

Contrastive Study of the Ancient Chinese and Western Linguistic Worldview

Jia Yuxin

Sun Benqing

Harbin Institute of Technology

Harbin Institute of Technology

Abstract

Worldview refers to "a set of more or less systematized beliefs and values in terms of which the group evaluates and attaches meaning to the reality that surrounds it" (Kraft, 1978). By extension, we presume, linguistic worldview may refer to a set of more or less systematized beliefs and values in terms of how a group evaluates and attaches meaning to the world/ reality, thought, and language as well as the relationships, between or among them. Three related elements are involved in this discussion: world/cosmos or reality, thought, and language. Four issues will be discussed in this paper. First, we will compare the worldviews, in which two dimensions will be involved: 1) ways of perceiving the world and 2) in connection to this, the epistemological issue: the nature of knowledge or how we come to know the world. Secondly, we will discuss beliefs in the performative forces of language on both sides. Thirdly, the paper will analyze the differences in the philosophical views of language. And lastly, very briefly, the influence of linguistic worldviews on communication on both sides will be illustrated.

1. Ancient Linguistic Worldviews

1.1 The Linguistic Worldview of Chinese Philosophers

Preconditioned by its natural and geographical environment in ancient times, Chinese people heavily depended upon agriculture and had to constantly follow the exchange of day and night and the exchange of seasons, and thus cosmos was perceived as one of a "harmoniously functioning organism

consisting of an orderly hierarchy of interrelated parts and forces, which, though unequal in their status, are equally essential for the total process" (Wei, 1980). Ancient Chinese viewed that everything in cosmos including the rise and fall of political systems, human life, etc. was in a continuous circulation, following the law of nature or what was called *Tao* (not controlled by external forces) and all the things were and should be merged with nature harmoniously. Stemming from this worldview, and with the orientation of harmony between man and nature, the patterns of thinking can be well characterized as holistic, integrative, intuitive, relational, and dialectical which are almost in sharp contrast with those that can be characterized as analytical, abstract, and deductive prevalent in the West. Based upon this thinking patterns and worldview, epistemologically, knowledge was primarily gained through intuition with emphasis on synthesis through configural logic, as well as introspection, and contemplation of unity between self and the world. The purpose of knowing was to establish oneness or unity between man and nature, the subjective and the objective, the inner-world and the outer-world. Above all, all the knowing is about the illustrations of *Tao* and to closely follow it. All of this finds best expression in the Chinese word *xuexi*, meaning 'learning', which means 1) to copy and imitate and 2) to understand or to acquire moral consciousness or simply to acquire unity between learning and virtue. With regard to *Tao*, it was defined in ancient times in three dimensions: the way of heaven, the way of earth, and the way of man (Book of Changes). The way of heaven and the way of earth refer to the law of nature while the way of man refers to the law of people and society. The three ways are interrelated and interdependent. The way of man, for example, is regarded as the extension of the way of nature.

Taoism advocated the way of nature as well as the way of man while Confucianism mainly advocated the way of man. Taoism believed that *Tao*, the law of nature and man was formless, unfathomable, and unspeakable and language was regarded as negative, while *Tao* or *the way of man* in Confucianism acquired the speakable nature and became the ethic system. To be more specific, as a result of the cosmic pattern or way of perceiving the world mentioned above, *Tao* adopted *Wu Wei* or *non-action* in English as its political stand and *Wu Ming* ('namelessness' in English) as its epistemological foundation as *Wei* ('action') including argument and debate could cause disorder, thus violating unity and harmony and *Tao* could not be described in language.

Confucianism, however, took a different direction, even though it shared the same worldview and thought patterns with Taoism. It extended the concept of *Tao*, the law of nature to the law of man and society and advocated active participation in administering the society, keeping it in order, in which the act of language played an important role.

In comparison, on the basis of the ideology of *Tao* and Confucianism about the world, thought, reality, and language, we can see clearly that *Tao* and

Confucianism, though taking different political stands and epistemological approaches, were in fact attempting to achieve the same objective, i.e. to achieve harmony in the society and between man and nature. These no doubt have a great impact on their view of language and language use. However, linguistic worldview for Taoism can be called "out of the world", meaning 'getting out of the world or going back to where human life had started', while for Confucianism, "into the world", meaning 'being actively engaged in regulating the society.' However, these two divergent ideologies in the long term of historical development have indeed complemented each other in making the Chinese behave the way they do and speak the way they speak.

