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Is Art a Language?

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Abstract

In the essay I outline a rudimentary definition of language and then analyze art and argue that it is not a language strictly speaking. It does however contain aspects or properties of being a language and thus is a quasi-language, allowing greater flexibility, association, imagination and creativity, while at the same time not structured and precise in meaning as say ordinary language (oral and written) or as

is the case in mathematics. I suggest that art can produce new knowledge because of this malleability, however this gain is at the loss of precision in expression, communication and meaning even where ideologically forms have been read as been equated with a specific meaning (political, religious and so on), this equivocation is no more than cultural dogmatism and not inherent in the form itself.

Keywords: Language, Art, Knowledge, Creativity

1. Introduction

In this essay, I will argue that art, specifically the visual arts of painting exhibits properties of being a language but not a sufficient set of conditions to actually count as a language. I base this on the argument that a language is such that every component is defined, relationships of these components have a definitive meaning, and a meaning emerges out of such an interaction. Defined as such, a language is linear, it proceeds from the simplest to the more complex. It can be clearly divided into syntax and semantics. The syntax provides for the rules of what is possible in order for an almost infinite extent of meaning. According to such a definition, I will argue that art (painting) only partially fulfills such a modus operandi. The ensuing argument does not quite argue that art is non-sensical, but since it is not strictly speaking a language, arts' meaning is rather "airy fairy", even descending into any possible meaning or reference or none at all, albeit art history tries to make sense of such artistic output and pinpoint a particular set of meanings and construct what (only appears) to be a narrative of logical salience. This, however, is but illusionary and hence the readdressing of such a narrative in the first place, while in the second place the reality is that there is no sense, precisely because art is not a language. However, these limitations in art also operate to render it particularly well appointed to elicit new meanings or associations, much in the sense that a dream may, so that arts "misbehavior" is also its most redeeming quality.

2. What is a language?

A language such as characterizes spoken or written languages in any of the hundreds of dialects that there are, is such that specific signs verbally or as codified within some kind of written form, is such that such sounds or written marks – the physical surface quality – maps onto a particular reference or meaning. In this sense, language is contained, and while one could say interpret a random word such as say "blue" in a myriad of ways, there is at least, In Wittgenstein's terms, "a family resemblance". Similarly, the ability to pronounce a word in a particular language correctly or the ability to write a sentence follows specific rules. Without such "code" a string of letters or sounds will be gobbledygook.

Furthermore, a language is such that words point to objects in the external world and may also assist in communicating more abstract ideas. However, this can only occur when the language is defined by specific parameters, that is to say the syntax. Language is mainly an instrument of the ear, not the eye, and this means that it evolves over time: It is said or read in sequence; spaces between words separate them just as silence does between sounds and meaning is accrued sequentially just as one might listen to a musical score or take time trying to understand the sense of a book or article: It is not instantaneous.

Another property of language is that it evolves slowly since by and enlarge it is fixed in form, structure, and expression. There are no sudden or radical shifts. New words can be created or invented, but the use of such a word makes sense only in the context of other, defined, and fixed terms. Coining new words do not contradict the fixed, slow iteration and nuances of a

particular language, and the written form of a language solidifies an oral tradition producing longevity, a robust educational system, and the ability to “freeze” meaning as it were, so that as a text – an object – it can be consumed and communicated far and wide, a limitation of verbal language. However, with the age of multimedia this is not quite accurate. However, the basic idea that sounds disappear as they are uttered gives verbal language a certain ephemerality, while written text gives it a certain permanence.

Every dot and dab – that is the point, the comma, the semi colon and so on and so forth are not random marks or simply for aesthetic effect. They form a function, just like knowing that “th” makes a certain sound as does the “ch” in English and every such language has such defined phonetic orders. While there is a certain messiness – for example people may have different accents or written sentences can be expressed in various ways without changing the essential meaning. The point is that there is a limited range of sense and an almost infinite range of nonsense.

What about mathematics? Does it qualify as a language according to the definition as described? I would say yes as accordingly every dot or dash or letter or number or equation is precisely defined and is the ultimate expression of logical sequencing where each step follows the next far less loosely than ordinary language. Particular rules define transformations, that is the way one thing can be defined in terms of the other or more fantastically, how one set of relationships can be argued to equate with another set of relationships or quantities.

3. Art is a quasi-language

Following the definition of language as more or less fixed in both its oral and verbal form, where does the visual arts fit in, and in particular the discipline of painting? If one would define language broadly as simply the transference or communication of something in any particular medium, then art is clearly a language. But I have gone beyond this open-ended definition which really amounts to very little, since if that were the case than any kind of communication would qualify as being a language, which I think is false. I could say “hjhjhjkjio” and you might impute a meaning therein, but it is really just guesswork or creating one’s own game, and not a language or a determinate meaning that can be universally shared and understood (unless one were to invent a new language, but that is like reinventing the wheel – or perhaps not).

Now according to the definition as set out that the signs of a page or sounds one hears are fixed to a determinate sense, does art fulfill such a function? Partially, yes, and also strictly speaking, no. Yes, in the sense that there is a set of images that are contained under umbrella terms, such as “portrait”, “landscape” and “figurative” or other terms culled from the history of art, such as “religious painting” or “modern art” and all the various categories and appellations whose function is the abstract qualifier that includes countless images and modes of perception and understanding according to such terminology.

