

## LANGUAGE: THE NON-DECISIVE, THE NON-SECURE VARIABLE FROM AN ELIOTIAN PERSPECTIVE

*Piku Chowdhury*

*Assistant Professor, Satyapriya Roy College of Education, Kolkata, West Bengal, India*

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### ABSTRACT

*Language deemed as the mode of human communication emerges to be volatile, insecure and elusive with the all-pervasive complexity and evolving perplexity of modern life. T.S.Eliot's frustrated wrestle against the ever elusive linguistic certitude is reassessed against the similar quests and perceptual profiles in this paper. This paper remains a humble attempt at exploring the poetic and philosophical anxiety with the inefficacy of the linguistic modules as modality of human communication, culminating in a reassuring faith in the human indomitable spirit of exploration and quest with scant regard for the outcome. In the journey lies the challenge and the beauty and not in the apprehended or awaited result.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Eliot, Rorty, Chomsky, Zizek, Words, Communication, Elusive*

### INTRODUCTION

Noam Chomsky distinguishes between the cognitive and performance systems of human language faculty, assuming that the former interacts with the later by means of levels of linguistic representation. He assumes that the human cognitive system interacts with two external systems –the articulatory – perceptual system (A – P), and the conceptual – intentional system (C – I). Accordingly he identifies a double-interface, comprising of the Phonetic form at the first level and a Logical form at the conceptual–intentional interface. The tensive forces operating between the two create formidable barriers to utterance–signification–comprehension linearity. Chomsky is aware of such nonlinear relations that test the adequacy of human language:

Even within the general frame-work, the idea that articulation and perception involve the same interface representation is controversial, and arguably incorrect in some fundamental way. Problems relating to the C – I interface are still more obscure and poorly understood...When questions are more sharply formulated, it is learned that even elementary phenomena had escaped notice, and that intuitive accounts that seems simple and persuasive are entirely inadequate. If we are satisfied that an apple falls to the ground because that is its natural place, there will be no serious science of mechanics. The same is true if one is satisfied with traditional rules for forming questions...Recognition of the unsuspected richness and complexity of the phenomenon of language created a tension between the goals of descriptive and explanatory adequacy...Experience must suffice to fix...a state of language faculty that determines the varied and complex array of expressions, their sound and meaning; and even the most superficial look reveals the chasm that separates the knowledge of the language user from the

data of experience.<sup>1</sup>

Contextually distinct and yet a poignant portrayal of human intentions and concepts in a fatal grapple with articulation and fluid perception–formation, the Chomskyan perspective opens up a plethora of intriguing queries regarding the communicative and discursive framework of the socio-cultural superstructure.

Eliot experiences the deepening crisis. As the social relations grow more and more complex and the allied planes of chequered experience grow perplexingly variant, the conceptual–intentional system, working through the Logical Form of interface, gets entangled in a mesh of confusion in its attempts to confer a logical shape to the experiential variables which basically defy logical conceptualization. The crisis deepens with the Phonetic Form of the articulatory–perceptual system attempting a conscious rendition of the transient and essentially elusive fixity of conceptualisation in acts of speech. Eliot traces the roots of the crisis to the initial step of conceptualization at which human cognition grapples with bewildering multiplicity of variables to locate continually eluding stabilities. The greater the awareness of the variables, the deeper the confusion and frustration in failing to locate a fixity of resolution:

In the world today we find ourselves more and more trying consciously to manipulate what had been left to take its own course – that is, our area of conscious manipulation becomes bigger and bigger. A problem comes into existence through our ability to become aware of it; the awareness shapes the problem; and once we are conscious of a problem, we cannot dismiss it from consciousness; we find ourselves under obligation to try to find an answer.<sup>2</sup>

If a conscious wrestling with perplexing experiential variables generate a cognitive crisis, an awareness of the magnitude of the complexities and the multiple dimensions of a single phenomenon enhance the articulatory crisis. The given restrictive domain of language appears to stumble against a frustratingly dense opacity in its ambitious attempts of registering what is terribly differential and completely beyond the given rule-bound system of traditional codification. The existential exigency of the multilayered identity in the contemporary social complex, generates a deep-seated linguistic contingency. It finds a poignant expression in Harry's self-explanatory performative in *The Family Reunion*:

Harry.