1.2 The Linguistic Worldview of the Western Philosophers

In contrast the worldview held by the ancient Chinese, the ancient Westerners perceive the cosmos as created and controlled by a 'divine power' and as the cosmos was controlled by supernatural force, there must be laws of nature. In connection to this worldview, the Westerners perceive the world in terms of dichotomies. Things in the eye of Westerners are analyzable and dividable, such as man and nature, spirit and material. In this light, man and nature is separated and thus man can stand by and study nature objectively, and then conquer it. And then men can reach out or extend themselves to nature and society and impose their will on them. In analyzing and dividing things, they tend to look at things in terms of good vs. evil, right vs. wrong, etc. This, according to Stewart, predisposes the Westerners to the habit of judging and evaluating things by comparison. This way of perception is the reflection of the Western pattern of thought, which can best be characterized as linear, logical, analytical, and abstract. And in regard to knowledge and knowing process, unlike those of the Chinese, the Westerners tend to start "from postulations with an emphasis on analysis through *linear* logic by syllogism and dialectic processes" (Gudykunst 1988).

In controlling the society and conquering nature, language becomes a tool in exploring nature, extending self, persuading and changing others. The West has long had the tradition of believing the persuasive and assertive power of language. Logos (meaning speech and Rede) has long been regarded as God.

In contrast to the linguistic worldview of "getting out of the world" for Taoism, "getting into the world" for Confucianism, we may use the term "creating the world" for the Western philosophy.

2. Similar Belief in the Performative Force of Language: East and West

As ancient Chinese and Western philosophy underlying language and its use was represented by different ideologies: the Chinese philosophy of language finds expressions in the definition of *Tao* while the Western philosophy can be

explained in the definition of Logos, their linguistic worldviews are entirely different. However, very interestingly, their belief in the performative force of language long time ago was very close to each other. The philosophers on both sides believed in the creative function of language - they both believed language created all the things in the world. Both ancient Chinese and Western philosophers regarded language as existence and act, even though they did not use the term speech act as the contemporary linguists do.

2.1 Taoism and language

The philosophical view of language of Taoism is the reflection or outcome of its philosophies of *Wu Wei*, or *non-action* in English and *Wu Ming* or *namelessness* in terms of epistemology.

Tao, the core of Taoism represented by Lao-tzu, is believed to be the origin of the world, as the saying goes:

Tao begets one; One begets two; Two begets three; Three begets all things (Lao Tzu).

It shows that *Tao* exists before all the things in the cosmos. And it is *Tao* that creates heaven and earth, and then all the things in the world. However, at the same time, believing in the signifying power of language, Lao-tzu pointed out,

Namelessness is the origin of Heaven and Earth; Naming is the mother of all things (Lao Tzu, Chapter 1).

It is clear that *Tao* or Namelessness in this case, existed before (the signifying function of language) or Naming came from *Tao*. However, it is also clear that Name may have existed either before the existence of heaven and earth or at the same time and it is surely the mother of all the things in the world, including human being. Language thus exhibits its performative force through creating all the things in the world. Then Lao-tzu stated the performative force again when talking about the relationship between language and objects. He thought that even in the nameless *Tao*, the substance of names had existed, which was the seeds breeding all things on the earth. These names and the objects they signified appear and existed inseparably without changes from old times till now. Due to the natural appearance of objects and their names and the eternal stability, man could observe all the things through their names.

So, it might be justified in saying, to Taoism, language possesses the homoousia of God, as it, through its signifying function, created everything in the world.

2.2 Logos, Genesis, and Language

It is very interesting again, during about the same period (roughly between 479 and 338 B.C. ?), philosophers in ancient Greece showed their concern about language, especially in terms of its performative force. They almost shared the

same belief that language created all the things in the world.

● **Logos and language**

Logos in the Western dictionary has almost the same meaning as *Tao* in the Chinese dictionary. It has been considered to be the most dominant and general principle or rules underlying all the movements and activities in the world. At the same time, it has or implies the meaning of language, logic, reasoning, narrative, story, etc.

