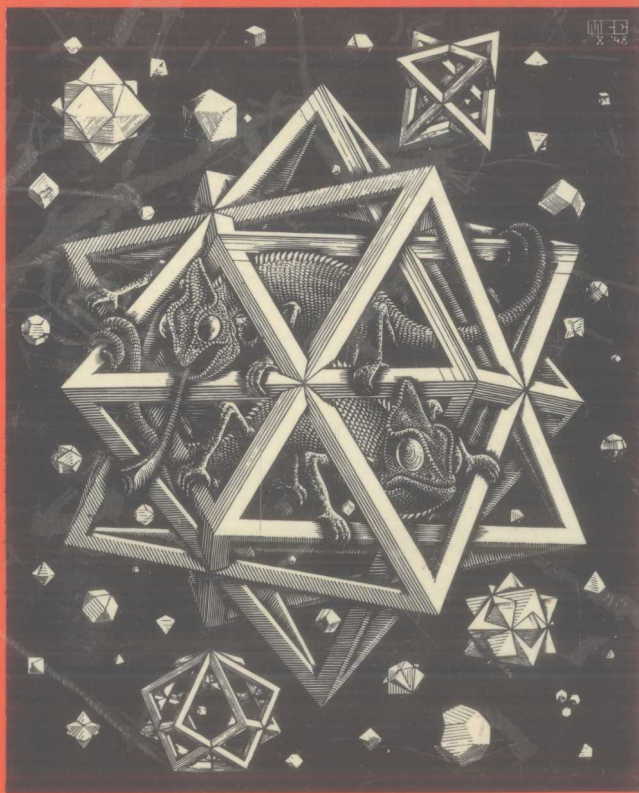


THE LIMITATIONS OF LANGUAGE

TERENCE MOORE AND CHRIS CARLING



The Limitations of Language

Terence Moore and Chris Carling

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MACMILLAN
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First published 1988

Published by
THE MACMILLAN PRESS LTD
Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 2XS
and London
Companies and representatives
throughout the world

Printed in Hong Kong

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
Moore, Terence

The limitations of language.

1. Language and languages

I. Title II. Carling, Christine

400 P121

ISBN 0-333-37152-6 (hardcover)

ISBN 0-333-37153-4 (paperback)

THE LIMITATIONS OF LANGUAGE

Also by Terence Moore and Chris Carling

***UNDERSTANDING LANGUAGE: Towards a Post-Chomskyan
Linguistics**

***Also published by Macmillan**

Preface

Most of us at one time or another have felt let down by language, have felt misunderstood or been unable to express at all adequately what is in our minds. One reason may have been that we expected too much of language, too readily took it for granted we would understand and be understood, too easily forgot that, as a means of communication, language is only a fragile bridge prone to collapse when subject to strain.

In writing this book we wanted to look at language from a fresh perspective, beginning by acknowledging that, imprisoned as we ultimately are within ourselves, communicating with one another by means of words is an inherently difficult task with no guarantee of success.

One of the ways we can make the task easier is by becoming much more conscious of the strengths and, more particularly, the limitations of language: what we cannot easily say, what we should not even expect to be able to say. Recognising the limitations of language is not the same as overcoming them – they can never be wholly overcome, only diminished. Nevertheless, the more we are aware that language is in the end no more than a rough and ready, imperfect instrument, the greater the likelihood of our understanding and being understood.

There are obvious hazards, absurdities even, in attempting to write a book about the limitations of language in language. At the best of times using language to talk about language is rather like engaging in a civil war and being on both sides at the same time. In using language to talk about the limitations of language, however, both sides are likely to be fighting a losing battle. Perhaps it would have been wiser to remain silent.

In writing the book we have been considerably helped by people from a range of professions – solicitors, social workers, marriage guidance counsellors, police – who have talked freely with us and answered patiently our seemingly obvious questions. We gratefully acknowledge their help. We should also like to thank Oxford University Press for permission to reproduce sections of

the Clarendon Press (1975) edition of John Locke's *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, edited by Peter H. Nidditch.

Cambridge

TERENCE MOORE *and* CHRIS CARLING

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Part I

Limits of Language

‘Speech is a joint game between the talker and the listener against the forces of confusion. Unless both make the effort . . . communication is quite hopeless.’

Norbert Weiner, *The Human Use of Human Beings*

1

Changing Perspectives

Wittgenstein tells a story of a man's attempt to escape from a room. First he tries the window, locked and barred, then the chimney, then a panel leading to a secret passageway, but all to no avail. He sits down in despair, head in hands. Then he notices that the door has been unlocked all the time.

Conceptual confusion is like that. We follow trails that turn out to be false; come to dead ends or run, sometimes headlong, into brick walls. Yet all the time, if we could only shift our perspective, there is an alternative, a way out, another way of looking at the problem.

Before embarking on this book, we had come to feel something of the frustration of Wittgenstein's prisoner. We wanted to understand how it is that on some occasions language works perfectly well and on other occasions perfectly badly. We looked in what seemed like all the obvious places. We read the work of fellow-linguists, of philosophers of language, of cognitive psychologists, of researchers in artificial intelligence who claimed to throw light on the workings of language.