They don't understand what it is to be awake,

To be living on several planes at once

Though one cannot speak with several voices at once.

I have all the right minded feeling about John

That you consider appropriate. Only that's not the language

[. . . ]What you call normal

Is merely the unreal and the important.

I was like that in a way, so long as I could think

Even of my own life as an isolated ruin,

A casual bit of waste in an orderly universe.

But it begins to seem just part of some huge disaster,

Some monstrous mistake and aberrations

Of all men, of the world, which I cannot put in order.  
[ . . . ] Oh, there must be another way of talking  
That would get us somewhere. You don't understand me.  
You can't understand me.<sup>3</sup>

The opaque block at the speech-reception, articulatory–perceptual interface where performatives tend to slip into engulfing bogs of non comprehension, where the utterances tend to fly and yet continually collide with restrictive norms of linguistic grammar, creates considerable tension. What results is a state of stupendous contradiction. Everyone prepares for what is perceived as reality and yet end up in absolute isolation, a failure in reconciling with the world through individual perception. Articulatory efforts at connecting with the others involved in the total scheme terminate in utter frustration:

Harry. I feel an overwhelming need for explanation –  
But perhaps I only dream that I am talking  
And shall wake to find that I have been silent  
Or talked to the stone deaf : and the others  
Seem to hear something else than what I am saying.<sup>4</sup>

Even in the conscious state, a keen awareness of the frustrating fiasco destined to taint every performative act, assails the intellect:

Harry. If I tried to explain, you could never understand:  
Explaining would only make a worse misunderstanding;  
Explaining would only set me farther away from you.<sup>5</sup>

The frustration does not congeal into an absolute passivity comprising a total resignation and concomitant inaction. One is aware of a contradiction, as mentioned earlier, and the very awareness stirs an urgency to act for emancipation. If the pressure of the inarticulate perennially tests the restrictive limits of a given language, there must be a way to break free; a way to transcend the normative hegemony and access the realm of freedom, the sense of release in a complete communication. One must try:

Agatha. We must try to penetrate the other private worlds of make- believe and fear.<sup>6</sup>

If momentary impressions of appropriate contact through words in a communicative act emerge, the luminescence tends to disappear fast in the pervading opacity of fluid verbal constructs. But one must keep trying to penetrate the opacity in quest of the lost point of contact:

each venture  
Is a new beginning, a raid on the inarticulate  
With shabby equipment always deteriorating  
[ . . . ] There is only the fight to recover what has been lost  
And found and lost again and again: and now, under conditions  
That seems unpropitious. But perhaps neither is gain or loss,  
For us, there is only the trying.<sup>7</sup>

In the very attempt of framing concepts that may or may not be articulated with utmost clarity and precision, in the very act of articulation – a “fight” against the formidable restrictions of a limited dialect, lies the essence of freedom, an essence realising itself in resistance to repression and in a burning urge of liberation. The essence of a contradiction comprises of an essence of a potential revolt against the tyranny of systematic rule-bound suppression. Chomsky refers to Humboldt’s analysis of human nature and the intrinsic generative nature of human language that invents freely even within a straitjacket of regulations. He refers to Schelling’s appraisal of the necessity of an essential “contradiction” in the process. The tension between rule and choice, necessity of formal restriction and an urge to break free, generates a force operative within the human cognitive and articulatory manifold, necessary for an effective communication: “Language is a process of free creation; its laws and principles are fixed, but the manner in which the principles of generation are used is free and indefinitely varied. Even the interpretation and use of words involves a process of free creation. The normal use of language and the acquisition of language depend on what Humboldt calls the fixed form of language, a system of generative processes that is rooted in the nature of the human mind and constraints but does not determine the free creations of normal intelligence...they speak of “contradiction” in the...metaphoric sense of Schelling, when he writes that “without the contradiction of necessity and freedom not only philosophy but every nobler ambition of the spirit would sink to that death which is peculiar to those sciences in which that contradiction serves no function”. Without this tension between necessity and freedom, rule and choice, there can be no creativity, no communication, no meaningful acts at all.”<sup>8</sup>

