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Language in Zhuangzi: How to Say Without Saying?

Abstract

The paper is concerned with the status of language and its usage in *Zhuangzi* and how this particular way of viewing and using language can affect our “perception” of Dao. Zhuangzi’s language skepticism is first introduced and possible reasons for Zhuangzi’s mistrust in language are explored. The question is then raised as to why Zhuangzi himself used language to talk about Dao if he mistrusted it. At this point Zhuangzi’s usage of language is discussed in two aspects: the negative aspect and the positive aspect, the latter being the main concern of this paper. The negative aspect is exposed as the denouncing factor of employing (fuzzy) language to undermine (propositional) language while using different techniques (paradox, uncertainty/doubt, mockery, reversal). The positive aspect is explored as twofold: first, putting language and reason to their “proper” limits entails an acquisition of a broader perspective and a more receptive, open state of mind which prepares one for the wordless “perception” of Dao. Second, fuzzy language is presented as capable of “accommodating” silence and emptiness. Doing so it unites silence and speech giving an incredible *insight* of what Dao is about. An approach taking from both the principles of scholarly analysis and an unrestricted personal *experience* of the text is employed.

Santrauka

Darbe nagrinėjamas kalbos statusas, pritaikymas ir reikšmė siekiant „pažinti“ Dao pagal Zhuangzi. Pirmiausia pristatomas Zhuangzi skepticizmas kalbos atžvilgiu bei pateikiamos kelios galimos priežastys, kodėl Zhuangzi nepasitikėjo kalba. Keliamas klausimas, kodėl Zhuangzi pats naudojo kalbą, nors manė, kad ji ne tik nepajėgi atskleisti Dao, bet gali būti ir žalinga. Siekiant atsakyti į šį klausimą, Zhuangzi kalbos naudojimo specifika nagrinėjama dviem aspektais: negatyviu ir pozityviu. Pozityviojo aspekto atskleidimas yra šio darbo pagrindinis tikslas. Negatyvusis Zhuangzi kalbos pritaikymo aspektas atskleidžiamas kaip dalinis kalbos „paneigimas“ pačios kalbos priemonėmis (pritaikant paradoksus, abejonę, patyčias ir kt. technikas). Pozityvusis aspektas nagrinėjamas kaip dvejopas: kalbos ir jos išreiškiamų dalykų sąlygiškumo atskleidimas pirmiausia daro įtaką žiūros taško praplėtimui bei padidintam jautrumui, įgalinančiam išgirsti bežodį Dao kalbėjimą. Antra, Zhuangzi naudojama kalba pateikiama kaip galinti talpinti savyje tylą ir tuštumą, tokiu būdu sujungianti tylą ir kalbėjimą į harmoningą visumą, taip suteikdama *įžvalgos* į Dao galimybę. Darbe pasitelkiami keli teksto nagrinėjimo būdai: mokslinės analizės ir nesuvaržyto, asmeninio įspūdžio bei išgyvenimo, sukkelto autoriaus teksto.

Keywords: propositional language, fuzzy language, Dao.

Introduction

There are quite a few topics handled in *Zhuangzi*, all truly fascinating: the author(s)¹ of *Zhuangzi* speak about love and life, status and death, knowledge and ethics, friendship and skill, and much more. Yet one thing that always seems to stand out and lurk around every corner of every topic is the involute status of language. When reading *Zhuangzi* we are often reminded of the inability of language to convey “the true meanings” of things that are being conveyed. This, however, does not necessarily constitute an original idea. Humankind has always struggled to find “the right words” to express things that constitute the most important parts of our lives and, save some truly talented (and self-confident) poets, many were led to conclude that some things are just quite simply indescribable so the best thing is to leave them be in the non-linguistic amorphous darkness from whence they came to toy with our eager yet limited minds. I believe it is not as simple in the case of *Zhuangzi* (as in several other works of great philosophers who climbed the ladder and then threw it away). And it lies in a simple and easily overlooked fact that claiming something to be “indescribable” means to have already described it, so trying to speak about things that are not to be spoken of is not necessarily a meaningless act. In this article I will try to show that usage of negative, self-denying language can have a positive outcome which may greatly influence how we read *Zhuangzi* and what we take from it.

The paper is structured into three parts. In the first part I will discuss the language skepticism in *Zhuangzi* and give a brief overview of why *Zhuangzi* is skeptical about language. In the second part I will give a quick review of the particular manner in which language is used in *Zhuangzi* and some of the possible reasons why it is used in such a way. I will give just a few examples of how language is used in *Zhuangzi* as such analysis deserves a separate research topic of its own. In the third part I will talk about the positive outcome of the negative usage of language and what implications it has to the entire work of *Zhuangzi* and our reception of topics that are quite “recklessly” tackled there.

