The curse of the perceptual: a case from Kinaesthesia

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Abstract

In this paper I briefly consider the reach of the *phenomenal* in our mental tapestry and the relative *ineffability* of at least some of our thoughts. More specifically, I start from an example based on *kinaesthetic* representations, i.e. representations involving bodily posture and movement, and then generalise the discussion by suggesting that all *perceptual/phenomenal representations,* being rich and complex informational states, test our expressive capacities to the limit. Linking the modernist poet's discontent with language to the ineffability of phenomenal states, I argue that such states may be more pervasive than is sometimes thought. Along these lines, I consider whether perceptual states are associated only with certain sets of concepts, distinguish between two different types of phenomenal qualia -the one associated with objects, events or states in the world, and the other with words or other linguistic expressions- and finally, use a list-poem to show that even proper names, whose primary function is referential, can give access to phenomenal states.

'I haven't spoken to anyone for three days. In fact it seemed a good thing to keep silent. After all, words can't express all a person feels; words are inadequate'.

Andrei Tarkovsky, 'Mirror', 1974, A Mosfilm Unit 4 Production

'Dear Everyone,
Words are inadequate, but I just wanted to thank you all for making my 'last' day both happy and memorable'.

From Neil Smith's e-mail to the UCL students who organised his farewell party

'…it's ripped my heart apart. There are no words really to express it'

Sion Jenkins, describing what the experience of being in prison for 6 years has done to him

1 Kinaesthesia: a case study

'Solo' is a study in improvised movement danced and choreographed by William Forsythe and celebrated mainly for its idiosyncratic and peculiar gestures.

For the sake of argument let us consider a slightly odd scenario: imagine that you are given a 5 second sequence from 'Solo' and asked to produce as accurate a verbal description as possible of what you see. You are even told that in the room next door a dancer will be listening to what you say and will try to perform the 'Solo' sequence on the basis of your description alone. You have no visual contact with the dancer and hence cannot make corrections based on how your instructions are being followed. You need to make your instructions so clear and precise in the first place that the resulting dance sequence is almost identical to the one from 'Solo'.

If the task doesn't sound bewildering enough to make you opt out from the start, you are first likely to realise that 5 seconds of real time can accommodate a rather long stream of bodily movement. You might then consider breaking down this stream into individual instances -only to find that describing posture is no easier a task itself. Even the crudest static visual representations are in fact very complex informational states. On the simple business of what it means to see a floor tile as 'square'[1], Evans (1985: 392) writes: 'to have the visual experience of four points of light arranged in a square amounts to no more than being in a complex informational state which embodies information about the egocentric location of those lights'.

Bodily posture is a complex configuration of many *concurrent* 'goings on'. Its informational complexity -so simple to perceive and represent visually- is felt more when trying to render it in a conceptual system like language. What in vision is sub-attentively perceived, in language would have to be first brought to attention and consciousness.[2] What in vision is automatically fixed in space through an *egocentric map* of spatial reference points, in a linguistic description would have to go through a complex process of labelling -where origins/starting points, references and axes must be explicitly determined. What in vision is instantaneous and concurrent, in a linguistic description would inevitably take sequential form.

So here you are, having to observe the intricate configuration of the many 'goings on' that make up bodily posture, possibly describe each 'going on' individually, show in what way each 'going on' relates to some other 'going on' -e.g. position of the head *in relation to* the torso- and how they all hang together as a whole. And without exaggeration your pains are only just beginning.

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[1] The word 'square' is intended here to represent a shape that a subject can identify perceptually without being aware of the geometric definition.

[2] As Heil (1991: 10) suggests in passing, while gazing at our surroundings, we are, in some sense, aware of far more than we recognise or bother to identify. Much of what constitutes the mental representation of a perceived object might not be consciously attended. Along the same lines, Crane (1992: 138-139) points out: '(…) there are [also] the states of the so-called 'sub-personal' computational systems like the visual system, but whose content is not (…) phenomenologically salient'. Finally, Colin Mc Ginn (1989: 163) labels non-conceptual mental content 'subpersonal content': the kind of content routinely attributed by cognitive scientists to information processing systems of which the subject has no awareness' (quoted from Crane 1992).

You will stumble upon movements or body parts you never realised you don't have vocabulary for. You will quickly write off easily accessible but sketchy descriptions of the sort 'the head leans towards the back' or 'hands and arms face forward' seeing the indefinite number of ways in which they could be physically realised.

As you stretch your inventiveness to the limit to improvise literal descriptive strategies and show where each body part rests or how it moves in space, you automatically also resort to figurative ways of spelling out what you see. Just like your once-upon-a-time ballet teacher who used to say things like 'Girls! Toes in the pond' instead of attempting a literal description. But you are soon to find that figurative language leads by different means to the same result.