If Harry’s performatives perennially contradict his intentions, the ensuing contradictions and combat only operate as powerful forces propelling the utterances towards communicative liberation. When Mary says, “You bring your own landscape/ No more real than the other. And in a way you contradict/ Yourself”, the contradictions and combat in Harry’s cognitive domain are brought out. Every individual moves round and round in a suffocating circularity, perpetually denied access to the innermost depths of the other’s word, engaged in a terrible drama of mutual conversation on a floor of absurdity, within a terrible vacuity, waiting for some moment of contact that is perpetually deferred. It seems to echo Samuel Beckett’s portrayal of a tremendous tension between the impossibility of speaking and the tormenting necessity to connect: “[...] all words, there’s nothing else, you must go on, that’s all I now, they’re going to stop, I know that well, I can feel it, they’re going to abandon me, it will be the silence, for a moment, a good few moments, or it will be mine, the lasting one, that didn’t last, that still lasts, it will be I, you must go on, I can’t go on, you must go on, I’ll go on, you must say words, as long as there are any, until they find me, until they say me, strange pain, strange sin, you must go on, perhaps it’s done already, perhaps they have said me already, perhaps they have carried me to the threshold of my story, before the door that opens on my story, that would surprise me, if it opens, it will be I, [...]where I am, I don’t know, I’ll never know, in the silence you don’t know, you must go on, I can’t go on, I’ll go on.”<sup>9</sup> Every human heart is eventually shown to be torn apart by such intrinsic contradictions. However, this tension allows a certain degree of perceptual freedom from of an urge to break free from the throttling vacuity and thus essentially suggests a “common pursuit of liberation”.<sup>10</sup> The journey, no matter how protracted and agonising, may then be perceived as comprising not only hopelessness, but also an element of hope:

Harry. In and out, in an endless drift

Of shrieking forms in a circular desert

Weaving with contagion of putrescent embraces  
On dissolving bone. In and out, the movement  
Until the chain broke, and I was left  
Under the single eye above the desert.  
Agatha. Up and down, through the stone pass ages  
Of an immense and empty hospital  
Pervaded by a smell of disinfectant,  
Looking straight ahead, passing barred windows.  
Up and down. Until the chain breaks.  
Harry. To and fro, dragging my feet  
Among inner shadows in the smoky wilderness,  
Trying to avoid the clasping branches  
And the giant Lizard. To and fro.  
Until the chain breaks.<sup>11</sup>

The point, at which the chain breaks, or might break, is perhaps a state, where all restrictive variegated and perplexing folds of verbal modules are transcended. It is a point where language, reflecting the complexities of modern human life, succeeds in suggesting a deeper fold of signification. “The time has come”, asserted Schelling, “to proclaim to a nobler humanity the freedom of the spirit, and no longer to have patience with men’s tearful regrets for their lost chains...the beginning and the end of all Philosophy is freedom”<sup>12</sup> The strife against and resistance to the illegitimate authority to restrictive linguistic strictures and limited signification gains a strange urgency in the depiction of the anxious and restless phase preceding a shattering of fetters, in the hope of a level of communication where the luminous logos succeeds in dissolving the opacity of non comprehension. The luminosity of the inner word, akin to the Greek ‘logos endiathetos’ closes all intimidating gaps admitting forces of destruction; constructs a deeper language of communication, glorious with the clarity and succour of love, that touches the realms of the eternal. The resistance to the tyranny of limited words, the almost asthmatic gasping for accuracy of speech, the resolution against shackles that throttle expression – all lead to a penultimate zone of peace where individuals tend to comprehend fully the divine voice of love. The final exchange between Charles and Monica in *The Elder Statesman* brings out the certitude and security of the intuited language of love that can surpass all surface insecurities and opacity. A new consciousness reveals the inarticulate absolute:

