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## Between Names and Concepts: From 'Learn about' to 'Talk about'

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*“To write is to shake the meaning of the world, to place an indirect question in it, to which the writer, by a last suspense, abstains from answering. The answer is given by each of us, bringing his history, his language, his freedom”*

Roland Barthes (1963). *Sur Racine*, Paris : Seuil, p. 11

**Abstract:** This article is from a lecture which aims to shed light on the difference between names and concepts, i.e., between ‘learning from’ and ‘talking about’, based on the story that God taught names to Adam. Among the main results of the study: (i) if the names taught by God to Adam emanate from the knowledge of the essence of things, science, with its concepts and technical tools, does not really allow to penetrate the depth of things. (ii) If the so-called scientific concepts constitute an advance in the art of persuasion, they do not constitute an advance in the deepening of knowledge. Consequently, scientific conceptualization should not constitute the only horizon of the human being in the construction of his world (milieu, umwelt, fūdo 風土). As the progress of the philosophy of quantum physics has shown, science describes the human experience of reality, but not reality itself.

**Keywords:** Name, concept, learn about, talk about, Adamic language

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**Introduction:** In his book *The Search for the Perfect Language in European Culture*, Umberto Eco (1997), whose first draft is a lecture presented at the Collège de France on 2 October 1992, explores a utopia that, from antiquity to the present day, has haunted European culture: the rediscovery or invention of a language that would be common to all humanity.

For a long time, there was no doubt that there was an original language in which God spoke to Adam. This idea of a "mother tongue" is present among Jewish commentators, Christian exegetes, Muslim scholars, the medieval poet Dante (1965, p. 560). But the search for a single language can also take another form: for George Dalgarno, John Wilkins, or Gottfried Leibniz (Courtine, 2003, pp. 267-292), it is not a question of finding a lost language but of inventing a new universal language, easy to learn and use. Mathematicians will say it is their language: mathematics. Dataists will retort that it is more theirs: big data.

For now, I prefer to focus on John Tolkien, professor of medieval literature at Oxford University, who invented languages with their own grammar and vocabulary. From these languages, he invented a wonderful world, *The Lord of the Rings*, to encourage us to better perceive our world today. It took him seventeen years to write it, at night, on what he calls his 'stolen time'. In this book, which required a considerable amount of energy, he has put his whole life. He explains that at the time of publication it is his heart that he is exhibiting to the public. We are far from the fast science where bluffers, who proclaim themselves 'highly cited scholars', publish almost one article every week. If human being has lost all sense of shame, then he does whatever he like. To which world do they belong: Hobbits, Dwarves, Humans, Elves, Magicians, Ents, Orcs, Uruk-Hai, and Spirits serving the Ring? I let the reader guess at will.

In this lecture, as an introduction to the research methods course that I teach master's students, I draw on Adam's story to explore the difference between names and concepts and the passage of 'learn about' to 'talk about'. The research methods course as it is generally taught in Europe and the United States is not intended to train people who think with their own minds but individuals who speak well in the fashionable language in their respective specialties to put themselves forward.

However, as Rene Girard said in his last interview with Daniel Lance in his house at Stanford in 2009, "fashion is the false intelligence which ruins everything that is true about intellectual research". In his last interview, recorded in his apartment in New York in 2002 with Charles Glass, Edward Said mentioned that most of his students come to the university with a desire to show off and they leave with a greater desire. This shows that what really drives them is mimetic desire.

Fortunately, some students stand out from the crowd by realizing the importance of reading. What I teach my students is practically the opposite of what is stated in most research methods books. We must learn to read deeply, ask profound questions, choose meaningful topics, analyze thoroughly, and communicate clearly by giving priority to names instead of concepts. Some of my former students have acquired a very advanced level of reading over the years. In my humble experience, the students I have taught are not frivolous, they have a great curiosity. All they need is to meet professors who listen to them and are willing to encourage a constructive exchange.

*I. The Myth of The Expert:* The more I meditate the academic literature, the more I become aware of the myth of the expert. The media tries to engrave in people's minds that this is a person who knows everything, especially that which is difficult to understand for the ordinary person. In fact, it is a person who talks about simple things in a complicated way. The world of bluffing and that of rhetoric are closely related. Those who wear a suit that exceeds their height usually know how to speak well to hide an incapacity to search seriously, i.e. to read in depth beyond cut, copy and paste, or to steal the ideas of others without quoting them. This reminds me of something Andre Malraux said: "I have enough ideas so that one can steal them without harming me". But the latter would never have imagined that if some steal ideas of their colleagues, other their papers, still others their courses without any qualms. The age of men is over, the time of the orc has come.

