Philosophy of Language in Third Century China:
on the argument 'language does/does not exhaust the meaning of words'

Nozomi WAKU

Doctoral Program in Philosophy

Graduate School of Humanities and Social Sciences

University of Tsukuba

Abstract

In third century China there was a discussion of whether language does or does not exhaust the meaning of words. There were three positions on language. First, that intuitive knowledge, which Confucian sages can acquire, cannot be expressed in language, that is language does not exhaust the meaning of words. Second, that there could be a gradual grasp of meaning through language and symbol. Third, that something which reaches into the mind is necessarily accompanied by language, that is to say language does exhaust the meaning of words. Each position reflects the view taken by each of the three scholars: He Yan 何晏; Wang Bi 王弼 of the Wei 魏 dynasty; and Ou Yangjian 欧陽建 of the Jin 晋 dynasty. The aim of this article is to consider their arguments in the context of contemporary epistemological knowledge.

要旨

三世紀の中国では「言尽意・言不尽意（言は意を尽くすか否か）」という主題をめぐって議論がなされていた。この議論には、言語に関する三つの捉え方があった。第一の立場は、儒教的聖人が体得できる直観的な知は、言語に依拠しては説明可能ではない、すなわち「言不尽意（言は意を尽くさず）」とするものである。第二の立場は、言語と象（『易』の卦象）とによって段階的に意を捉えようと試みるものである。第三の立場は、所与として心に直接与えられた認識は、必然的に言語をともなって把捉される、すなわち「言尽意（言は意を

尽くす）」というものである。これらの立場は、それぞれ魏の何晏、王弼、そして晋の欧陽建によって示されている。本論文の目的は、当時の認識論を背景とするこの三者の行論を検討することにある。

キーワード：魏晋玄学、何晏、王弼、欧陽建

Introduction

In third century medieval China, there was a philosophical discussion on whether language does or does not exhaust the meaning of words. It was a topic closely related to contemporary metaphysics. That is to say, underlying this argument is the intuitive understanding that the basis of creation and the principle being guaranteed is *Dao* 道, and that language or rational knowledge is related to empirical knowledge. Reflections on language and rational knowledge began from this position.

In this article, I will take this as being the philosophy of language in third century China, where there were three positions on language. The first position propounds that intuitive knowledge Confucian sages acquire cannot be expressed in language, i.e. language does not exhaust the meaning of words. The second puts forward that it is possible to attempt to gradually grasp meaning 意 through language and symbol 象. The third puts forward that something that reaches into the mind is necessarily accompanied by language, i.e. language does exhaust the meaning of words. Each reflects the view of each of three scholars: He Yan 何晏; Wang Bi 王弼 of the Wei 魏 dynasty; and Ou Yangjian 欧陽建 of the Jin 晋 dynasty. Previous studies have not carried out enough comparative analysis of the arguments of these three scholars. However, in my opinion, each scholar shares the same understanding that empirical knowledge precedes linguistic knowledge. In this article, I will consider their arguments in the context of contemporary epistemological knowledge.

1. Language does not exhaust the meaning of words: He Yan

He Yan incorporated the philosophy of Confucianism with Daoism by interpreting *Dao* as an ideal form of Confucianism based on the metaphysics of traditional Daoism, then locating (or

ranking) the Confucian sages within the *Dao*. In *Lunyu-Jijie 論語集解* (The Commentaries on the Analects of Confucius by He Yan), He Yan states:

> [Lunyu] Kong Zi 孔子 said, " I set my heart upon the *Dao*, base myself on Virtue 德, lean upon Benevolence 仁 and take my recreation in the Arts 芸[1]".

> [Commentary] 'set my heart' means longing. We cannot learn *Dao* by experience, so we long for it[2].