Charles. that now we are conscious of a new person...  
Oh my dear,  
I love you to the limits of speech, and beyond.  
It’s strange that words are so inadequate.  
Yet, like the asthmatic struggling for breath,  
So the lover must struggle for words.  
Monica. Age and decrepitude can have no terrors for me,

Loss and vicissitude cannot appal me,  
 Not even death can dismay or amaze me  
 Fixed in the certainty of love unchanging.  
 I feel utterly secure.<sup>13</sup>

But is this the end of the journey? Is this the final destination of an arduous pilgrimage? Is this the final strata of eternal certitude where all opacity dissolves and the anxious verbal manifold resolves into a finality of the luminous logos? The suggestion seems alluring, but somewhat elusive. The voice of love imparts security, but the asthmatic struggle for life-breath still pervades the verbal endeavours. The revolution continues: an intriguing combat where even 'love' can become a 'general' term, how much it truly conveys being solely dependent on factors essentially related to a mutual ability to converge on a transient commonality of expectations. Monica can perhaps understand what Charles articulates, but that is not because of an abrupt epiphanic luminescence of the verbal modules, but due to a convergence of expectations at that particular moment. Charles concedes that words are strangely inadequate and yet can understand Monica with utmost clarity. This is perhaps due to his ability to anticipate that his feelings would be reciprocated and Monica would perform a speech-act convergent with his. Whenever such a convergence of expectations is wanting, failure of communication takes place. No one expects Harry to perform the speech-act that he does on returning to Wishwood in *The Family Reunion*. Charles is taken by surprise as are all the other family members except Agatha. It is this element of an inability to guess what the other is going to say that leads to a general opacity of non-comprehension. Richard Rorty refers to Davidson's "passing theory" about an individual's total behaviour or a set of guesses about how he will act under what conditions; such a theory being 'passing' since it is amenable to continual correction to allow for "mumbles, stumbles, malapropisms, metaphors, tics, seizures, psychotic symptoms, egrerious stupidity, strokes of genius, and the like"<sup>14</sup>. Every moment the words may alter in signification and the pattern of every communicative act may change drastically: "The knowledge imposes a pattern, and falsifies, For the pattern is new in every moment/And every moment is a new and shocking/Valuation of all we have been."<sup>15</sup> The words and the revolt against the hegemony of their representational roles remains, but comprehension or a frustrating non-comprehension, appears to depend more on a mutual ability of converging on certain articulatory expectations. The endorsement of the element of strife that is perennial and is denied any ultimate certitude is evident in an overt acknowledgement of the "passing" nature of every verbal articulation. New words are quested and new utterances formed continually as communicators trapped in the labyrinthine mazes of social discourse indulge in verbal acrobatics, cautious like one handling boa constrictors, trying not to be surprised, and attempting to locate areas of common mutual expectations: "If we ever succeed in communicating easily and happily, it will be because her guesses about what I am going to do next, including what noises I am going to make next, and my own expectations about what I shall do or say under certain circumstances, come more or less to coincide, and because the converse is also true. She and I are coping with each other as we might cope with mangoes or boa constrictors – we are trying not to be taken by surprise. To say that we come to speak the same language is to say, as Davidson puts it, that "we tend to converge on passing theories". Davidson's point is that all "two people need, if they are to understand one another through speech, is the ability to converge on passing theories from utterance to utterance".<sup>16</sup>

Wittgenstein, comes close to this element of surprise that generates a certain degree of non-comprehensibility, in his