To be able to better define the nuances of the usage of language as seen in *Zhuangzi*, the terms of propositional and fuzzy language will be used. These two notions should not be viewed as clear-cut definitions, unmovable pillars that are supposed to hold some self-sufficient unforgiving system standing. Extracting and/or creating clear-cut terms while talking about *Zhuangzi*'s undermining of such operations would indeed be a sadly hilarious task to undertake. So I urge the reader to take those “terms” more as hints to a possible direction, more as references with blurry edges because that is precisely their task: to hint, to raise questions and leave as much room as possible for the silent part of language and for the silent message of *Zhuangzi* to be heard as I, as an individual reader, find it to be.

It is also important to point out that this paper is not aimed at giving neither a thorough analysis nor an exhaustive overview of the history and background of research done on *Zhuangzi*. It is also not aimed at discussing with the available scholarship but rather taking some available insights and metaphors employed by other authors and using them here and there to build a story on what I take from my *experience of Zhuangzi*. Although I do believe that scholarly analysis and the brilliant discussions between authors deserve the utmost respect, yet I believe there are different ways of approaching *Zhuangzi* and the validity of those different ways should not be determined by the perspective-bound criteria but what they aim to achieve. This paper is an experiment that tries to employ some of the basic scholarly principles with meditative, personally-engaged, unconstrained and unpretentious approach to *Zhuangzi*.

Following the tone set by *Zhuangzi*, I find it quite important to point out that the topic presented and the content that it entails is something that cannot be spoken of in a clear and propositional manner. This, of course, puts a researcher set on an academic task (and, as noted in the previous paragraph, I *am* bound to an academic task to some degree at least) in quite a precarious position and I am sure *Zhuangzi* would appreciate the humor of the situation. I hope the readers of this paper will too. So I would like to urge the readers to take what I have to say with a pinch of salt, or, as it is said in *Zhuangzi*, “I’m going to try speaking some reckless words and I want you to listen to them recklessly” (*Zhuangzi*, 2).

Language Skepticism in *Zhuangzi*

It is a well-known fact that *Zhuangzi* is quite skeptical towards language and its inability to give us substantial, “true” knowledge of Dao and how things “really are”, so to speak. Here’s one of the passages: “Words are not just wind. Words have something to say. But if what they have to say is not fixed, then do they really say something? Or do they say nothing? People suppose that words are different from the peeps of baby birds, but is there any difference, or isn’t there?” (*Zhuangzi*, 2) Immediately we see that *Zhuangzi* does not discard language altogether but what he is trying to say is that whatever we put into words, whatever we are *able* to put into words are things that are fleeting, things that are not “fixed”. The reason for that, at the very least, is because we necessarily utter those words from a perspective, and that means the point made can be easily altered when it is put in or viewed from another perspective. One perspective or the other are but the different aspects of Dao but one must first “get acquainted” with the essence of It. And that requires one to assume, as Hans-Georg Moeller (2004) calls it, the “zero perspective”.

The zero-perspective, as defined by Moeller (2004, p. 53), is a position

that the sage takes in the “pivot of Dao” (*dào shū*). Moeller uses the image of a wooden wheel to explain the idea of Dao and how it interacts with the reality as we see it. A wooden wheel is composed of a hub and a set of spokes. The hub is empty and it does not really do *anything* yet it enables the spokes to be put in to form a functional wheel. When the wheel is moving, the spokes constantly change their position (assume different perspectives) but the hub always stays the same, no matter what position the spokes are in (up or down, left or right). Operations within language can be seen as the movement of spokes: that which is in constant change (of perspectives). Language itself can be seen as an endless set of perspectives, so to speak, endless set of differences that refer to one another and change their meanings in different contexts. Obviously Dao, as associated with the emptiness of the hub, is something different. Yet we should not make the mistake of renouncing language altogether as something that is at odds with Dao. Doing so we would disregard what the image of the wheel is symbolizing in its entirety. Even though in the image of the wheel we have two entirely different elements (the hub and the spokes), we should not forget that they form a functional *unity*, they interact and they are both valid and important. The point I am trying to make here is that when it comes to seeing the wheel in its entirety and understanding its way of operation, language could be of little help or even become a misleading factor as it belongs to the domain of the ever-changing perspective-dependent spokes.