In the academic jargon, it is said about the expert: the one who addresses colleagues with the technical language recognized by the specialty. The main goal is not to make people understand but to speak well. This makes me think of the book *The society of spectacle* by Guy Debord (1996) and *On the television* by Pierre Bourdieu (1996) who had refused all along with his life the invitations of the media. According to him, the media do not favor the expression of the thought because there is a link between the thought and the time, and a negative link between the urgency and the thought.

*II. The Illusion of Knowing:* The modern specialties invented for the most part in Europe and the United States do not train to think freely but to evoke the knowledge acquired in the field with a technical language that gives the impression of knowing well. As the philosopher Edgar Morin notes "I live more and more with the awareness and feeling of the presence of the unknown in the known, of the enigma in the mundane, of the mystery in everything and, in particular, of the advances of a new ignorance in each advance of knowledge" (Truong, 2017). For the anthropologist Marc Augé (2017): "the illusion of knowing is even worse than not knowing".

Talking about a subject does not mean mastering it in depth, having a Ph.D. degree does not make us doctors worthy of the name, having a promotion regarding our academic publications does not make us professors who deserve this title. What counts is the time we steal after classes and meetings to enjoy reading a book we are passionate about without seeing the time pass, and to tell its content to the students with the same passion to explain, beyond what is written, how the author has built the narrative regardless of the subject and the field of specialization. There is no such thing as a good object or a bad object. What counts is to share it and give it a taste. In this regard, I urge my students to create their own paths, avoiding the dualistic trap of choosing between two paths like for example 'orthodox economics / heterodox economics', 'neoclassical / Keynesian', 'microeconomics / macroeconomics'.

The problem with students is that they are drawn into a vicious cycle at an early age that pushes them to publish at any cost and maintains superficial writing that deals with topics that are neither deep nor essential to society in terms of priority. Most of them go wrong before reaching maturity especially when they are exploited by unscrupulous doctors who add their names to their writings after having made them believe that they are geniuses, but that they have little chance to publish without the name of these doctors as world renowned scholars.

I often quote the advice of Bakr Abu Zayd (1988, p. 107), from his book *Al-Ta'ālum* (On people who claim to be scholars when in reality they are not), which seems very judicious in this circumstance: "I advise myself and the students to be diligent and to seek constantly, to deepen the subjects, to master the fundamentals, to take notes, to read a lot, to be persevering in acquiring knowledge, and not to worry about writing before reaching maturity, the proper writing must come from someone whose reading has been improved and whose comprehension has been deepened; the quality of a product depends on its skillful maker trained under the guidance of an experienced master".

*III. The Need to Meditate On the Learning of the Names by God to Adam:* The existence of a language through which God taught Adam all the names, leads us to distinguish between names and concepts beyond the definitions of dictionaries and encyclopedia articles, however prestigious they may be. It is not simply a word, a group of words used to designate, to name a category of beings or things, to distinguish it from other categories, or to designate, to name an individual, an element of this category, to distinguish it from others. Learning names refer to three major points:

- i. Knowledge of the name.
- ii. Knowledge of the meaning, i.e. of the reality associated with the name.
- iii. Knowledge of its field of application, i.e. the conditions in which the name is appropriate or useful. This invites us to distinguish between appropriate and inappropriate conditions concerning the application of the name.

The last two points lead to two questions to pay attention to:

- i. Is the way we approach things appropriate?
- ii. How should we properly frame what we think we know about reality?

If the world of names invites us to name things by their names, to learn and to reflect through relevant questioning, that of concepts forms to speak well, to justify the accomplished fact, to divert attention through the game of mirrors, as was the case with Adam Smith who appealed to the myth of barter to better justify the market society. The fundamental problem of science does not lie in the fact of speaking well of things, it consists in knowing how to name the things correctly. And "to name an object badly is to add to the misfortune of this world" said Albert Camus (2006, p. 908) in his manuscript on the philosophy of expression published in 1944.

Moreover, this distinction between name and concept shows that authors are not quoted in reference to their knowledge but to their power acquired through their submission to the contemporary mainstream language. This reminds me of a sentence of Roland Barthes: "One is never really loved by one's writing". So, we must not fool ourselves or others into believing that the volume of quotations reflects our unparalleled knowledge and exceptional genius. Fashion fades, only style remains the same. As rightly noted by René Girard (2009): "The fact the fashionable languages die and are never revived says a great deal. After Derrida's death, why suddenly did everything vanish. Everything disappeared as if in a trap door".