Naturally we found much that was stimulating, and some that was not. What we also found was an implicit acknowledgement that none of us really understands our capacity to communicate through language. The knowledgeable know that there are no satisfying answers to the apparently simple questions that continue to nag at us: how communication works, why it works, whether on some occasions we should expect it to work at all.

We all know, of course, that in talking with certain people at certain times, we appear to be getting through, making contact. But we rarely stop and ask ourselves: why? What was so special or ordinary about these people, this relationship, this occasion?

Instead of stopping to ask, we ordinarily take success for granted, see it as normal, run of the mill. Worse, we expect other conversations with other people on other days to run as smoothly.

Feel let down, disappointed, even a sense of failure when they do not.

What we do not see is that much of the time we expect too much of language. We fail to see how it is double-edged. We fail to see that words can both enlighten and confuse. Inspire and mislead. We fail to see that words can both help us impose some order on our experience of living while at the same time deceive us into believing this order is greater than it really is.

Because nearly all of us expect too much of language, we are not sufficiently alert to its limitations. Not aware of the inexpressible, what we cannot say, what we should not expect to be able to say. Not aware of the vagueness and uncertainty that clouds much of our understanding. Not aware that language only enables us to communicate with one another when the conditions are right. Not aware of the emptiness of language when they are not.

Why, we wondered are we so resolutely unaware? Why do we have such high expectations of language? Where do they come from? How justified are they?

Faced with no obvious answers to these persistent questions, we gradually came to realise that, like Wittgenstein's prisoner, we too had been looking in the wrong places. In practice the door could be opened, though where it would lead was another question. The key, curiously enough, we found in the work of John Locke – in Book III of *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*.

Before that key could be effectively used, however, we had, like Wittgenstein's prisoner, to realise the possibility of changing our perspective. For us the shift began on a longish walk, a walk on which the seeds of this book were sown. It began as quite an ordinary walk but turned out in the end to be extraordinary.

We are keen fell walkers, reasonably experienced now. But there was a time when we would stride off into the Peaks or the Lakeland Fells with a map, but without a compass, only to end up entirely lost charging across bogs, running to avoid sinking in too far. Fortunately we wore tough, no-nonsense army surplus boots that shrugged off water and seemed to thrive on mud.

Many of those early expeditions have sunk into oblivion, but one, the saga of South Head, we have not wanted to forget. We were in the Pennines at the Peak District end. We had left our car in the village of Hayfield and set out with rucksacks stocked with

food and thermoses on a circular walk we had planned from an Ordnance Survey map.

We were to go south first but only for a very short way as far as Coldwell Clough, then east to Edale Cross by Jacob's Ladder; there we would turn north on to the Pennine Way, north west at Kinder Downfall, and eventually complete the circle by coming back down William Clough, passing above Kinder reservoir before regaining the village.

It was August and a fine day. A weekday in a holiday month. We set off along a well-defined track which our map told us should remain well-defined for about two-and-a-half miles, probably more – that is until we were fairly near Edale Cross where we were to join the Pennine Way. At this early stage in our walking career we had never been on the Pennine Way, but we had heard how it was heavily used. We had visions of suddenly coming upon streams of hikers – the Piccadilly of the Peaks.

Not that as yet we had seen anyone at all. We marched along cheerfully, fresh and optimistic as we always were at the start. After about half an hour we passed through a farm at a point where the track took a turn. We consulted the map. There was a farm on the map alright, marked South Head Farm, but it was somewhat to the south of our track. So this couldn't be South Head Farm. We looked again more closely. There, where the track marked on the map, our track, turned east, was a tiny grey square – didn't that generally mean 'building'? That grey square on the map must be this farm. Funny though, we thought we had gone further than that. According to the map we still had more than a mile-and-a-half to go to Edale Cross with the prospect of Jacob's Ladder and the streams of hikers. But at least it was a mile-and-a-half along a track which looked as though it should be well-defined.

And so we marched on. Only before very long the well-defined track became an ill-defined track which then all but petered out. We weren't unduly perturbed. Tracks had petered out on us before. We could see from the contour lines on the map that we should be climbing, and ahead there was certainly a steepish-looking slope with something which may very well have been a track wending its way up the side.

So we soldiered on steeply, through longish grass. The fine day had become a hot day, and there were lots of flies about which can

be a hazard when you're panting and have to open your mouth to gulp in extra air. The 'track' had quickly proved itself to be a sheep run.

But at least we were near the top, or so it seemed. Only it was one of those illusions you get used to when you walk a lot in the hills. What looks like *the* top turns out to be merely *a* top, a stage on the way to another 'top' and another. . . Funny, the contour lines on the map hadn't looked all that close together. We hadn't expected the climb towards Edale Cross to be so steep.