On Certainty, when he argues that his presence in England at the moment may not be questioned, but in the given place and time if things occurred totally in opposition to any apprehension, he may be marginalized as a lunatic since the proceedings would be far beyond his comprehensive ability: “Would it not be possible that people came into my room and all declared the opposite?...so that I suddenly stood there like a madman? [ . . . ] Might I not be shaken if things such as I don’t dream of at present were to happen?”<sup>17</sup> The apparition of the non-decisive, the non-secure haunts all three: Rorty, Wittgenstein and Eliot. For Rorty, philosophical and historical grand narratives fail to project a foundation of truth as truth is essentially ‘made’ and not found. Words do not represent a higher plane of reality lying beyond, a stance typically Wittgensteinian in essence: “Truth cannot be out there – cannot exist independently of the human mind – because sentences cannot so exist, or be out there. The world is out there, but descriptions of the world are not.”<sup>18</sup> Wittgenstein’s later views conceived of language as a repertoire of games which resist logical solutions and contends that post-Saussurian textual theory based on an emphasis on a split between signifier and signified, is fundamentally feeble as words can scarcely relate directly to objects or ideas. Lyotard too, in his *The Postmodern Condition*, describes philosophy as a proliferation of language games defying pre-disciplined restrictions. Eliot’s perennial anxiety about the difference or gap between ideas and expressions, tend to mature towards such an idea of the words being a fighting-ground for members engaged in a communicative act, attempting to reach a common point of convergence of expectations and behaviour. That point may be termed reality for the moment for the individuals involved in the act of communication, but then the suggestion remains that it was created by a convergence of linguistic behaviour; the words did not painfully rise to a metaphysical height where transcendental truth waited to be touched and represented. In his *Knowledge and Experience in the Philosophy of F. H. Bradley*, Eliot had overtly suggested the gap between words and ideas: “The fact that words are always used in the expression of ideas, and are remembered and placed by attachment to a more or less indefinite group of ideas in which they have been used, may lead us to regard ideas as the meaning of words. Now there is a decided difference...A word, it is true, may mean or stand for an idea. But there will never be an identity between the meaning of the word as concept, and the meaning of the word as idea.”<sup>19</sup> A concept exceeds all possible definitions. ‘The shadow’ that falls between the idea and reality, between conception and creation, is a gap that is akin to the Derridian difference and supplementation: “Between the idea/And the reality/Between the motion/And the act/Falls the shadow[...]/Between the conception/And the creation[. . . ] Between the desire / And the spasm/Between the potency/ And the existence [ . . . ] Falls the shadow.”<sup>20</sup>

Concepts are inexpressible. Ideas and objects are related in an essentially fluid manner; ideas are continually in a relational world, and thus words are also relational in nature. For Eliot, much as for Derrida, words endlessly lead to other words and sentences to other sentences. In the interminable process of “supplementation”, there is no end, but continual addition or extension. There seems to be no definite transcendental signified but an endless play of words that can only produce a “husk of meaning”. Derrida refers to this play of words and human thought as a playground for the chimerical game of presence and absence, a proportion that defies semantic centrality and fixity, coming close to the fluid moments of convergence when a semblance of comprehension is achieved, only to dissolve in further proliferation: “From the moment there is meaning there are nothing but signs. We think only in signs...One could call play the absence of the transcendental signified as timelessness of the play, that is to say as the destruction of ontotheology and the metaphysics of presence...Here

one must think of writing as a game within language .<sup>21</sup>The anxiety had found poignant expression in Little Gidding: “And what you thought you came for/Is only as hell, a husk of meaning/ From which the purpose breaks only when it is fulfilled/ If at all. Either you had no purpose/ Or the purpose is beyond the end you figured/And is altered in fulfilment”<sup>22</sup>