Although figures often come so much more easily to mouth -in our everyday verbal give-and-take we readily prefer them to literal language when it comes to conveying our perceptual experiences[3]- they bring troubles of their own. (For some the story so far might feel like a journey from the commonplace to the banal, but some things need spelling out for the sake of discussion.)

'Toes in the pond' and other figurative descriptions represent an intelligent move, by an intelligent organism who is thus able to bypass very complex literal alternatives. But while they seem just right for a multitude of communicative occasions, on others -like the odd one we are imagining- they simply do not achieve the desired levels of accuracy. Or when they do, they seem to have done so at the expense of large investments of creativity, time and mental energy.

Also, the very mechanics of figurative language at times makes it an even more dubious solution. Figures rely heavily on existing background experience, entailing -at the least- that for a figurative expression to succeed, interlocutors often need a degree of shared background resources that might not be readily available. Ultimately, a representation can be so unusual or idiosyncratic that no matter how much one stretches their creativity and imagination, no matter how thoroughly they sieve their background in search of that valuable piece of relevant information, they still consistently fail to find a satisfactory figurative way of conveying it.

Before the invention of the video camera, modern choreographers had little choice but to resort to an intricate type of notation known as *labanotation*: a stenographic language in which they hoped to code their choreographies and make them available to others. It is astonishing to see that in the formal system of labanotation a relatively uncomplicated initial position with just a single motor departure from it could easily devour pages and pages of absurdly tortuous description. Such a representation would take roughly the following form:

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[3] For instance, we naturally and spontaneously come up with expressions like 'the cash machine spat out the card', whose perceptual force is very difficult to capture in literal terms. Cristina Cacciari in 'Why do we speak metaphorically? Reflections in thought and language' (1998) and Adrian Pilkington in 'Non-lexicalised concepts and degrees of effability: poetic thoughts and the attraction of what is not in the dictionary' (2001) offer an interesting perspective on the interconnections between perceptual states and figurative language.

Description of:
Initial position of the head with regard to vertical and horizontal planes
Initial position of upper back, shoulders and chest with regard to vertical and horizontal planes
Initial position of lower back with regard to vertical and horizontal planes
Initial position of upper and lower arm with regard to vertical and horizontal planes
Initial position of hands with regard to vertical and horizontal planes
Position of legs and feet with regard to vertical and horizontal planes
Relative position of each body member with regard to the rest to compose the overall design of initial body position

Then a similar set of descriptions would be used for every single departure from the initial position. The more complex the intended design, the more parameters -such as additional spatial reference points- had to be introduced; the parametric system was thus open-ended and could expand *ad infinitum*. Complex movements that involved more than a simple departure from horizontal and vertical planes could not be represented at all without being radically underdetermined by the representation used.

2 The curse of the perceptual

As humans, we have the ability to entertain mentally, recall from memory, track in our immediate physical surroundings or assemble from scratch in imagination the most refined perceptual representations[4].

It might be odd to quote a philosopher who contemplates the possible redundancy of the perceptual altogether, but this following paragraph by John Heil nicely serves my discussion. Heil writes:

> 'Philosophers cut their teeth on talk about perceptual experiences. Seeing, hearing, tasting, smelling, and touching things is, we are taught, a matter of our having *experiences* of those things. (…) Experiences are of objects and events, particulars and particular goings-on, not facts. And experiences are, or often are, in some degree, *conscious.*
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> That we have perceptual experiences with these characteristics is widely assumed, hence rarely defended. The attitude is one inherited from Locke: 'What [perceptual experience] is every one will know better by reflecting

[4] It might already have become obvious from the quotations at the beginning of this analysis that I use the term 'perceptual' in a rather broad sense, to refer not only to states associated with the senses but also to emotions. Emotions are not perceptual states; they are responses to the world rather than perceptions of it. Strictly speaking then, my use of 'perceptual' stands for every *non-conceptual representation* that the human mind can potentially entertain.

> on what he does himself when he sees, hears, feels, etc. than by any discourse of mine. Whoever reflects on what passes in his own mind cannot miss it: and if he does not reflect, all the words in the world cannot make him have any notion of it'. (Locke [1690] 1979, book II, chapter 9, section 2, p. 143)
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> Indeed in considering the matter, one may feel a certain sense of foreboding. Like time, perceptual experience is something we have a grip on so long as we postpone thinking about it. It is only after we trouble to reflect on the topic that it loses its obviousness (1991: 1).

Or, so long as we postpone talking about it, one could legitimately add.