In ancient Greek, the verb form of logos is *legein* meaning 'speaking', having the meaning of 'stating clearly, explicitly, and methodically', while its *lalein* means 'talk endlessly and unclearly'. This word root is *leg-* which derives the meaning of 'ration' and 'logic'. It also possesses meanings signifying thought (spiritual law), numbers (natural law), etc. The most systematized research on logos, *The history of Greek Philosophy*, summarized eleven meanings for logos, of which the most fundamental is still 'speech' and 'rede'.

According to Herakleitos, all the movements in the world abide by the rule of logos and he also stated that language contained the essence of things and the most permanent things were seen through language. Herakleitos maintained the world was not made by God or man. There, however, did exist Logos, and the Logos was the incarnation of God (Yao, 1992). Thus, logos became the unity of God and the world, the unity of nature and spirit, the unity of mystery and rationalism. It may have helped pave the way for logos to enter Bible and became the magic power of God.

● **Genesis and Language**

To understand the Western culture, we should also study religious ideology in the West, as it plays an equally important role as the Western philosophy in the making of the Western culture. The understanding of religion is important in the comparative study of linguistic worldview.

The creative power of language, especially of the signifying function of language is clearly manifested in the Holy Book. As almost everybody knows, the first chapter of Genesis the Old Testament of the bible reveals the performative force of language to the people.

In the beginning, God created the heaven and the earth...And God said, Let there be light:...And God called the light Day and the darkness he called Night. And God said, let the waters under the heaven be gathered together...and it was so. And God called the dry land Earth; and the gathering together of the waters called the seas; and god saw that it was good.

This quotation shows that God uses language to name the primitive state of the cosmos. In fact, language is not only used to name all the things but also used to create things. It has become God's tool to originate life. By uttering some imperative sentences God creates heaven, earth, and all the things in the world. To God, speech is action and words are power, both carrying perlocutionary

force:

And out of the ground the LORD GOD formed every beast of the field, and every fowl of the air; and brought them unto Adam to see what he would call them; and whatsoever Adam called every living creature, that was the name thereof. Here, Adam used the signifying function of language to name every creature. It demonstrates the belief in the performative and creative function of language.

As to the *New Testament*, the classic of Christianity, the whole *Old Testament* with the ancient Hebrew's theory concerning the origin of language was accepted by the initiators of Christianity and was elucidated in the New Testament. The gospels of St. John, the most crucial chapter of the New Testament starts with:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God.

In the *Old Testament*, God creates the world through imperative sentences as perlocutionary act. Obviously, God and language exist as two separate entities before the creation of heaven, earth, and all the things in the world. However, in the *New Testament*, there exists the view that God and Logos have merged into one:

All things were made by him; and without him was not anything made that was made.

The implication is clear: language is innate in God, and it is an integral part of god. Through language, which is part of him, God creates the world or otherwise, impossible. Throughout the whole Bible, God is logos or logos is God. Thus it is said, "Logos was God." (Yao, 1992, p38)

Obviously, ancient Chinese Taoism and Western philosophy and religion almost shared the same belief in the creative power of language. Stated differently, language had the homoousia of *God* for both Taoism in the East and philosophy and religion in the West. However, a big difference still remains: the essential feature of *Tao* is unspeakable while the basic meaning of logos is speech and rede. Even though both regard language as possessing creative power, they hold divergent linguistic worldviews by advocating different philosophical ideologies.

3. The Philosophical View of Language

3.1 *Lao-tzu's Negative Attitude towards Language*

Lao-tzu's worldview resulted in, on the one hand, his political view called the philosophy of *Wu Wei* or *non-action* and, on the other, his epistemological view called the philosophy of *Wu Ming* or *namelessness*, both of which are the integral part of his worldview.

According to Lao-tzu, disorder and contradiction in the society was caused

by all the opposing and contradictory factors such as social, political, personal, historical factors, etc. To solve these social problems, Lao-tzu advocated the philosophy of *non-action*, as he believed that *action*, especially in the political field is the source of social disorder. *Non-action*, according to Lao-tzu, means we must do things, including governing the country, in accordance with the rules of the natural development of things. Explained differently, *non-action* could possibly mean to let things/ people develop of their own accord and eventually they will take care of themselves. The philosophy of *non-action* can find expressions in what Lao-tzu said, "Kingdoms can only be governed if rules are kept; Battles can only be won if rules are broken (indicating unexpected maneuvers). But the heart of all under heaven can only be won by letting them alone (Lao, Chapter 57)". *Wei*, the opposite of *non-action* is regarded as the cause of disorder and chaos, which can be demonstrated in the following saying,