There is also a point to be made about how Zhuangzi points out the variability of meanings carried by words. He is not simply affirming the fickle nature of words and things that can be put into words; he is in fact *questioning* it. This may not come as a surprise, philosophers are known for their relentless habit of questioning yet they usually proceed at giving the answers to those questions, or at least try really hard to. Zhuangzi, on the other hand, is quite certain that he cannot give an answer (in a propositional manner), a substantial one at least, since it would not be a “fixed” one. Who is he to say if words are different from the peeps of baby birds? Whatever it may be, I believe Zhuangzi is not concerned in finding or giving answers. It may very well be that this questioning is meant to inspire doubt in us about what language can really do and keep us in doubt for the rest of the reading as no clear answer is ever given. Doubt is necessary to keep us receptive, to make us be “all ears” but not for Zhuangzi’s *words* (“do they really say something? Or do they say nothing?”), but what lies between them: a reference to Dao, a wordless, boundless principle of everything that is and is not: “The Way has never known boundaries; speech has no constancy. But because of [the recognition of a] “this”, there came to be boundaries” (Zhuangzi, 2).

The above line is also concerned with the way in which language works. It appears that even the principle itself of how language operates contradicts the oneness of Dao. Language divides reality into “this” and “that”, into subject

and object and is indeed quite clear in making those distinctions. And these do not unify but divide by making clear cuts. Here is what Zhuangzi has to say about it: “Everything has its “that”, everything has its “this”. <...> So I say, “that” comes out of “this” and “this” depends on “that” – which is to say that “this” and “that” give birth to each other” (Zhuangzi, 2). This has to do with language being based on differences and separation: if I say “this” I automatically assume that there is a “not this”, and in such way I inadvertently emphasize their separateness instead of cohesion, interconnectedness. That is especially true for propositional language which is quite literally “full of it” and leaves no room for emptiness in which Dao “gathers” and leaves no room for “silence” in which Dao can be “heard”. So Zhuangzi holds that the sage “does not proceed in such a way, but illuminates all in the light of Heaven. He too recognizes a “this”, but a “this” which is also “that”, a “that” which is also “this”. His “that” has both a right and a wrong in it; his “this” too has both a right and a wrong in it. So, in fact, does he still have a “this” and “that”? Or does he in fact no longer have a “this” and “that”? A state in which “this” and “that” no longer find their opposites is called the hinge of the Way” (Zhuangzi, 2). This “hinge of the Way” can be identified as the empty hub of the wheel, the zero-perspective from which all of the perspectives are equally valid and thus are not opposed to each other but complementing each other.

By operating the way it does language can trick us (or rather, we can trick ourselves by using it the way we do and not realizing our limited usage of language) into believing that life is nothing more but a set of opposites that have nothing in common but being opposite to each other. Of course, opposites and contradictions are a part of life and the sage acknowledges that (“He too recognizes a “this””), but the important thing is to grasp their *unity*. The usual usage of language cannot help us with that. At first glance even the yin-yang symbol might appear as *two separate* pieces of black and white, two sides that are opposite to each other. But what it is meant to signify is the unity of opposites, their interconnectedness and interchangeability. So even though the symbol gives out hints of this unity (the fluidity of shapes, a black point in the white piece and a white one in the black piece, a circular frame) it still *cannot help* but show separateness as well, and even more so, thus the popular western misconceptions of what yin-yang symbol actually means. Looking at the symbol we are supposed to see a grey blur with no clear divisions in it which is not so easy to do if you do not know what to look for, especially if you come from the culture that *divides* to understand. I believe the effect is similar to what we take from language: it emphasizes the *division* between meanings carried by words, and that may as well be one of the reasons why Zhuangzi is skeptical about language. Language is not only incapable of providing the “true knowledge” (“The Great Way is not named; Great Discriminations are not spoken; <...> If the Way is made

clear, it is not the Way. If discriminations are put into words, they do not suffice.” (Zhuangzi, 2)), but it can also hinder one from realizing that such knowledge is even out there.

Another reason why Zhuangzi is skeptical about language is the fact that words have the tendency to bring about turmoil by being a vehicle for expressing and solidifying so called “ethical truths” that Zhuangzi was quite rigorous at dismantling: “What do words rely upon, that we have right and wrong? <...> When the Way relies on little accomplishments and words rely on vain show, then we have the rights and wrongs of the Confucians and the Mo-ists. What one calls right the other calls wrong; what one calls wrong the other calls right. But if we want to right their wrongs and wrong their rights, then the best thing to use is clarity” (Zhuangzi, 2). Such “ethical” debates, grounded in one perspective or another, prevent one to gain a broader, receptive, all-encompassing viewpoint that is crucial for walking the Way: “The sage embraces things. Ordinary men discriminate among them and parade their discriminations before others. So I say, those who discriminate fail to see. <...> The sage harmonizes with both right and wrong and rests in Heaven the Equalizer” (Zhuangzi, 2). These “ethical” debates on “right” and “wrong” are empowered by the usage of propositional language and its ready-made, convenient form for making logical oppositions. These, in turn, bind the debater to a certain, narrow perspective which blinds out the bigger picture. And the bigger picture is necessary for life according to Dao.