Our private mental lives are teeming with images, sensations, smells, sounds, textures; and yet for some reason, more often than not, the attempt to communicate even the most elementary of them proves overwhelming. From this standpoint, the 'discontent with language' (Waldrop 1971) that characterised most 20th century literary theory seems neither unjustified nor absurd. It might not be the case that language[5] is 'inadequate' *tout court*. Such extreme romantic views were largely side-effects of traditional semiotic theory, a pragmatically naïve programme that dominated literary study for much of the last century and which more or less reduced the richness of linguistic communication to the *code* alone.

Dismissing language in its entirety is as crude as accepting it in its entirety. As Dan Sperber suggested to me recently, the amazing fact about language is not what we cannot express by it but what we can, the astonishing range of thoughts that we can make available to others *because* we have language. We wouldn't want to deny that language performs exceptionally well in many areas: in simple scene descriptions, for instance, instructions for achieving goals, complex logical arguments and long trains of abstract thoughts. A 'defence of language' is redundant because language does not need to be defended. But would we want to discount the possibility that in some other areas language doesn't really make the grade? All one has to do is focus on the right set of phenomena and the business of publicly expressing what is privately present in our minds will begin to appear less and less straightforward.

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[5] Allow me to speak of 'language' here -since this is the term used in traditional literary theory- but use it to denote something much broader than the *code* alone. In using the term 'language' I actually refer to *linguistic communication*, which -taking into account the Relevance-theoretic programme (Sperber and Wilson 1986/1995, Carston 2002)- involves not only a *linguistic code* but also widespread and diverse *pragmatic processes*. At the time when traditional literary theory was developing, the discipline of pragmatics hadn't been invented yet. So, in line with the then dominant semiotic model of communication, literary theorists of the time assumed that language (in the sense of the linguistic *code*) is all that linguistic communication involves. I am sure that if they were around today, they would also adhere to a *pragmatically* enriched view of linguistic communication.

In this sense, representations of bodily posture and movement -let me refer to them from now on as *kinaesthetic*[6]-are not special. They are just one amongst a number of different phenomena whose common thread is that they bring out an incompatibility between our mental lives and our expressive capacities.

Kinaesthesia is quite widespread in our mental tapestry, often fused with other representations that wouldn't strike us as kinaesthetic in the first place.[7] And it is possible that the particular makeup of kinaesthetic representations -i.e. the

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[6] In the OED, 'kinaesthesia' is defined as 'the sense of muscular effort that accompanies a voluntary motion of the body'. It is thus standardly understood as the (internal) sense of one's own body's disposition in space. I am not certain about whether 'kinaesthesia' is the most appropriate term for the kind of mental representation I have in mind but I shall stick with it until I find a more appropriate term. In using the term, I am interested in both the (internal) sense of one's own body's disposition in space and the (external) description of the disposition of someone else's body in space. In the former sense, my understanding of 'kinaesthesia' is very close to what Martin (*Sight and Touch*, in Crane 1992: 201) refers to as body-awareness:

> In talking about bodily awareness, or body sense, I mean to group together some of the various ways in which we are aware of our own bodies. At present I am aware of my posture, orientation in space, the position of my limbs; I have some sense of the shape and size of my body, and within and on it I am aware of various goings on - itches, aches, patches of warmth. What is interesting about these kinds of ways of being aware of oneself as opposed to seeing, hearing or touching oneself is that one is aware of one's body in a way that one is aware of nothing else in the world. One might grandly say that the world of bodily awareness is restricted to one's own body. But there is an important sense for us in which that is false: in our awareness of ourselves we are aware of ourselves as being an object in a world which potentially can contain many other objects. We are aware of ourselves as bounded and limited within a world that extends beyond us.
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> One's own body is the proper object of such awareness in that anything which one feels in this way is taken to be part of one's body. There is no case, for instance, of feeling someone's legs to be crossed and then determining from how it feels whether the legs are one's own or someone else's. What marks out a felt limb as one's own is not some special quality that it has, but simply that one feels it in this way. Likewise when one feels a bodily sensation to have a location there is no issue over whose body it appears to belong to (see O'Shaughnessy 1980, volume 1, p. 162). Rather in as much as it feels to have a location, it feels to be within one's own body.

Internal and external body-awareness must be somehow interconnected. Our sense of our body's disposition in space can be combined with an imagined visual projection of what our bodily disposition possibly looks like externally. Our external perception of the disposition of someone else's body in space can be combined with an imagined sense of what this disposition would feel like if experienced internally. In other words, we know what it must feel like when we see a body somehow disposed in space and we also know what it must look like when we feel our body somehow disposed in space. Kinaesthesia need not operate only on representations of human bodily movement. We can project our own body awareness upon anything that has a 'body' even in a broad sense: animals, robots, machines.

Finally, inclusion of facial expression in kinaesthetic representations seems to me rather important, since the interaction between face and body plays a decisive part in perceiving or rendering expression. Body movement underpins facial expression and facial movement underpins bodily expression.