Eliot seems to be pointing at an essential gap or an absence present at the heart of any verbal expression, the meaning always defined by relation, contingent context of the utterance and thus essentially variable. If there is any realization of structural unity in any poetic communication, as discerned in fragmented poems like *The Wasteland*, that basic structural unity, as early scholars like Frank Wilson and the New Critics had assumed, is not easy to locate; it remains elusive. Again the very concept of unity encompasses the presence of more than one element, and this very plurality indicates the presence of absences in the form of gaps that confer individual ideality to each element; after all they are said to unite and not melt into one another to the point of nondistinction. The apparent presence of unity at any level of communication is thus full of absences that are an integral part of its own cogency and necessity. The reconstruction of the Marxist problematic of structural determinism, albeit in a sociological context, projects the inherent lacunae of any conceivable structure, gaps that represent the very form of temporality, possibility and freedom. Althusser, Cohen, Elster and Giddens in their attempts at reconstruction of Marxist theory, shared a common faith in the conception of structure as a fully constituted objective whole with a gamut of tangible effects. However the social structure, conceived as a discursive structure, continually project a dislocation - a fact pointed out by E. Laclau. Laclau points out the presence of certain elements in the structure that constantly resist representation, symbolization or any form of domestication to the discursive superstructure. This dislocation, argues Laclau, is a permanent and integral part of the structure that continually reveal the limits. Dislocation remains the traumatic event of chaos and crisis that maintains the essential incompleteness of the discursive structure.<sup>23</sup> Concomitantly the social agency or the subject is denied a fixed identity, as such an identity may only evolve in reaction to the structure.<sup>24</sup> Thus ensues a struggle for establishing a fully achieved identity. The constitutive lack that marks the subject becomes the locus of a struggle not determined by the structure that is itself dislocated. Žižek portrays the quest for identity in interesting terms, comparing the social agency to a signification that is desperately searching for an apt signifier capable of expressing its full identity in the symbolic order.<sup>25</sup> However such a quest is destined to failure because the discursive structure or the symbolic order is essentially disrupted and signifiers either project an excess or something grossly inadequate. The failure constitutes a gap. What is interesting in this entire project is the subject's urge for seeking a complete identity or an adequate signifier. Even before its subjectivation, the individual member of the society suffers from a constitutive lack; and the concomitant urge that initiates a quest for a complete identity operates as an urge to fill the gap. Such an act however, involves a decision making by the subject; an act of the individual will since the fractured social discursive structure does not confer any definite predetermined identity upon the subject. The Eliotian discourse seems to identify the gaps in the social superstructure and also the struggle of obdurate elements or certain subjects who continually reject the circular inanity of the network of social communication that indulges in a plethora of verbal structures basically incommunicative. The intuited gaps urge them to embark on a journey for filling them in order to constitute complete identities, an act of individual decision. Whether such identities are found and whether the gaps are filled remains a matter of speculation. What is important is perhaps the initiation of the quest to fill the gaps in the fractured discursive structure and the individual decision of doing so. Harry in *The Family*

Reunion is a poignant portrayal of intense suffering from such lacunae in discursive structure and a final election of rejecting the masquerading void of social discourse, setting out in quest of a complete signifier that would signify his complete identity. The success or final destination of such a journey is not spelled out, but the urge for the pilgrimage remains an indication of a possibility of healing the rift; only a subtle sensation of the possibility of a true communication that may reveal the true idea: “Why is it so quiet?/Do you feel a kind of stirring underneath the air?/Do you? don’t you? a communication, [. . . ] And now I know/That my business is not to run away, but to pursue,Not to avoid being found, but to seek.”<sup>26</sup> What seems significant is his willed and wilful selection of a strenuous journey against the futile network of the social discursive structure. The element of choice that recurs in the Eliotian discourse of the progress of social agencies against an essentially fractured societal superstructure, is intriguing. Earlier in the present paper, Wittgenstein’s concept of lunacy or oddness had been mentioned. Through such an instance, he seems to locate an element of volition or wilfulness in the entire project of comprehension. In Zettel, he argues that if bewilderment at an unexpected turn of events and utter perplexity in one’s inability to comprehend the unexpected events, overpower an individual to such an extent that he fears that he has gone mad, then such a surrender to the opacity generated by unexpected phenomena reflects a lack of individual will to ferret out the true signification. The element of choice thus is granted supremacy. One must choose to encounter the opacity and journey towards signification, towards an identity denied by the volatile nature of the fractured societal discourse.

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