In a way, language helps to validate the impression that these “rights” and “wrongs” as set properties (or even as substantive entities) really exist. Yet according to Zhuangzi, they are quite volatile and cannot be used as a fixed measure: “If a man sleeps in a damp place, his back aches and he ends up half-paralyzed, but is this true of a loach? If he lives in a tree, he is terrified and shakes with fright, but is this true of a monkey? Of these three creatures, then, which one knows the proper place to live? Men eat the flesh of grass-fed and grain-fed animals, deer eat grass, centipedes find snakes tasty, and hawks and falcons relish mice. Of these four, which knows how food ought to taste? Monkeys pair with monkeys, deer go out with deer, and fish play around with fish. Men claim that Mao-ch’iang and Lady Li were beautiful, but if fish saw them they would dive to the bottom of the stream, if birds saw them they would fly away, and if deer saw them they would break into a run. Of these four, which knows how to fix the standard of beauty for the world? The way I see it, the rules of benevolence and righteousness and the paths of right and wrong are all hopelessly snarled and jumbled. How could I know anything about such discriminations?” (Zhuangzi, 2). We use language to articulate and even to enforce our ethical truths, and that not only prevents us from walking the Way ourselves (locked in one perspective we are blind to the all-encompassing zero-perspective of Dao) but brings about pain and suffering to others by disallowing the natural course of things to

develop self-so (*zìrán*) when we demand others to abide to our ethical rules. There are quite a few stories in Zhuangzi concerning the unfortunate and often fatal attempts to apply one's value system to another's being, even if one's actions stem from good will.

It is important to point out that all this language critique is not meant to point fingers and expose enemies: language is not the culprit and Zhuangzi is not really looking for one in the first place. Such action would also constitute an acknowledgement of a *one-sided* “wrong” in the name of a *one-sided* “right”. My guess is that Zhuangzi first of all wishes to inspire doubt in us, but not in the name of discarding one thing in order to reinstate another but to show that both can be quite valid, or, in other words, that both are but two sides of the same coin: there can be good in bad and there can be bad in good. The “danger” of propositional language is that it is often used to reinforce the clear-cut, rigidly bipolar way of viewing and establishing virtues.

Even though there are a few quite disconcerting reasons for mistrusting language, Zhuangzi does not suggest that language should be discarded completely or that language is utterly useless when it comes to “talking about Dao” (the latter point will be discussed more in the third section of this paper). I gave a brief overview of those reasons: language (especially the propositional kind) has no capacity to “relate” the reality, the essence and even the significance of Dao. Moreover, the way language works is contradictory to what Dao “is” and thus makes it difficult or even impossible to get “in tune” with It. Language is also a vessel, a tool and often even a weapon in ethical debates meant to enforce a rigid and one-sided virtue system. Having all this in mind, we should not forget that words do have their uses (the famous fishnet allegory can be one of the examples, in which the usefulness of words is acknowledged to some degree), but it is important to realize the limitations of language and the concepts conveyed by it, and use words in the right context and with the right state of mind. The right state of mind is being receptive and open to the conditionality of utterances and the meanings they carry. Or, to put it more simply, words should be used and taken less seriously than we are normally used to. And the particular way in which words are used in *Zhuangzi* is meant to remind us of this (Schwitzgebel, 1996).

The Particular Usage of Language in *Zhuangzi*

In the previous section I have mentioned a few of the reasons why language is not really trusted in *Zhuangzi*. Naturally, a question may arise: if we are not to trust language in conveying the “truth” of Dao and we know that it can also impede the possibility of one “finding” It, how come Zhuangzi himself used it to talk about that which cannot be put into words?

One of the possible answers to this question is truly fascinating: Zhuangzi used language to undermine language itself. Or rather, undermine its “all-

knowing”, “superior” position by showing its inadequacies and conventionality. What is gained by this undermining? By making us realize the proper limits of language and at the same time hinting at something that lies beyond it, Zhuangzi enables the change of perspective in us to take place, and this change allows for the possibility to open up our minds. An open mind welcomes the broadness of multiple perspectives and especially their unity instead of being stuck in one of them and thus preventing oneself from seeing the bigger picture of Dao. If we are encouraged and even pushed to question the self-evident, clear-cut “truths” that words are so useful in conveying, we are automatically given the right tools to get a more adequate *picture* (not a *word!*) of what the reality governed by Dao is, and especially – what it means for us and what we are to do about it to act according to Its principles.