[7] I intend to develop my views on this in a future paper.

articulation of representations of three dimensional posture and movement of individual body parts, including facial expression- might make it rather easier to pin down and peel apart some of the problems perceptual states pose for our expressive repertoire. However, one could take as a starting point for reflection any other of the fine range of perceptual states the mind can be in, as it is a rather generic fact about communication that, when the perceptual element becomes the focus of attention in a communicative situation, language is bound to stumble.

Perhaps some intuition that our expressive capacities fall terribly short when it comes to linguistically conveying *phenomena/perceptual states* -prevents us from stepping into this area in most communicative situations. And this isn't just a question of a certain speaker in a certain context not being able to convey linguistically some perceptual state, but rather an issue of whether any speaker in any context and at any time would be able to convey this perceptual state.

The 'no go area' is skilfully bypassed with manoeuvres such as 'I have no words to express how I felt…', 'words cannot describe the experience of…' or 'you should have seen his face when…', where the existence of some noteworthy perceptual state is suggested but we never get to find out how the speaker 'felt', what the 'experience' was like and why all the fuss with that undescribed 'facial expression'.

Mimicry is certainly another manoeuvre that allows one to convey certain types of perceptual states through something akin to direct quotation, while avoiding the hassles of linguistic description. At a recent conference on Metaphor the psychologist Ray Gibbs set out to explain the origin of the idiom 'he kicked the bucket'. The idiom derives from the context of slaughterhouses. Gibbs explains that, as the pigs are dying hanging upside down with their throats slit, they often kick the bucket that is there to gather their blood. But this verb 'kicks' feels somewhat vague for the purposes of his story -it doesn't capture, for instance, the involuntariness of the movement in question, and Gibbs surely doesn't want us to visualise the pig kicking the bucket as in 'Beckham kicks the ball'. Instead of verbally narrowing the *manner* of the action, Gibbs tilts his head sideways, lifts his right arm with the hand in a released position and mimics the involuntary spasmic movement of the dying pig.[8]

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[8] Our pragmatic ability enables us to readily draw on our *background* and depict an action in the relevant way in our *mentalese*, when interpreting common verbs in different contexts: e.g. 'open the window' vs 'open the mouth' (Searle 1983:145, Carston 2002: 64-65). Supplying *manner* in this sense does not require explicit linguistic description. The information needed is so generic in human experience that the recipient of these utterances will almost certainly fish the right way of mentally representing the act of opening from their background.

In other cases, though, it seems more appropriate to provide explicit linguistic clues about the manner of an action. Our background is highly unlikely to contain representations of how dying pigs kick buckets. We may as well prove able to improvise the necessary manner by stitching together fragments of information from various other areas of our existing experience. But if the speaker wants to increase the probability of our representation not going completely astray it is good to supply further clues.

It is noteworthy that when no manoeuvre comes easily to mind and circumstances leave no option but to step into the dreaded zone, we almost always produce descriptions that grossly understate the facts. In a BBC documentary about the 7/7 London bombings, a man recounts the horrific moments after the subway blasts. He recalls how in pitch dark he sensed the body of a woman who had landed on his legs twitching from pain. The twitching goes on for some time and then stops. To his horror he gathers that the injured woman must have passed away. 'What was that like?' the interviewer asks (foolishly). The man looks stunned and stays silent for a few seconds: 'It was gross' he mumbles.

3 More thoughts on the curse

In the usual affair of human language a spilt coffee is 'gross', the sight of vomiting is 'gross' and a woman dying on you is also 'gross'.

In the last decade, ground breaking theory in the relatively new field of Lexical Pragmatics (Sperber & Wilson 1998, Carston 2002, Wilson 2003, Wilson & Carston 2006) has come forth with compelling arguments that, well… things are not as bad as they appear at first sight. A fundamental assumption in Lexical Pragmatics is the existence of a *gap* between the concept a word of the public lexicon *encodes* and the concept this word *communicates* in specific contexts.

In the new light of Lexical-pragmatic theory, the relationship between concepts encoded by words and the concepts these words in the end communicate is neither fixed nor inflexible. The rigid one-to-one relationship between a *signified* and a *signifier* in now replaced by the plasticity of a one-to-many relationship between what a word standardly encodes and what it eventually communicates in specific contexts.

This way, Lexical-pragmatic theory accommodates compelling psycholinguistic evidence that the human mind has the ability to construct concepts on the spot by tracking subtle differences across and within contexts (Barsalou 1987). On hearing an utterance, the mind takes the discourse context into account and each time tailors and slightly fine-tunes *ex impromptu* our mental representation of the category of objects a word is used to pick out. Our mental representation of the category picked out by 'bird' is differently tailored in:

a. As I worked in the garden, a *bird* perched on my spade.