Finally, after much sweating and many flies, we emerged to our relief and delight at a junction, our non-existent path joining a broad track. The Pennine Way this, surely. No sign of the streams of hikers though. And if this were Edale Cross, shouldn't there be a cross?

There wasn't. But what there was, just up ahead, was a small summit that looked eminently climbable and could only be Jacob's Ladder. We decided to have our lunch on top.

Munching our ham rolls we surveyed the countryside stretched out before us with a certain satisfaction. That stiff climb had been tough . . . well, toughish . . . and what with the path petering out . . . this map really was not reliable.

Drinking our coffee we looked at the map again, and again at the countryside stretched out below us. According to the map, if we looked right we should expect to see a path leading off into the hills towards Kinder Scout. To our left we should see another summit, this one called Brown Knoll. We looked right. There was a track alright, the one we had been so relieved to see when we emerged from our climb. But far from stretching away into the hills, it appeared to lead down to a road. The same track going in the opposite direction was visible when we looked to our left. There was, however, no sign of Brown Knoll. Instead, another road.

We peered harder at the map, willing it to make some sort of sense until one of us voiced what we had both begun thinking: 'Maybe this isn't Jacob's Ladder after all.' But if we weren't at Jacob's Ladder, where were we?

According to the map Jacob's Ladder was about two-and-a-half miles, certainly no more than three miles, due east of where we had started. Had we somehow managed to overshoot it, or go round it, or . . . ? We scrutinised the entire eastern section of the map trying to make it fit the terrain we saw around us, the track

and the two roads which were undeniably there whatever the map said. But we failed. The only roads within striking distance of where we had started were to the south.

And we certainly hadn't been going south. Or had we? We looked again at the map and at the roads, and it slowly dawned on us that we might have to abandon entirely the view that had sustained us up to now, the view that we were walking in an easterly direction towards Edale Cross and the Pennine Way. The only way the map and the terrain made any sense at all was if we were not due east at all, but instead due south of where we had started so cheerfully and optimistically not so very long before.

Looked at from this new perspective it was obvious we were nowhere near Jacob's Ladder, but on the very lowly summit of South Head. Looked at from this new perspective it was abundantly clear that we had taken a wrong fork almost at the start and that the farm we had passed had indeed been South Head Farm, where, as the map now very clearly indicated, the track did come to an end. So we had looked in vain for a path as we had scrambled up the steep slope in the heat and the flies. There wasn't one, as the map now made perfectly plain.

It was an extraordinary moment of revelation we have never forgotten. Shifting our perspective and suddenly seeing everything fall into place. Order out of confusion. We were entirely taken aback. Not because we had gone wrong. That wasn't at all difficult to believe. But because we had concealed it from ourselves so successfully. We had forged on doggedly, interpreting the world around us the way we required it to be, forcing the terrain to fit our reading of the map, blissfully unaware we were walking an illusion.

Like Wittgenstein's prisoner we had expected the world to conform to our view of it. Only when we gave up our view, or rather exchanged it for another – for there has to be some view – did a door open and a way forward reveal itself.

South Head has stayed with us as a salutary reminder of how easy it is to see the world selectively, to forget that it can look quite different from another perspective, to assume we see it as it *is*; to believe we understand it better than we do.

'South Head' became our way of reminding one another that the world is often not as it seems; that we, each of us, forge our own perspective, our way of looking at things, our way of imposing order on the world around us. And though we often do so on the

flimsiest of evidence, relying on hunches and intuitions, we find it nevertheless surprisingly difficult to change our perspective, to see that we may have been misled.

Subsequently South Head took on a much richer significance, helping us to see that we had been tackling problems of language and understanding too from the wrong point of view. If we could go so wrong in interpreting a map, because we failed to see that there could be another perspective, another interpretation, might we not go just as wrong in interpreting what others said or wrote? Failing to remember that they might see the world in a quite different way, that their words – though apparently the same as ours – might have another, quite different interpretation. Might others too be wandering equally astray in understanding us?

Languages, it struck us, are in some respects like maps. If each of us sees the world from our particular perspective, then an individual's language is, in a sense, like a map of their world. Trying to understand another person is like trying to read a map, their map, a map of the world from their perspective. And as we well knew, map-reading is a craft, a skill. Some of us learn to do it better than others.

As maps can mislead and confuse, the more so if used without a compass, so too can language. Particularly if we expect too much of it, forget the different perspectives. Particularly if we exaggerate its strengths, fail to see its inherent limitations.

But if this is a book about the limitations of language, it is not so much about how to overcome them – they can never be wholly overcome – as about how to understand them. It is a book that may in the right hands serve as a compass to the use of language, a help in finding bearings when the going gets tough and we seem to have lost the route to understanding others and making ourselves understood.

* * *

It is also a book about the paradoxes inherent in language. For becoming alert to its limitations does not mean losing our wonder at the miracle of language: somebody shapes a few noises with their tongue and lips, or scribbles some marks on paper, and if the conditions are right, other people respond, are moved to action or to tears, to excitement, to anger, to compassion, to indignation, to laughter, moved to see things differently, feel things more sharply