Now, how does Zhuangzi undermine language by using language? This is a truly exciting and intriguing theme in analyzing *Zhuangzi* and there are quite a few examples. Due to the established brevity of this paper only a couple of those examples will be mentioned. Zhuangzi is known for his playful language and it toys with both the author and the reader himself. Crazy metaphors, parables, allegories and paradoxes seem to be aimed at confusing and dismantling the reader’s comfortable position that he has set himself in via his own logical preconceptions. When reading *Zhuangzi* we are often baffled by the turn of events, blatant inconsistencies and the ever-changing tone varying from dead-serious to outrageously absurd (or so it may seem). The smallest thing on earth is at the same time the largest one; the most useless objects appear to have the greatest use; the most disfigured, ugly man is the most attractive one; the indecipherable speech of a man with no lips is the greatest wisdom that even emperors are awed by it; rulers taking council from madmen; friends laughing at their friend’s funeral; benevolence that is not benevolent; modesty that is not humble. These are just a few examples.

Of course, the cases mentioned are not just empty word plays used solely for their shock value, they do carry a message. The message could be the one saying that opposites are complementary (there is usefulness in the useless), or that they are dependent on the perspective (to a frog a caved-in well is a huge palace and the tallest mountain is but a speck when compared with the sky). Yet the way these messages are related to us is by some researchers qualified as “therapeutic”, meaning, it is not so much the question of the content of a message but what it *does* to the reader.

One of the researchers, Eric Schwitzgebel (1996, p. 69), holds that Zhuangzi’s skepticism is endorsed “more with the desire to evoke particular reactions in the reader than as an expression of his heartfelt beliefs”. This particular reaction, following Schwitzgebel’s line of thought, is the acquisition of a more open (and humble) mindset, allowing one to rethink his own beliefs as well as the ones proponed by others. Such reaction is achieved with various linguistically enabled devices, such as mockery (of oneself, of historical texts

and figures, of logic, etc.) and reversal (making statements that are opposite to usual truisms, e.g. “life is worse than death”; “one should not be benevolent in order to be benevolent” and so on).

By mocking something or someone (himself included) Zhuangzi first of all calls into question the meaning of an utterance he is mocking, but at the same time avoids seriously engaging himself into the squabbles between different philosophical schools, squabbles that he sees as quite pointless because there is no fixed criteria to decide who is right and who is wrong: “Suppose you and I have had an argument. If you have beaten me instead of my beating you, then are you necessarily right and am I necessarily wrong? If I have beaten you instead of your beating me, then am I necessarily right and are you necessarily wrong? Is one of us right and the other wrong? Are both of us right or are both of us wrong? If you and I don’t know the answer, then other people are bound to be even more in the dark. Whom shall we get to decide what is right? Shall we get someone who agrees with you to decide? But if he already agrees with you, how can he decide fairly? Shall we get someone who agrees with me? But if he already agrees with me, how can he decide? Shall we get someone who disagrees with both of us? But if he already disagrees with both of us, how can he decide? Shall we get someone who agrees with both of us? But if he already agrees with both of us, how can he decide? Obviously, then, neither you nor I nor anyone else can decide for each other. Shall we wait for still another person?” (Zhuangzi, 2) Playful mockery allows one to maintain the distance and not get caught up in these squabbles (keep one’s clarity by maintaining the big picture in front of you) but still draw some attention to the problematic area.

Reversal, on the other hand, does not necessarily carry out a function of playful disengagement but draws attention to the multiplicity of a situation or a concept and calls into question the one-sidedness of the established viewpoints. In chapter 18 of *Zhuangzi* there is a story about a skull that came into the dream of Zhuangzi after he lamented over the death of the person to whom the skull once belonged. The skull in the story is quite happy to be in the position it is and assures Zhuangzi that it would not want to return to life if it had a chance, basically saying that death is better than life. Reversing concepts that one would never think of reversing as doing so might seem absurd, at least to the majority of folk (how can death be better than life? How can useless be useful?), brings about shock or curiosity at the very least. These, in turn, are associated with an elevated state of receptivity: as long as we are not appalled by the shock our amusement and curiosity can inspire us to play with other truisms and put them into question as well. This practice allows one to gain a broader perspective and appreciation of the multitude of possible ways (and, of course, their unity) because this way we do not automatically accept a statement or a situation as having just one side to it that does not change with the change of perspective.