The more prohibitions there are, the more ritual avoidances. The more laws are made, the more thieves and bandits there will be, Therefore, as I do nothing, the people will of themselves be transformed. So long as I love quietude, the people will of themselves go straight...So long as I have no desire, the people will of themselves be simple and honest. So much so that ...through non-action in governing, all things will fall into place and take care of themselves. (Lao, Chapter 3)

Like *Wei*, *Ming* or *name*, as signifier of objects and people was also regarded as the cause of contradiction and disorder, especially in terms of argument or debate, as, according to Lao-tzu, language or speech belongs to the category of *action*. Lao-tzu's negative attitude towards language and its use is also clearly expressed in what he said, "Much talk is doomed to a dead end". As to books, articles, and speeches, he did disregard them for "The greatest sound sounds faint; the greatest form looks formless" (Lao, Chapter 41). His follower, Zhuang-tzu went even further. He had this to say, "The greatest eloquence seems to stutter." These ideas were obviously derived from the ideology that form, image (words), and sound (language) could not express what people sensed in the cosmos--the formless and soundless *Tao*. According Zhuang-tzu, form, words, and language cannot express meaning. *Tao* as well as meaning could only be sensed.

In general, we may find the features of *Tao* in the following aspects of communication:

- Speech, argument and debate in particular, are actions that violate harmony and cause disorder and contradiction in the society.
- The inability of language: Language loses its power when it comes to describe meaning and intention.
- Meaning is more important than words. However, meaning is sensed according to context, not explicitly expressed in words. Arriving at the meaning and forgetting the words

- The greatest eloquence seems to stutter. Debate and argument are a meaningless and fruitless effort. Debate is inferior to silence.
- The advocacy of wordless teaching Sage was like still water "that does not speak but provide harmony to others and convert others". He who knows does not speak, and he who speaks does not know.
- True words are not fine-sounding; fine sounding words are not true. Eloquent speakers are not trustworthy.
- Lao-tzu believed in the power of the signifying force of language.

However, at the same time he discovered limitations of language. He pointed out, for example, language could not be used to signify *Tao*, the formless and shapeless entity. Obviously, the philosophy of language of Taoism is the outcome of the ideology of *Tao*, as *Tao* is formless, soundless, and can not be talked about.

3.2. Confucius' Attitude towards Language

In contrast to the philosophy of Taoism, Confucianism has been serving as ethical-political systems for several thousand years for the administration of government and regulation of order in China. The ultimate goal of Confucianism is to achieve harmony in the society. To realize this objective, people in the society must first of all achieve the fine qualities of manhood, i.e. *Ren*, or 'benevolence' by keeping to the rules specified by *Li*, meaning, 'propriety'. The achievement of *benevolence* has a lot to do with the hierarchical relationships based on people's social positions. However, the realization of the ideal manhood or fine qualities specified in *benevolence* depends on moral teaching and instruction. As the saying goes, "If you don't learn the Odes, you will not be fit to be spoken to." Confucius truly believed in the power of words and his *Book of Odes* was regarded as the Bible of language. Confucianism may be more or less expressed in the following aspects of communication.

- Language as an important tool for moral and political teaching and helps achieving harmony;
- Belief in the power of language: "Man has the will, and his words express his will. Articles depend on the sufficient language, and without the expression of language, who knows your will?"
- Golden rule: Do unto others as you would have them do unto you;
- Improving one's language through reading poetry; Confucius' Book of Odes or Book of Poetry is about the teaching of *benevolence and propriety* covering from self-cultivation, relationship to government administration. It is also about how to communicate appropriately. According to Confucius, poetry is the origin of language, without learning poetry, people cannot learn language well. So, it was widely spread and widely read throughout across the whole country and the Confucian ideology contained in the book has remained alive and kicking for several thousands of years.

- Being cautious and careful in Speaking (the practice of prudence); Keeping to Confucius' ethical and political rules, one has to use language cautiously and carefully. "What a man of complete virtue cherishes is cautiousness of every action." (Cheng Yi)

One's speech should be in keeping with rules and norms of *propriety*: "Look not at what is contrary to Propriety. Listen not to what is contrary to *propriety*. Speak not what is contrary to *Propriety*. Make no movement which is contrary to *propriety*" (Analects) .

What to say and how to say depends on whom you speak to.