Moreover, other than historical labels, there are stylistic conventions and names: Abstract art; surreal, dada; expressionistic; Classic; naive and so on and so forth. One might call the “syntax” of art the various craft-like techniques that allow for these variations in style and the history and theory of art constructs a narrative linking

technical creativity and virtuosity to historical and extra-aesthetic dimensions of meaning. So, it would appear everything expressed in art has a clear function and definition in which case it is a language. But let us look deeper.

Take as an example an Impressionist painting. The style can be defined and observed – it has certain properties that include other paintings of a similar ilk. Is this as steadfast as the use of full stops and commas in writing or an utterance in say English? In the sense that art can simply be reduced to technique, then yes this would be the case. But the uncanny thing about art, especially those in the forefront, is such that new things (techniques, mediums, meanings) are elicited on an ongoing basis. In this sense, definition is “after the fact” as it were. Practice precedes theory and history.

Moreover, since painting appeals to the eye, and not the ear, it is not consumed in logical sequence, but as an immediate revelation as it were, preceding articulation, understanding or definitive categorization. The result is that it does not say a specific thing and although one might divine rules of visual perception; although one sees in a context of understanding or within a historical epoch where such images perform a certain function, especially in times dubbed as post history and post truth, there is no one to one correspondence between image and meaning. Derrida’s textual analysis of the “language system” operating such that there is no present term, applied to images in such a way that anything could come to mean anything (which is to say nothing) precisely because there are no rigorous rules, no process of logical deduction or inference.

Thus, the veneer of order that art history injects into the massive output of paintings is like collecting similar colors in a set of Lego, whereas one might have collected similar shapes and not colors – in other words its system of meaning is arbitrary. A blob or blotch or dash or line in a painting can describe a moving tiger, be purely abstract, define pointillism, express an emotion and so and so forth. There is no necessary relationship between that blob or dash or whatever and the meaning it elicits, whereas as described in ordinary language or in mathematics, it is not simply context dependent, but there is a fixed relationship between sign and reference and resultant meaning or sense.

4. New knowledge

Art’s inability to pin a specific meaning or its construction of a imagined specific meanings (as evident for example in overtly political or religious art down the ages), may mean it is not strictly speaking a language, but it does yield something particularly unique and worthwhile in the qualitative sense. It points to the following:

- a) Image making mimics the subconscious.
- b) Image making is a direct road in some respects to emotive qualities.
- c) It yields associative and divergent thinking.
- d) It allows latitude for creative solutions and originality in form and content.

As a result, art (and in particular, perhaps, the discipline of painting) is such that while it is not logical: “read” from right to left of left to right or top to bottom but is a revelation that appeals to the eye. There are levels of interpretation spanning the literal and the metaphorical. This facilitates creative play in meaning-making - a tenuous logic

coupled with imaginative openness results in the possibility of new images and new techniques (styles) and it is this that leads to new meaning, even a form a knowledge, though not bounded by the precision of a mathematical calculation or a simple sentence in any particular ordinary language. The image impacts with great presence and new techniques and media allowing a new set of hermeneutic possibilities. In these respects, it is not that art is a language as such: It is a quasi-language, where the sign means more than one particular thing. Arts' strength is that it ought not to fix meaning and may even offer a new vista of meaning. Usually, however, art fulfils a certain function within a given society defined by the constraints of time and place and individual (for most of history art was not even associated with a particular individual, namely the artist). At different times art is wedded to other institutional powers - today it may simply be the art world model as proposed by Thornton (2008), which is part of a long history of the separation of art from pagan worship; religious didactic use; state and empire building and later the secular turn leading first to modern art and then the postmodern., In all instances, the constraints of time and place and definition of art is such that art is subject to these other dominant paradigms. Accordingly, it is rare when there is a breakthrough. When it occurs, sometimes it is canonized as art and its abhorrent "behavior" is tamed by theory and history of art.

Nevertheless, the discipline of art - in theory and practice - allows for new ways of thinking and is flexible enough not to limit both new form and thence new content. It is this very flexibility that means it does not qualify as a language in the strict sense, but simply shares certain qualities, methodologies and forms borrowed from languages as defined above: Signs that mean x and x only just as a function includes a certain input with one possible output. Art appeals to broad and deep thinking, but not to focused and precise meaning. This is both its advantage and its limitation in delivering a definite sense.

5. Conclusion

This essay defined language as been more than transference of information or communication or sharing, but as a system of signs that map onto a particular form-structure that has a particular meaning and the more precise the meaning, the better the language., In the case of art, such a definition does not completely apply – in part it does, but arts labile nature means that interpretation may even be arbitrary or simply constructed. It is primarily imaginative, visual, and emotional and does not follow a certain definitive sequence or logic. In this respect, art is at least a quasi-language. However, one can extract from this, that art allows for creativity and originality and a certain qualitative approach that may result in the emergence of new knowledge or a new way of seeing existing knowledge. As a primarily aesthetic instrument, it appeals to sense (as in the sensory) before it does to logical sense.

The value of such a distinction means that we should approach art and its power with circumspect – it simply does not have the objective power that mathematics has or ordinary language to convey truths about things. Nevertheless, it is inherently creative and encourages divergent thinking, a necessary balance to the more scientific, technical, and logical.

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