Yet reversal as a therapeutic technique used on its own can be dangerous. Reversal alone does not break us out of the one-sided bipolar mentality: all we achieve is swap the positions of the “plus” (“positive”) and the “minus” (“negative”) – where once we said that life is definitely on the positive side of the scale we now say that death is. In essence, saying that life is better than death is basically the same as saying death is better than life. To break out of this bipolarity of our views we need to remain suspicious of any propositionally given meanings but do so by being *open to both* sides of the story and never lock ourselves to one of them: it is *possible* that life can be better than death and death – better than life (there is good in bad and bad in good), but can we really know that? And what can such knowledge bring to us anyway? The skull is happy where it is and so is Zhuangzi as he truly felt for the skull assuming that the position he is in (being alive) is the better one. Realizing that we are dealing with *acceptance* that allows us to appreciate both positions and fit them nicely in the big picture. Reversal alone cannot really show us that. Actually, it can bring us further away from that realization. That is why reading *Zhuangzi* we need to be careful not to see concepts where there aren't any and finding concepts is difficult to avoid when dealing with (propositional) language. But Zhuangzi is very helpful when it comes to that.

Along with employing paradoxes and logical absurdities that play a role in making us abandon our usual way of handling the content intellectually, Zhuangzi also constantly reminds us that his words should not be taken too seriously as well. One of the ways he achieves that is by expressing self-doubt. From time to time he appears to question his own statements, reminding that the notions he is using are necessarily incomplete. Here is an example: “Because right and wrong appeared, the Way was injured, and because the Way was injured, love became complete. But do such things as completion and injury really exist, or do they not?” (Zhuangzi, 2) Such incessant questioning does not allow the reader to get comfortable conveniently waiting for a handout – a meaning or a concept on which he can build a sturdy conception. Sturdy conceptions have nothing to do with Dao: “Only when there is no pondering and no cogitation will you get to know the Way. Only when you have no surroundings and follow no practices will you find rest in the Way. Only when there is no path and no procedure can you get to the Way” (Zhuangzi, 22).

Another example of how Zhuangzi keeps us from attaching ourselves to a position proposed by an authoritative figure is the ever-changing status of Confucius in *Zhuangzi*. At times Confucius is presented to us as a true sage. Here are the words of Duke Ai after he spoke with Confucius to whom he refers to as the “Perfect Man”, a true sage: “At first, when I faced south and became ruler of the realm, I tried to look after the regulation of the people and worried that they might die. I really thought I understood things perfectly.

But now that I've heard the words of a Perfect Man, I'm afraid there was nothing to my understanding" (Zhuangzi, 5). Other times Confucius is a man of many limits and a comical example of what we are *not* to do: "Confucius certainly hasn't reached the stage of a Perfect Man, has he? <...> He is after the sham illusion of fame and reputation and doesn't know that the Perfect Man looks on these as so many handcuffs and fetters!" (Zhuangzi, 5) Such indeterminate status of an authoritative figure does not allow us to attach ourselves to a personality that is supposed to be all-knowing and should be listened to. It does not allow us to take his words for granted since we are made to mistrust the person speaking. Of course, one should not take this to an extreme and proudly shut off from everything that is said to him. On the contrary, one might say that Zhuangzi teaches us *humility* and that allows for attentive listening to take place. The kind of attentive listening that allows you to go beyond words and beyond the individuals uttering those words.

With these tactics Zhuangzi seems to constantly slip through our fingers, leaving us baffled and alone. There is nothing convenient for us to hold on to. We are encouraged to mistrust our usual way of thinking, at times we are made to mistrust logic itself. Moreover, we are urged to mistrust Zhuangzi himself who shatters our illusory convictions and leaves us without a replacement. But is there really no positive outcome in this negation of language and what it conveys?

The Usefulness of the Useless Language

Up until now I have talked about the fact that language is mistrusted in *Zhuangzi* and gave a couple of possible reasons for that. I then raised a question of why Zhuangzi used language himself if he mistrusted it. The main idea in that section was that language is used to undermine language, or in other words – call into question the reliability of words and what they can convey. Now I would like to concentrate more on the positive side to the negative usage of language.

So the playful, evasive language helps to keep an open and unencumbered mind: such mind is receptive to the subtle dynamics and the ever-flowing changes in the universe and the unity of the different aspects of those changes. It is not encumbered with rigid, static preconceptions that have no ability to flow and transform alongside Dao. Having the ability to free the mind, fuzzy language (the message it carries) as one of the tools also hints at what it is trying to (not) say. This, I believe, is one of the positive achievements of such language. It actually says something without saying it. This is one of the main features of apophatic language, a language employed by Zhuangzi as pointed out by Mark Berkson (1996).