And of course, *manner* is not a single-stratum story. In an expression such as 'he opened the window as you open an old wound' there is an evident stratification of *manner* embedded within *manner*. (So, he opened the window in the way we open windows, not mouths. Then, he apparently opened the window in a particular way; the way we open an old wound. And one opens old wounds in the way we open wounds, not windows!) As the stratification increases and manner becomes more particularised, explicit description of some sort seems all the more necessary.

b. *Birds* wheeled above the waves.
c. At Christmas, the *bird* was delicious. [9]

Would you be comfortable with the claim that what the utterer of (c) ate for Christmas is likely to be the same kind of bird that the utterer of (a) saw perching on her spade? Unbeknownst to us, in hearing each of these utterances our mind has narrowed the category BIRD to something far more specific; it has allowed certain kinds of bird as candidate referents and eliminated others.

And if you were hasty enough to think that such *ad hoc* fine-tunings would not appear if the discourse context remained constant, observe how your interpretation of 'red' changes in the following examples in which the context for 'red' is always 'eyes':

a. …*red* eyes denote strain and fatigue.
b. This flashing light is to stop you getting *red* eyes in the photos.
c. …two *red* eyes she recalled burning from anger.[10]

How is that relevant to our discussion? Well, since lexical-pragmatic processes allow the same word to recur in different contexts and communicate rather different things, so that in each of our previous examples

the word 'bird' communicates the different concepts BIRD*, BIRD**, BIRD***

then we could maybe resolve the problem of a spilt coffee being 'gross', the sight of vomiting being 'gross' and a woman dying on you also being 'gross', by suggesting that in each of these cases the word 'gross' is differently fine-tuned and thus communicates quite distinct concepts GROSS*, GROSS**, GROSS***.

'Gross' might communicate quite different concepts in each case, but the problem, nonetheless, persists: the gap between BIRD (i.e. the concept encoded by 'bird') and BIRD*, or BIRD**, is a gap in a minimal sense. By 'minimal sense' I mean that in an utterance of 'at Christmas, the *bird* was delicious' the mention of Christmas and the bird being edible and delicious provides sufficient evidence for a move from and fine tuning of BIRD to BIRD*, where BIRD* is a type of bird that we normally find at the Christmas table in the Western world. The move from

[9] The examples are taken from Deirdre Wilson's lectures on Lexical Pragmatics at UCL.

[10] A gripping and diverse range of examples of the latter sort have now allowed Lexical-pragmatic theory to challenge recent 'Default approaches' to lexical meaning (Levinson 2000, Lascrides & Copestake 1998) which claim that the one-to-many relationship between the concept a word standardly encodes and how this concept is eventually narrowed in specific contexts is mediated by sets of *default rules* and passes through default narrowings, which may then be overridden.

‘gross’ to GROSS* and GROSS**, where GROSS*and GROSS**, the particular way in which the sight of a spilt coffee or vomiting are unpleasant, is also a move in a minimal sense.

But what context could ever enable a leap from GROSS to the complex emotional, mental and experiential states involved in the circumstance of seeing a woman dying the way she was dying? The choice of wording seems so inadequate that no bridging between encoded and communicated concepts can justify it. And if that is so, then the question remains: why is it that, when trying to muse over experiential states, we so often and so easily see our words lose their adequacy?

Philosophy of language and linguistics have always authorized a special treatment for perceptual *qualia* as an exception to the claim that whatever can be thought can be expressed in language, and in the main, the existence of such *qualia* is pretty uncontroversial.[11] (For discussion of relevant matters see Carston (2002: 32-37, 79-80).)

To start with, one could encapsulate the various sub-problems that have occasionally been associated with the communication of perceptual experience under a single, superordinate problem. The philosopher Fred Dretske lends us an illuminating metaphor:

> I will say that a signal (structure, event, state) carries the information that *s* is *F* in *digital* form if and only if the signal carries no additional information about *s*, no information that not already nested in *s*'s being *F*. If the signal *does* carry additional information about *s*, information that is *not* nested in *s*'s being *F*, then I shall say that the signal carries this information it analog form. (…)
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> To illustrate the way this distinction applies, consider the difference between a picture and a statement. Suppose a cup has coffee in it, and we want to communicate this piece of information. If I simply *tell* you, ‘The cup has coffee in it’ this acoustic signal carries the information that the cup has coffee in it in digital form. No more specific information is supplied about the cup (or the coffee) than that there is some coffee in the cup. You are not told *how much* coffee there is in the cup, how large the cup is, *how dark* the coffee is, what the shape and orientation of the cup are, and so on. If, on the other hand, I photograph the scene and show you the picture, the information that the cup has coffee in it is conveyed in analog form. The picture tells you that there is some coffee in the cup by telling you, roughly, how much coffee is in the cup, the shape, size, and color of the cup, and so on.