He Yan states that mastering the *Dao* is impossible for us, therefore we can only long for it. He Yan also describes the *Dao* as follows:

> To be precise, the *Dao* cannot be regarded as being. Heaven 天 and Earth 地 and so on can be regarded as being. However, we call it *Dao*, because it exists in a hidden place. So, *Dao* can be named the *Dao* but it hides in a nameless state[3].

Dao refuses recognition by the five senses. However, He Yan says, we call it *Dao* as an object because *Dao* functions as a nameless concept. Then, *Dao* can be recognized only as an inexpressible something, as an object of intuition not of experience. In He Yan's *Dao Lun 道論* (Discourse on the *Dao*):

> There is no word when you want to talk. There is no name when you want to call. There is no shape when you want to see. There is no sound when you want to listen. If so, *Dao* is the faultless state[4].

In this sentence, it is repeatedly stated that *Dao* transcends language, notion and physical senses. He Yan's quotations are based on the tradition of Daoist metaphysics, but He Yan ranks Confucian sages with the *Dao*. In He Yan's *Wuming Lun 無名論* (Discourse on the Nameless):

> The man admired by the public is famed 有名. The man not admired is nameless 無名. The sage regards nameless as famed, not admired as honored. By calling namelessness as *Dao*, and not admired as greatness 大, sages as nameless can be remarked as famed, sages who are not admired can be honorable. However, do such sages have the same function as the man admired and famed described at first? In terms of nothingness, neither of

them can be regarded as nothing, however sages are not one and the same beings as described at first because they are related to nothingness[5].

Defining fame 有名 and namelessness 無名 in terms of admiration 誉 of the public, He Yan placed sages in the third position. The third position is fame in so far as fame is related to the nameless *Dao*. The fame that is defined as admiration by the public and the fame of sages are both fame. However, the fame of sages subsumes the namelessness of *Dao*. This logic equates the sages with the *Dao*. Then, if *Dao* transcends expression by language, sages related to *Dao* also transcend linguistic expression. In this sense, He Yan takes the position that language does not exhaust the meaning of words.

> [Lunyu] Kong Zi said, "Do I possess knowledge? No, I do not[6]".

> [Commentary] knowledge is to know meaning. Knowledge is language which is not yet quite completely exhausted[7].

He Yan determined that knowledge is to know meaning, and stated that language is inadequate to exhaust the meaning of words. Then it follows that knowledge transcends language. In the following phrase from the *Wuming Lun 無名論*, there are references to knowledge that transcends language.

> In the first place, it is nameless. Therefore we can denominate it by using all the names in the world. However, is this its true name? It can be represented metaphorically but finally cannot be realized 悟. It is like saying that the Tai mountain 泰山 is great but not understanding the materials 気 that form the greatness of theTai mountain[8].

Namelessness is a negation of name. Namelessness surpasses the limitation of language and also transcends recognition by the five senses. Accordingly, it is possible that denomination by any notion is possible. But as long as it remains a linguistic understanding it is nothing more than an expression by metaphor; it cannot reach the knowledge that transcends language, namely realization. The metaphor of the Tai mountain means that the principal knowledge behind knowledge is brought to language; notion and senses can be gained only through realization, not through language.

He Yan's logic, which combines Confucianism with Daoism, associated Confucian sages with the inexpressible *Dao*. Accordingly, this means that it is impossible to express the

intentions of the sages as well. That is exactly what He Yan means by language does not exhaust the meaning of words. Yet is the knowledge that transcends language indeed impossible to describe through language? Wang Bi and Ou Yangjian undertook to examine this kind of knowledge and language in their discussion. However, they have different opinions on the subject.

2. Language, symbol and meaning: Wang Bi

According to Wang Bi's framework of metaphysics, he conceptualized metaphysical existences such as *Dao* and *Wu* 無, but he considered them impossible to be described by language.

> The *Dao* that can be spoken, the name 名 that can be named, indicate abstract things and extend to every shape so they cannot have eternity 常. That is why we cannot talk about them and denominate them[9].