*IV. The Quasi-Monopoly of Positivism in The Framework of Thought in Academic Circles:* Positivism, which has a quasi-monopoly on the framework of thought in academic circles, even those that claim to be based on a religious, moral, or ethical universe, with a few variants that clarify or perfect it. It is based on the idea that human knowledge has gone through three major states:

- i. A religious or fictitious state.

- ii. A metaphysical or abstract state.
- iii. A scientific or positive state.

According to its initiators Auguste Comte, positivism does not seek either the first causes or the ultimate ends, but consists only in discovering the laws which govern the phenomena, i.e. the mathematical functions which link the experimental observations. In this sense, the goal of science is not the things themselves but the relationships between things. In other words, science is giving the same name to different things. This has led in contemporary mainstream economics, as shown in Figure 1, to assimilate the human to the individual, the individual to reason, a reason to rationality, rationality to utility.

We therefore understand the basis of Henri Poincaré's thought that mathematics is the art of giving the same name to different things. In order to be able to apply mathematics to human beings in such a way as to be able to equalize, add and subtract them with ease, it is necessary to reduce them to a utility function which, according to the contemporary mainstream economics, reflects the most part of the real.

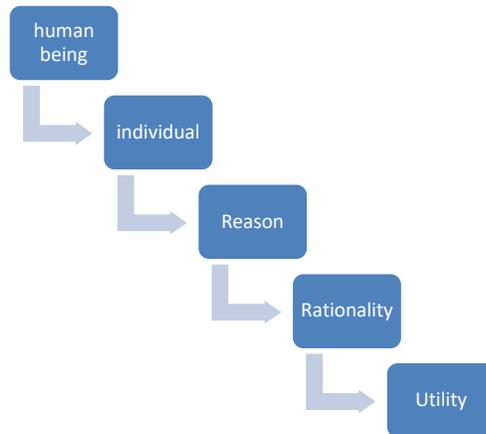


Figure 1. The Conceptual Thought Processes of The Contemporary Mainstream Economics.

*Source: Developed by the author*

*V. The Limits of The Use of Mathematics in Economics:* Mathematics as it is used today in contemporary mainstream economics is concerned with equalizing, adding, and subtracting individuals, but does not ask itself a primordial question: why by a magic trick did the human being become an individual? In other words, contemporary mainstream economists take care of the operation:

$$1 + 1 = ?$$

But don't ask the question: is the concept of 1 really 1? If not, how did it become so? If yes, under what conditions? Contemporary mainstream economists do not deal with the last two questions. They just apply models that work well by playing with the data in such a way that they fit the target. What is important in mathematics today is not what machines can do with advances in computing power, but what they cannot do, i.e. the intuition on

which something new and beneficial for society is based. This is the reason why there are different philosophies of mathematics, i.e. different visions through which different relations between things are elaborated.

This questioning evokes the formal character of scientific language, which is based on symbols rather than on their concordance with reality. This role of symbols in scientific discourse reveals the eminently linguistic character of theories. To formulate a theory is nothing else than to give oneself a language to speak about a phenomenon. This confirms, as Jules Tannery (1911, pp. 73-74) rightly pointed out in his book *Science and Philosophy*, that science is a discourse that is the product of an agreement between a community according to the norms that its members have defined.

**Conclusion:** If the names taught by God to Adam emanate from the knowledge of the essence of things, science, with its concepts and its technical tools (mathematics, big data), does not really allow us to penetrate the bottom of things. If the so-called scientific concepts constitute progress in 'talk about' they do not constitute an advance in 'learn about'. The philosophy of quantum physics has taught us that conceptualization reflects our experience of reality, but not reality itself. In this respect, conceptualization is only a model, it cannot claim universality.

These limits of scientific conceptualization open the field to other possibilities of apprehending reality beyond positivism according to which knowledge is based on the study of the relations between things as they are verified empirically. This makes us aware of the importance of philology, literally the love of words, practically the study of language as used in literature, starting from three major questions: Where does the word come from? How did he get to us? Will it not lead us astray?

Scientific conceptualization should not constitute the only horizon of the human being in the construction of his world (milieu, Umwelt, fûdo 風土). If conceptualization constitutes in the eyes of scientists the golden calf, "all that is gold does not glitter", as noted by Tolkien in *The Lord of Rings*.

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