[11] Although there are different views on this too. The philosopher Michael Tye (in Crane 1992: 158-176), for instance, has produced an array of philosophical arguments that attempt to deny the existence of visual -and consequently all perceptual- qualia.

> I can say that *A* and *B* are of different size without saying how much they differ in size or which is larger, but I cannot picture *A* and *B* as being of different size without picturing one of them as larger and indicating, roughly, how much larger it is. (…)
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> As indicated, a signal carrying information in analog form will always carry some information in digital form. A sentence expressing *all* the information a signal carries will be a sentence expressing the information the signal carries in digital form (since this will be the most specific, most determinate, piece of information the signal carries). This is true of pictures as well as other analog representations. The information a picture carries in digital form can be rendered only by some enormously complex sentence, a sentence that describes every detail of the situation about which the picture carries information. To say that a picture is worth a thousand words is merely to acknowledge that, for most pictures at least, the sentence needed to express all the information contained in the picture would have to be very complex indeed. Most pictures have a wealth of detail, and a degree of specificity, that makes it all but impossible to provide even an approximate *linguistic* rendition of the information the picture carries in digital form. Typically, when we describe the information conveyed by a picture, we are describing the information the picture carries in analog form -abstracting, as it were, from its more concrete embodiment in the picture. (…)
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> To describe a process in which a piece of information is converted from analog to digital form is to describe a process that necessarily involves the *loss* of information' (1999: 137-141).

The metaphor/ 'admission' of philosophy about analogue and digital systems squarely explains the problems emerging in the case-study with which I chose to begin this discussion. It also justifies the distress we feel or our failure to convey our experiences fully when attempting to speak out *phenomenal* aspects of our thoughts. And strictly speaking, this failure shouldn't be seen as a problem for language any more than it is seen as a problem for perception.

As the philosopher of language Francois Recanati suggested to me at a recent conference: 'it is rather a contingent fact that we find it so difficult sometimes to share and convey perceptual experience. If there was, for instance, a device that could allow us to connect our brain with that of a fellow human so that we would be able to 'see' exactly what they 'see' and 'feel' exactly what they 'feel', none of the hassles of perceptual expressibility would arise. The problems begin when we try to translate perceptual representations into a different type of representation, conceptual that is, or analogue into digital streams in the Dretskian sense. That is not something we should charge language with or treat as a deficit of language'.[12]

[12] My rough expression of Recanati's proposals.

Indeed, a problem that nests in the fixed relationship between two systems is no more a problem of the one system *per se* than it is for the other. Hence, instead of accusing language of 'inadequacy', one could as well have accused perception of being inadequate to be put into words. (Let us move on quickly before sinking too deep into such vicious circles.)

4 The reach of the *phenomenal*. How far does the curse go?

In the last decade the work of Adrian Pilkington (2000, 2001) has brought perceptual states into focus and pioneered the way towards exploring how they might relate not only to questions of *expressibility* but also of *poetic thought*. The questions Pilkington touches on are of huge importance for poetics and literary theory. They therefore ought to be explored further and pursued in great depth.

In his work 'Non-lexicalised concepts and degrees of effability: poetic thoughts and the attraction of what is not in the dictionary', Pilkington (2001) seems soberly aware of the fact that some concepts -and consequently the thoughts that contain them- are relatively ineffable and totally hits the nail on the head in proposing that their relative ineffability is the result of their containing a significant phenomenal freight. The question I want to contemplate here is the scope of this phenomenal freight across our mental tapestry. Is it to be found widely in our conceptual repertoire or perhaps specific to a certain range of concepts?

Any thought about any object can involve an element of *mode*/*manner* in the way it is mentally represented: not simply 'sad' but sad in a particular manner X, not simply 'flex' but flex in a certain way Y, not merely 'a breeze' but a breeze that feels like this, and so on and so forth. The presence of some *mode* in a thought about an object may amongst other things indicate that the thought has to varied extents been infused with perceptual matter.[13]

If any thought about any object, if any conceptual representation, can involve *modes* linked to phenomenal states and other private elements, then treating the phenomenal as associated only with certain types of conceptual representations -e.g. colour terms, terms for shapes, movements etc- would hugely understate the intensity and reach of the issue, by mistakenly portraying the expressive problems associated with phenomena as specific and restricted to a limited set of our thoughts.

