others this complexity of contexts, of life and of the games of use and meaning. To say that "John is Down's syndrome" only makes sense in one of those "games" called "psychology of disability" but it is meaningless in other game spaces. And what about the possibility of verifying these uses? Is terraplanism the same as modern geological science? It is not enough just to expound a brilliant new theory of "language games" without drawing its logical consequences. The task of the philosopher is to unravel the skein and dissolve the problems, but also to provide solid criteria to avoid the naïve relativism to which this theory seems to be destined. The task of the philosopher, as our article says, is to get the fly out of the bottle.

### **The Performative Power of the Words that Name the World**

In our opinion, the culmination of this semantic complexity is to be found in the aforementioned author, John Austin, who develops a theory of language by introducing the

realizative or performative element as a creator of the same references. Language is not a mere photograph of the world but a way of creating, manipulating or destroying it. The positivists' propositions were valid as long as their meaning could be verified. The "house is red" is a true proposition if it can be empirically verified, i.e. if the house is red in reality. Who could disagree with this correlation? Even in sentences not yet verified we know that this logical principle applies to them. If I say "there is life on Jupiter" this sentence is susceptible of truth or falsity even if I do not have the means to do so today.

The fact is that truth-falsity is the result of a verification process that is at the basis of modern science and allows us to make, for example, better diagnoses in medicine in the face of propositions that are inflated in meaning without the possibility of verifying their reference. What happens is that propositions are not always declarative or reflect such simple events or states of affairs. Language is anchored in the world of life, and life does not consist of human beings uttering constitutive sentences but, more often than not, language is a form of action. When this is the case, the positivist solution of eliminating the proposition and calling its meaning, meaning meaningless will not do.

If the powerful president of a nation says that "country X is at war" it can mean, from a positivist point of view, that the proposition will only be true if it is verifiable and we go to the country to see that tanks are firing, soldiers are fighting and bombs are falling. Calling this "war" makes perfect sense and the news the journalist is covering is not fake news. So far it seems simple, but let's look for the complexity of the matter: Mr. President, who has interests in country X, says that country is at war. And, it is true, the country is in conflict: tanks have taken to the streets, the army has intervened, several bombs have fallen, although its leaders, those of the country itself, do not speak of "war" but of "conflict". The struggle is now in the realm of language: is this a "war" or not? And the answer is not a declarative sentence that is true or false from a logical point of view but it is necessary to understand that the word "war" is not only a constitutive term, a picture that reflects a fact but that the word itself is an action, a lever, a tool, the very weapon of war; the hyper-sense of the expression eliminates any objective reference and enters the semantic field of, here is the new magic expression, of the "performative".

Does this mean that, in this case, it is impossible to know whether the country is really at war? We think not. We believe that neutral external international observers could make a better judgement than the actors themselves. This would lead to other derivations such as the presumed neutrality of the observer and so on. If the problem is taken to infinity, we are lost because we will always have an argument to eliminate any attempt at sense-checking. War, nation, sovereignty, equality or a simple "I promise you" are all subject to the realm of signs that can be acts at the same time. These are the so-called "speech acts" that Austin thematises. Let us take a closer look at his theory and see whether or not identity expressions in the field of "disability" belong to this realm.

Many propositions serve "to indicate (and not to record) the circumstances in which the statement is formulated or the restrictions to which it is subject, or the manner in which it is

to be taken, and so on. To overlook these probabilities, as was once common, is to commit the so-called descriptive fallacy” (Austin, 2016, 43).

Performative or realisational propositions do not possess veritative conditions but are forms of life and therefore cannot be subjected to verificationist logic. The author calls this new pragmatic dimension of language a “perlocutionary act” (differentiating it from “locutionary” acts that focus on meaning or “illocutionary” acts on intention) because only in praxis can we find meaning. Austin (2016) states:

Saying something permits will produce certain consequences or effects on the knowledge, thoughts or actions of the audience. We call this the performance of a perlocutionary act (145).

If the expression “country X is at war” is an act rather than a sentence and that act can be analysed from non-logical instances, does this mean that any proposition can be an act that creates its own reference? In the case of the identities that concern us in our article, we have the problem: if I say that “Luis has a disability” or “John has Down’s syndrome” and this enunciation is performative, do we mean that whoever uses this expression is trying to “produce certain consequences or effects on knowledge”? Again, yes and no.

We will have time to develop our two-faced answer while remembering that Bertrand Russell himself, in his logical (almost playful) ramblings, denounced self-referentiality as part of the meaninglessness and paradoxes that Lewis Carroll himself was so fond of in his works such as *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass*. If the expression “war” does not refer to any war but only to the performative “war”, we cannot know whether the statement is true or false, as happens with the paradox of the liar who says he is lying; we do not know whether he is telling the truth or not, because both are paradoxical. Or, like Russell’s set which in turn includes all the sets, is this superset a set? Because if it is, we would have to find another one that includes it.

Via *reductio ad absurdum* the self-referential is brought to the pure set that self-destructs itself. Unless, as we shall see, there is another way of understanding this self-referentiality produced by meaning. If the proposition ceases to be a photograph of reality and passes to the other extreme, that is, to be the very reality that originates in the world, we are faced with a case of evident self-referentiality which, given that it lacks any veritative value, would lead to pure subjectivity. Namely, we understand that country X and powerful president X do not agree on whether or not there is a “war”, but we will agree that we can find other more rational subjects who can provide reliable and contrasted criteria to verify whether or not we are facing a real war. Unless one of the parties is so performative that it gives rise to a—here is another luminous concept—paradigm that configures the entire field of play, the entire field of meaning. If everything that happens within the paradigm as a construct that produces meaning, there is no way of knowing if there is a third element that provides rationality because everything goes through the model we are using. The map is the territory.

If the whole medical system constructs the sign “disability” as a “disease”, to get out of this construct would mean creating another paradigm where disability is not a disease but a different way of being. If the map-sign “produces” the reference from power-to produce references, we are faced with an example where Austin’s performativity becomes one of the most critical semiotic analyses that have been carried out in modernity.

### **By Way of Conclusion**

Why do we consider this semiotic analysis of the standpoint “disability” to be relevant? The standpoint, in the hands of the current epistemologists of semiotics, ceases to be just an analysis of ordinary language and becomes a critique of the places from which we speak. And from what place of enunciation are we speaking when we say “disability”? We have argued in our article that the performative power of words that name the world is a disturbing issue that needs to be analysed in a practical way. Classical analytical philosophers studied ordinary language but today, in a century where semiotics must be a hermeneutic tool of social transformation, words and signs speak to us of identities and persons.

In the modern traditions of moral and political philosophy, the identity of subjects was not relevant to the elaboration of a theory of justice. John Rawls’s famous “veil of ignorance”, for example, presupposed that it was not necessary to know the identity of subjects in order to establish principles of justice. In subsequent years, communitarian theories and civil rights social movements (defending the equality of women, blacks or indigenous people) put the concrete subjects making demands and their means of empowerment at the centre. In recent years, the politics of recognition based on the visibility of identities can be considered as one of the axes of any design of public policies or collective demands. In the field that concerns us, people with disabilities, the same debate not only focuses on the needs of the collective but also on the names with which we call the collective, an issue that, we argue, should be part of the substantive debate, a debate to which we have tried to contribute with our reflections.

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