> The man who talks about *Dao* is spoiling that eternity. The man who names the *Dao* is departing from its true nature 真[10].

> In general, entities which have a denomination and a name are not their ultimate state 極. Saying *Dao* entails that there is something that is the basis for this expression. Because of its basis, this expression will be permitted. Accordingly, the *Dao* that can be described is only the greatest among the entities that can be considered by designation 称中之大. But it is nothing compared to the greatness of that which is not designated 無称之大[11].

Wang Bi also regarded the behavior of language, for example that of denominating, as a lack of universality.

> Denominating cannot identify it. Designating cannot express it thoroughly. Names necessarily have dividing lines between each other. Denominations necessarily have something on which they are based. If it were divided it could not be comprehensive. If it were based on others it could not be universal. If it were not comprehended, it would indeed depart from the truth. If it were not universal it could not be taken as a name[12].

From such an understanding of language, Wang Bi is considered to have based his position that language does not exhaust the meaning of words on a traditional reading[13]. However, I would suggest that Wang Bi does not have such a simplistic theory of 'language does not exhaust the meaning of words'. Since Wang Bi places the idea of symbol 象 between language and meaning, in his *Zhouyi-Lueli 周易略例,* (Discourse on the principle of interpretation of *Zhouyi*) he seeks to arrive at meaning through symbol instead of through language.

> To be precise, symbol is the measure with which to express meaning. Language is the measure with which to declare symbol. Symbol is an ideal to attain meaning. Language is an ideal to attain symbol. Since language is born of symbol, we can understand symbol by digging for language. Since symbol is born of meaning, we can understand meaning by digging for symbol. We can attain meaning by symbol. We can demonstrate symbol by language[14].

Wang Bi does not connect language to meaning directly, but establishes the three-part connection of language-symbol-meaning by introducing symbol. This three-part connection forms a class of ontology in which language arises out of symbol, and symbol arises out of meaning. On the other hand, it also forms an epistemological means-purposes relation which differs from its class. That is, with logical possibility, meaning may be attained by symbol, not by language directly.

Wang Bi does not state that meaning can be brought to language and be expressible by language, but foresees the possibility of expressing meaning by designation through the medium of symbol. Then, how does Wang Bi describe the grasp of meaning by symbol? He describes it as follows:

> Therefore, language is the measure with which to declare symbol. After obtaining symbol, then language should be forgotten. Symbol is the measure with which to hold meaning. After obtaining meaning, then symbol should be forgotten. This is exactly similar to the tradition of *Zhuang Zi 莊子*: a snare 蹄 is the measure with which to catch rabbits. After catching rabbits the snare is forgotten. A trap 筌 is the measure with which to catch fish. After catching fish, the trap is forgotten. That is to say, language is the snare of symbol. Symbol is the trap of meaning[15].

Wang Bi compares the language-symbol-meaning convergence with the method of snare and trap of *Zhuang Zi*[16]. According to the interpretation of Cheng Xuanying 成玄英, a trap is the

basket used to corner and capture fish, and a snare is used to hook the legs of rabbits. For instance, just as one is able to gradually corner fish into baskets in the endlessly rushing river and just as one is able to capture rabbits in the vast fields, Wang Bi considers it possible to drive meaning into a corner and catch it through the two gradual steps of squeezing, i.e. language-describing/symbol-showing, based on the tradition of *Zhuang Zi*. Wang Bi heightens the possibility of exhausting the meaning of words by introducing symbol to his theory.

Wang Bi believed that he could attain meaning by applying the theory described above. However, he debates the question regarding complete oblivion 忘 of language and symbol after exhausting meaning through language and symbol. He also states that oblivion of the measures is the very attainment of meaning.