- Unity between conduct and words: what one does is more important than what one says; Confucius advocated, "he acts before he speaks and afterwards speaks according to his actions." This can also be translated into "slow in words but earnest in conduct." Confucius used to advise his disciples to do more and speak less for to know a person meant to know what he intended to say.

- Who speak to whom and how is often more important than what to say: when speaking to officers of lower position, straightforward way is advocated. When speaking to an officer of higher social position, one should be precise and soothing. When speaking to a person like a prince, one should be formal and respectful. Sometimes silence is preferred to words.

- Sensitive, adaptive and empathetic to audience;

- Nonverbal language should be used; Confucius often advised his disciples to adopt nonverbal behavior to understand others for people should be "modest in rules of propriety, in use of language, and in appearance." At the same time, Confucius was against the use of fine words, as well as insinuating appearance and excessive respect (Analects). In his view, fine words may cast away our virtue.

- Intrapersonal communication. On the whole, the linguistic philosophy of Confucianism is closely related with the moral and political ethics of feudal society. It emphasizes the social function of language in ordering the society; whereas, Taoism seems to center on language itself and shows a negative attitude towards it.

3.3 The Western Philosophical View of Language

Logos has been the most dominant concept in the field of Greek philosophy since the Western civilization was established on the basis of the early philosophy in Greece. The belief that "in the beginning was the word," "the word was with God and the word was God," and "life is within the Word... it is the light of man and the dark of man" (Ratzinger, 1990) has been manifested in almost every aspect of communication. In Athens polis, a memorial ceremony for Goodness of Speech was celebrated every year. In the individualism oriented West, extending self, persuading and converting others are considered to be the most popular purpose in communication and interaction. Accordingly, language

has become the most powerful and important tool. Euripides pointed out that the only art with absolute power is persuasion, which is worth learning by us all with all the effort. Then Logos was expressed in the epical language game of sophists and the sophistic language game. The former told stories by the mouth of God; and the latter persuaded others through debates. And on the basis of the debate an important subject -- rhetoric came into being in the West, and the subject is what is called the art of persuasion, which the Chinese had to wait for a long time before forming their own, because, among others, in a harmony seeking society, the extending of self in terms of persuasion and assertion is regarded more as an action endangering harmony than an ordinary speech act. So much so that language in ancient Chinese culture was regarded as less important or even worse in the society. In general, Logos may find best expressions in the following aspects:

Logos has been the most dominant concept in the field of Greek philosophy since the Western civilization was established on the basis of the early philosophy in Greece. In general, Logos may find expressions in the following aspects of communication.

- instrumental in nature, for extending self, persuading and converting others, and thus, rhetoric, the art of persuasion as an independent discipline, was established in ancient Greece;
- complete trust in the force of words;
- linear logic in discourse organization;
- argument and debate being effective tools for extending self and persuading others;
- what to say being, relatively speaking, more important than who speaks to whom and how;
- direct, assertive, straightforward, impersonal, and confrontational;
- rhetorically sensitive to audience.

4. Conclusion: Influences of Linguistic Worldview on Communication

Both the Chinese and Western linguistic worldviews have been exerting influence on (inter)cultural communication in their unique way. Fundamentally speaking, the Taoism's negative view of language and the moderate/ cautious positive view of Confucianism have in general programmed the communication in the Chinese culture as a high context one, while the positive view of language in the West has laid a foundation for a low context communication to develop in the West.

On the basis of this classification, communication in China may to different degrees embrace the characteristics and features attributed to high context communications in terms of rhetoric, styles, syntax, discourse organization,

pragmatics, so on and so forth, while communication in the West may primarily demonstrate the characteristics and features attributed to low context communication. Obviously, the comparisons made along this line are made in black and white terms. Differences are assumed to be those in degrees not in kind. Within the Western or Eastern cultures or even within the same culture, communication may differ from group to group.

References

- Gudykunst, W. (1984). *Communicating with Strangers*. New York: Random House, pp.41-42.
- Jia, Y.X. (1997). *Intercultural Communication*. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, pp.224-227.
- Schiappa, E. (1994). *Landmark Essays on Classic Greek Rhetoric*. Hermagors Press.
- Miao, L.T. (1987). *Ancient Greek Philosophy*. Beijing: China People University Press.
- Feng, Y.L. (1985). *A Brief History of Chinese Philosophy*. Beijing: Peking University Press.