The idea that some concepts are more closely related to perception has some immediate appeal. BLUE is, of course, immediately linked to perception in a way BIRD isn't. Still, BIRD can at any time be entertained in a private, *de re* modality and our encyclopaedic entry for it is bound to involve a rich cargo of phenomenal

[13] As Deirdre Wilson suggested, it isn't, strictly speaking, that the narrower concept is necessarily more perceptual than the broader one; it is rather that the stratification of many manner descriptions sometimes makes it easier to evoke a perceptual image.

information: ‘it feels [x]’, ‘it looks like [x]’, ‘it gives one an [x] sensation’ and the like:

Concept BIRD
- lexical entry
- encyclopaedic entry
  - -conceptual information (it is a living organism, it flies, it has wings etc)
  - -phenomenal/perceptual information (‘it looks like [x]’, ‘it feels [x]’ etc)

In principle, our encyclopaedic entries for any concept, even abstract ones, can involve a phenomenal component. Abstract concepts, like BEAUTY, for instance, have *concrete instantiations*, which give rise to phenomenal states. A concept like ALGORITHM might have been associated with memories, environments or occasions in which the object has been encountered, and such memories are also bound amongst other things to have phenomenal content.

A more sober idea might therefore be that having links to phenomenal properties is not the privilege only of certain concepts, because any concept can potentially evoke perceptual states associated with the object this concept picks out. All conceptual representations -and concepts themselves- may both evoke perceptual representations and be evoked by them.

That is one side of the coin. The other side is the possibility that the phenomenal might in fact be even more widespread than that.

Language has a physical, bodily, articulatory dimension. Every sound or word we utter is the product of movement in certain areas and muscles in the mouth or larynx. Whenever we utter a word, the body experiences rather precise kinaesthetic activity. In parallel, words also have an auditory and visual dimension. And it is very likely that because of these perceptual aspects of words we sometimes entertain intuitions that a certain word ‘feels somehow’ or ‘has a particular texture’ that sets it far apart from other words with similar meaning.

Thus, apart from the *phenomena* that we associate with concepts or objects *per se*, there are also the *phenomena* that we associate with the word(s) that express concepts in some natural language. How are the two types of phenomenon interrelated?

When we speak about words, about, say, ‘bird’ in a *metalinguistic* sense, we certainly do not pick out the *set of birds*; and knowledge about the word is not knowledge about the object: we might know in what contexts the word ‘bird’ first occurred, we might be aware of its etymology, its use in the milieu of a certain literary figure and so on, but none of this amounts to knowing anything about BIRDS. And the converse is also true. The relation between our concept for the word ‘bird’ and our concept of BIRD is neither one of identity nor one of

containment. It is, therefore, reasonable to assume that there should exist separate concepts for words, with their own encyclopaedic entries:

Concept of the word ‘bird’
- lexical entry
- encyclopaedic entry -conceptual information (it occurs in [x] literary contexts, it has the etymological origin [y], it occurs in poetry as a symbol of the poet herself, etc

-phenomenal/perceptual information (‘it looks like [x]’, ‘it feels [x]’, it sounds [x] etc)

And the relation between our concept for the word ‘bird’ and our concept BIRD must be one of mutual *evocation*:

Concept BIRD

⇕ ⇕

Concept of the word ‘bird’

As words with no conceptual content can also evoke perceptual representations, I wouldn’t want to say that perceptual representations are essentially features of concepts rather than words. It is rather that concepts are associated with words via their linguistic entries, and words evoke phenomenal representations in their own right -as well as through the concepts they convey.

Before their association with any memories or experiences, before their exposure to any external context, concepts can activate phenomenal representations because of the sensory particularities of the words that express them in a given language. It is this, no less important, aspect of the phenomenal that Jacobson was essentially referring to in suggesting that the appeal of certain phrases owes a lot to the sound patterns they exploit[14]. It is this aspect of the phenomenal that poets consistently resort to when in the struggle for precision they choose a word not because of what it means, not because of the concepts we knot it with, but because of what the word *per se* ‘feels like’.

[14] One of the instances Jakobson used was ‘Veni, vidi, vici’.

5 The *list-poem*: proper names as '*phenomena*'?

An eminent achievement of modernist poetry was to draw attention to the extent of the phenomenal in our mental fabric and hint at its importance for literary and everyday linguistic communication.

The modernist poet was not of course interested in sketching a theory of concepts. Yet in the broader debate about *connotations* in relation to inter-personal, inter-textual and intercultural *reading*, modernists placed huge emphasis on the different phenomenal energies with which a concept can be charged through individual or collective experience.

The so-called *list-poem* -initially invented by Dadaism in an attempt to combat traditionalist and conventionalist views of poetry as a genre defined by the presence of metre and rhyme, or more outrageously, by the presence of 'poetic words and motifs': daffodils, mists, sunsets, and other ludicrous such- is no more than what the word says: a list of words proclaiming itself as a poem.

In due course the *list-poem* technique was taken up by various poets to achieve various goals. In the 'Journal of an Unseen April' Odysseas Elytis produces a part list-poem which -amongst other things- seems to be commenting on the role phenomenal energies can play in the possibility or impossibility of cross-cultural reading. The middle part of the poem is a list of proper names; some, names of historical figures and places associated with critical moments in the 3,000 and something years of Greek history. Others are names of everyday people and ordinary places of Elytis' time.