> So, remaining in language is not attaining symbol. Remaining in symbol is not attaining meaning. Since symbol is born of meaning, in the case of remaining in symbol, the part that remains is not symbol in itself of meaning. Since language is born of symbol, in the case of remaining in language, the part that remains is not language in itself of symbol. Therefore, oblivion of symbol is the attainment of meaning. Oblivion of language is the attainment of symbol. Oblivion of symbol is essential for the attainment of meaning. Oblivion of languages is essential for the attainment of symbol[17].

As long as we remain in language, we cannot attain symbol. Also, as long as we remain in symbol, we cannot attain meaning. Wang Bi states 'oblivion of symbol is essential for the attainment of meaning. Oblivion of language is essential for the attainment of symbol'. Wang Bi's theory which recognizes the oblivion of means as the attainment of aims is regarded as the failure of logic by traditional reading[18]. However my opinion is that this may not be the correct interpretation, and I would rather suggest that this logical turn is quite indispensable to his theory.

Wang Bi introduced symbol as connected to meaning directly. Symbol is the direct measure with which to exhaust meaning. Toward the meaning which cannot be brought to language, which is beyond the expression of language, Wang Bi regarded that such meaning can be shown through the medium of symbol. However, Wang Bi's theory itself is the linguistic description of meaning that is inexpressible by language. As it stands it seems to be a paradox. Therefore, Wang Bi should reject even his theory of language to overcome this

paradox. The phrases 'oblivion of symbol is essential for the attainment of meaning. Oblivion of language is essential for the attainment of symbol' mean a reversal of the logical order. Wang Bi's meaning is established as meaning in itself only by overturning his theory.

3. Language exhausts the meaning of words: Ou Yangjian

Ou Yangjian, who appeared shortly after He Yan and Wang Bi in history, ranked afresh the value of language as a common function with which to share knowledge against the contemporary language does not exhaust the meaning of words position.

> Undoubtedly, even if we gain reason 理 in our mind, we cannot express it without language. Even if concrete things exist in themselves, we cannot distinguish them without language. If language does not express thought, we have no way to communicate with others. If name does not discriminate things, we have no way to judge things clearly. Names and values are different by defining judgments. Thoughts are expressed by the communication of language and names. Then, at their origin, things do not have spontaneous names and reason does not have a predetermined name. If you want to discern the actual truth, then you name them by different names. If you want to express your thought, then you establish denominations[19].

Ou Yangjian's epistemology has two steps. In the first step the target of knowledge is brought to the mind directly without language. The second step is the discernment of objects grasped directly by the mind, by language. Language, for Ou Yangjian, has the function of analyzing reason and other concrete things which are inexpressible in themselves. Language is the indispensable instrument for communicating discreetly with others. Therefore, language and objects must form one-to-one corresponding relationships.

> Names are changed as things change, language is changed deriving from reason. They cannot exist separately from others like sounds and echoes, shapes and shadows. If they are not divided in two, then it is indisputable that language does not exhaust the meaning of words. Therefore, I insist that language exhausts the meaning of words[20].

Language varies with change or difference of objects and keeps incidental one-to-one relationships. After knowledge reaches the mind in a direct manner, language follows it. Then a vertical relationship is composed between language and objects as shown in the analogies of sound and echo, shape and shadow. Language follows the knowledge attained by the mind and corresponds to objects without excess or limit. Language and meaning are consistent in this position. Through the above conjecture, Ou Yangjian insisted that language exhausts the meaning of words.

Conclusion

The proposition that language exhausts the meaning of words is opposed to that of language not exhausting the meaning of words, however, the logic of each scholar does not fully oppose that of the others. Rather, each scholar shares the same understanding that empirical knowledge precedes linguistic knowledge.

He Yan insisted that language does not exhaust the meaning of words, but Wang Bi and Ou Yangjian groped for the possibility that meaning could be attained. Here we can see the difference between the three scholars. Wang Bi produced symbol as a method of approaching that knowledge which is impossible to arrive at by language. He thought that meaning which cannot be represented by language can be represented through the medium of symbol. Finally, he believed in the possibility of understanding knowledge beyond language. On the other hand, Ou Yangjian trusted language, and thought language arrived at knowledge and then identified the unity between language and meaning.