Propositional language and apophatic language can be compared to two

different rooms. An overburdened room speaks to us of fullness (“the ten thousand things”) while an empty one brings out the harmonious interplay of fullness and emptiness – the walls and the empty space which makes a functional unity (“the ten thousand things” as *One*). Fuzzy language draws our attention from the spokes of the wheel to the hub. This, however, does not mean that we should stop there and be silent altogether. There are the spokes and there is the hub but it is not just that. They make up a unity – the wheel – so we cannot say that there is only substance (the spokes) or that there is only emptiness (the hub), or that there should only be speech or silence. Fuzzy language is a great example of that – it does not really say anything but it is not utter silence as well. It speaks about Dao without speaking *about* it.

Fuzzy language is not encumbered by propositions which are “dense” by their nature. They cannot help but carry a message that necessarily has its counterpart imprinted in it (if we say “this”, we at the same time say/assume “not-this”). We are automatically locked in that proposition and its opposite and in their binary-oppositional logic. Language that roams free of our usual logic and even free of the “etiquette” of trying to be as clear as possible, opens up new possibilities of handling stuff instead of just dropping it as unintelligible and thus – useless. Fuzzy language *points* to, *hints* at something rather than explain it, and Dao, as we are told, cannot be explained (“He who, when asked about the Way, gives an answer does not understand the Way; and he who asked about the Way has not really heard the Way explained. The Way is not to be asked about, and even if it is asked about, there can be no answer” (Zhuangzi, 22)).

Kuang-ming Wu (2005) and Günter Wohlfahrt (2012) both use the image of a finger pointing to a moon to describe the referential importance in Daoist way of speaking as well as the relative importance of language in trying to relate what Dao(ism) is about. According to Wu (2005, p. 227), “when the finger <...> points to the moon <...>, we must forget the finger to attend to the moon (attending to the finger blocks the moon), and yet we need the finger to attend to the moon (we don’t know where to look without the finger). The finger must be discarded without being discarded; it must be there without being there, must be there *tacitly*”. If speech is saturated with propositional content it cannot be transparent enough to point to something that is outside of it. Yet we do need some referential mechanism if we want to point at something without blocking the view, and apophatic language used in *Zhuangzi* does just that. “In words self-wiping with their self-contradiction”, says Wu (2005, p. 229), “words cease to describe, get out of our way in our forgetting them, and there emerges what is there as meant by self-erased, self-forgotten words”.

On the same note, G. Wohlfahrt (2012, p. 50) attributes the ability to use “words to let us forget words” to poets whose skillful usage of fuzzy

language allows unspoken images to come forth: “they show the things in their ineffable individuality”. So it seems that as long as words do not trap us in their enclosed textual stagnation, we can enjoy the wordless play of life that poetic language hints at. G. Wohlfahrt sees this process as a transition: at first there *must* be a finger and there *must* be a concept of moon for me to understand the message of the finger pointing at the evening sky. But once I get the message, I have to forget about the finger, forget about the conception of the moon and just watch it, perceive it. So it is clear that it is a mutual effort – both on the part of the messenger and the receiver of the message. The utterance must be transparent enough for the receiver to see through it and get the message. The receiver, in turn, must be the one to look *through* it and to both *find* and *experience* the unspoken message for *himself*. So even though apopathic language has to be as transparent as possible, it does not mean that it is automatically a see-through. But being “slippery” is actually a very positive feature of such language.

Being “difficult to understand” fuzzy language appeals to us directly and calls us to engage into it personally. As Robert E. Allison (2007, p. 107) noted, “The speech of No-Lips cannot be easily divined: it must be interpreted”. Whereas the propositional delivery tends to leave us out: we can agree or disagree with the given proposition but it doesn’t really engage us in a way that the fuzzy language does. Fuzzy language invites us to give its blurry form content, to give it ourselves, and finding this unique and personal content, is one of the “requirements” to step on the Way. It is important to note, that by “content” I do not mean a substantial, intelligible, linguistic “something”, quite the contrary: the Daoist practice of fasting of the heart entails all contents to be done with in order to open up the emptiness in one’s *xīn*. Like language can point to, mirror something outside it by being transparent, so can a person mirror the workings of Dao by being empty of a set “content” (all the needs, wants and feelings that ground him in one perspective). So personal engagement is essential: *I* have to open up the emptiness in my heart so *I* can make all of the buzzing go away, and in the end so *I* can make the *I* go away to be able to hear the silent speech of Dao. This initial personal engagement is called upon by fuzzy language.