For the non-Greek reader -or more broadly the reader who cannot associate the proper names in question with any memories, images, historical knowledge, present and past cultural experience- *Con-stantine Palaeologus*, the *Hellespont* or *Mastr' Antonis* are mere referring expressions (if they are anything at all). They do no more than pick out persons or places in the actual world.

For the reader who has the precious intra-cultural experience, these same names have an extra function added to the referential one, a phenomenal function. The phenomenal function, the perceptual and emotive involvement, that is, that would potentially characterise the intra-cultural reading is more likely to be totally absent in the cross-cultural one. An involvement of this sort goes beyond purely conceptual encyclopaedic information or historical awareness; the cross-cultural reader who knows in theory who these persons and places happened to be, still in the main does not have phenomenal resources for his understanding of these concepts to draw on. And Elytis' poem seems to suggest that engaging emotively and perceptually in the act of reading relies precisely on such resources.

> *Thursday, 16*
> *DRIZZLE MEANS SOMETHING to everyone. To me nothing. I secured the windows and began calling alphabetically: the Angel of Astypalaea; Briseis; Con-stantine Palaeologus; Crinagoras' servant; Gaugamila; the*

> *Hellespont; Homer (with his entire Iliad); Ibycus (impassioned); Issus; Late; the Libation Bearers; Mastr' Antonis; Nicias; Origen; the Pelasgi; Phestos; the Prophet Elijah; Psara; Roxanna; Saint Pelagia's shoal; Sthenelai's; Tatavla; Theodorus the martyr from Mytilene; and Zagoria.*
> *I awoke having gone through the history of the Death of History or rather the history of the History of Death (and this is no play on words)*
> Elytis (1998: 57).

As regards this idea, Deirdre Wilson proposed: 'I guess a more mundane example would be a poem listing the names of famous English cricketers, which might evoke huge emotions in cricket fans but leave others totally cold. Of course, this doesn't show that the phenomenal isn't expressible at all, but only that it isn't expressible to anyone who hasn't experienced the appropriate emotions, etc. about the appropriate objects. Just as 'red' can't convey a perceptual image to anyone who hasn't experienced it before'.

Obviously, the lack of overlap between interactants need not be of a cultural sort. The *heteroglossia* and *dialogical* nature of our societies in the Bakhtinian sense (Holquist 1981) that traditional literary theory and cultural studies so intensely contemplate -the diversity and multitude of *discourses* and *ideologies* to which individuals are exposed to through social being- and also the *heteroglossia* of our minds and experiences makes it relatively easy to ponder and potentially attempt to communicate a state, a view point, a particular perception of the world or of an object that some other individual hasn't experienced. Knowing about something in theory might facilitate communication, but it is unlikely to replace the *engagement* that the missing experiential state could induce. Via readings, for instance, we know a lot about a lot. I suppose this knowledge, in conjunction with the human ability to empathise, allows us some degree of involvement with affairs and events of which we do not have phenomenal experiences. A list-poem of proper names that employs such references might be slightly more to one than a meaningless string of referring expressions. And at the same time, it would be slightly less than a corresponding string of proper names that one could associate with rich phenomenal resources:

Con-stantine Palaeologus: an image of the pilgrims of 'anastenaria' dancing on burning charcoal and holding icons of the sanctified emperor Constantine the Great

Gaugamila: a sculpture of Alexander the Great pictured in a high-school textbook

The Hellespont: a certain shot of the Hellespont from the film 'politiki cuisisne'

Homer: the first time I was taught Homer at University. My professor reciting the beginning of 'Odyssey', his voice echoing in the crowded but quiet amphitheatre

Mastr' Antonis: (strangely) a man wearing a Greek fisherman's hat

The Prophet Elijah: the chapel of the prophet at my birth place

Zagoria: the mountain of Astraka at dawn as I saw it from my hotel room half awake- half asleep.

6 Epilogue

The phenomenal is not restricted to certain domains of thought but is rather widespread and pervasive throughout our mental lives. Thus, the challenges for our communicative abilities seem to reach far beyond the limited repertoire of those concepts tightly associated with perception, and rather involve our entire conceptual spectrum. It should be reasonably uncontroversial that phenomena put our expressive powers to the test. Simple phenomena are in fact complex informational states that even the most elaborate sentence assisted by the most elaborate pragmatics will always to some degree understate. Thus, when trying to communicate phenomenal states speakers are, more often than not, likely to see themselves stumble and fall. The same goes for poets. It is just that poets cannot afford this fall. They must stand up and keep on trying. And in this sense, the modernist poet's persistence in accusing language of impotence is at least partially justified.

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