1 子曰、志於道、拠於徳、依於仁、遊於芸。(『論語』述而) All quotations in this article are translated by the author from the original text.

2 志、慕也。道不可体、故志之而已。(『論語集解』述而)

3 夫道者、惟無所有者也。自天地已来皆有所有矣。然猶謂之道者、以其能復用無所有也。故雖処有名之域、而没其無名之象。(『列子』仲尼篇注引何晏『無名論』)

4 夫道之而無語、名之而無名、視之而無形、聴之而無声、則道之全焉。(『列子』天瑞篇注引何晏『道論』)

5 為民所誉、則有名者也。無誉、無名者也。若夫聖人、名無名、誉無誉。謂無名為道、無誉為大、則夫無名者、可以言有名矣。無誉者、可以言有誉矣。然与夫可誉可名者、豈同用哉。此比於無所有、故皆有所有矣。而於有所有之中、当与無所有相従、而与夫有所有者不同。(『列子』仲尼篇注引何晏『無名論』)

6 子曰、吾有知乎哉。無知也。(『論語』子罕)

7 知者、知意之知也。知者、言未必尽。(『論語集解』子罕)

8 夫唯無名。故可得遍与天下之名名之。然豈其名也哉。惟此足喩、而終莫悟。是観泰山之崇崛、而謂元気不浩茫者也。(『列子』仲尼、注)

9 可道之道、可名之名、指事造形、非其常也。故不可道、不可名也。(『老子道徳経注』第一章注)

10 言之者失其常、名之者離其真。(『老子指略』)

11 凡物有称有名、則非其極也。言道則有所由、有所由然後謂之為道。然則是道称中之大也。不若無称之大也。(『老子道徳経注』第二十五章注)

12 名之不能当、称之不能既。名必有所分、称必有所由。有分則有不兼、有由則有不尽。不兼則大殊其真、不尽則不可以名(『老子指略』)

13 HACHIYA Kunio 蜂屋邦夫 (1981).

14 夫象者、出意者也。言者、明象者也。尽意莫若象、尽象莫若言。言生於象、故可尋言以観象。象生於意、故可尋象以観意。意以象尽、象以言著。(『周易略例』明象)

15 故言者所以明象、得象而忘言。象者所以存意、得意而忘象。猶蹄者所以在兔、得兔而忘蹄、筌者所以在魚、得魚而忘筌也。然則、言者象之蹄也。象者意之筌也。(『周易略例』明象)

16 筌者所以在魚、得魚而忘筌。蹄者所以在兔、得兔而忘蹄。言者所以在意、得意而忘言。吾安得夫忘言之人、而与之言哉。(『荘子』外物)

17 是故存言者、非得象者也。存象者、非得意者也。象生於意而存象焉、則所存者乃非其象也。言生於象而存言焉、則所存者乃非其言也。然則、忘象者乃得意者也。忘言者乃得象者也。得意在忘象、得象在忘言。(『周易略例』明象)

18 HACHIYA Kunio 蜂屋邦夫 (1981), HORIIKE Nobuo 堀池信夫(1988) and YAMADA Fumio 山田史生(1999).

19 誠以理得於心、非言不暢。物定於彼、非言不弁。言不暢志、則無以相接。名不弁物、則鑑識不顕。鑑識顕而名品殊、言称接而情志暢。原其所以、本其所由、非物有自然之名、理有必定之称也。欲弁其実、則殊其名、欲宣其志、則立其称。(『芸文類聚』言語所引欧陽建「言尽意論」)

20 名逐物而遷、言因理而変。此猶声発響応、形存影附、不得相与為二。苟其不二、則無不尽。吾故以為尽矣。(『芸文類聚』言語所引欧陽建「言尽意論」)

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