Free of a set content, playful and obscure language leaves room for the engaging-disengaging emptiness. Its playfulness allows for the content to be ever-changing and open for the multitude of possible perspectives. Its playfulness also prevents it to be taken seriously. It does not take up the attention of the reader entirely because it never stops pointing at something that is beyond it. It is forever fleeting and its logical cracks leave enough transparency to see through them, wherein the unspoken Dao lies.

A language capable of accommodating emptiness and silence actually speaks volumes about Dao, and that is a very positive outcome indeed. It tells us what Dao is not: at the very least we know that it cannot be found in

the messages of propositional language, and it cannot be found in the ones uttered in fuzzy language as well. The language that accommodates emptiness by not carrying anything substantial, speaks without speaking. It emphasizes the emptiness between words; it emphasizes the in-between-the-lines instead of a direct and content-full message of a proposition. Its inability to express Dao speaks volumes about It. So it appears that blurred, fuzzy language is the most appropriate way of not-speaking about Dao. And one thing we can do about Dao is not-speak about It while wanting to point it out. So it turns out, in a paradoxical, Daoist way, that the uselessness of language has its use. Instead of dropping it like Huizi dropped the huge gourd because he could not apply it in a traditional way, Zhuangzi makes great use of the uselessness of language and not-speaks about Dao in a remarkably eloquent manner.

Conclusion

Zhuangzi is known for his language skepticism and he has a strong reason to be skeptical when it comes to wordless, limitless, featureless Dao. In this paper I tried to show that, first of all, when using language the way we usually do, we divide reality and fill it up with fickle content. What is more, we assume that that content is fixed and it can be used as a *universal* measure to evaluate other contents. However, from the point of view of the impartial hub, this is to evaluate one spoke of the wheel from the perspective of another spoke as if it was done from the perspective of the hub. It is okay to make observations from your own perspective, it is only natural to do so, but the lesson in *Zhuangzi* is that you cannot make universal judgments from that perspective. Language belongs to the domain of the ever-changing perspective-bound spokes and if we concentrate on their incessant clatter we will not be able to hear the silence that enables it.

To draw the attention away from that clatter, Zhuangzi uses apophatic (or poetic, or fuzzy) language. I argued that the usage of apophatic language, first of all, exposes the clatter of the propositional language as just that – the racket of the temporal spokes: it is not meaningless yet it does not carry a universal meaning as well. Secondly, not being overburdened with a solid tangible content and erasing such content with its every step (paradox, absurdity, mockery, reversal, doubt – all of these help erase the content), such language makes room for silence and emptiness, the pivot of Dao.

While fuzzy language plays a negative role in undermining language, it does so only to some extent. Self-negating usage of language, as employed by Zhuangzi, puts language to its proper limits (he shows that operations within language are inevitably perspective-bound) but at the same time he stretches the language over its usual limits by using it to reference something that is beyond it but at the same time – integral to it. I am talking about *silence* –

the silent partner of language that follows its every step. Making room for silence and pointing to something that is “outside” language constitutes the positive outcome of the negative usage of language.

There is, of course, more to be said on this topic and even more to be silent about.

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Notes

- 1 As it is widely known in the scholarly community, *Zhuangzi* has not been written by a single author. See, for example, Mair, V. H., 1998. Preface. In V. H. Mair *Wandering on the Way: Early Taoist Tales and Parables of Chuang Tzu*. Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, pp. xxxi-xxxv. Yet instead of *negatively* questioning Zhuangzi’s conceptual consistency I rather concentrate on the general *feel* of *Zhuangzi* and what it tries to point *to* instead of what it supposedly *explains or defines*. From time to time *Zhuangzi* does get conceptually inconsistent, but that actually works for it and not against it. I will argue this point throughout the paper.

- 2 It is only natural that if we evaluate the poetic approach to a subject by scientific standards it will be easily discarded as unscientific and worthless in that context. In the same way, the scientific approach as seen from a poetic point of view will appear rigid, over-simplified, shackled and soulless, completely missing the point and essence of the subject matter.
- 3 When quoting *Zhuangzi* the translation of Burton Watson (1968) is used. Readers may notice that the majority of quotes are taken from the second chapter. The reason for it is that the second chapter, in my opinion, holds the most ideas on language, its usage and its connection to Dao. It is also the chapter which first inspired me to pursue the tricky question of language in *Zhuangzi*.
- 4 See a story about the bird who visited the capital of Lu (chapter 18) or the story of Hundun (chapter 7).
- 5 I mentioned this point briefly in the first chapter of this paper.

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