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The importance of untruth

Prakash Iyer

The hero is broke and owes his landlord \$800, but he has only \$400 in his bank account. He goes to the bank to withdraw money, when he is at the counter, the computer breaks down. The bank teller asks him, "How much?" Then a miracle occurs! His mind offers him two options. He realizes that he could say, \$400 or \$800. In that epiphanic moment he has, he invents lying. He says \$800, but at that moment the computer starts working. The teller sees that his account balance is \$400. But she shrugs saying that the computer is wrong and gives him \$800. The teller trusts a human over a computer! Another miracle!

In this delightful movie – *The invention of lying* – even the concept of trust or distrust does not exist because all humans "say things as they are". Lies have not been invented. People just say what they see, feel, think, exactly as it comes to their mind. We would consider some things they say as unkind, nasty, cruel, disrespectful, loving, hateful or affectionate; but the characters have no concept of value judgment. They don't have opinions, attitudes, imagination, predictions, love, affection, cruelty, kindness, sympathy or empathy. No humour either because people speak as a matter-of-fact. It is a world rife with truth.

Why do I say 'rife with truth'? Wouldn't it be a perfect world where truth always prevails! The idea would seem to be fascinating and even desirable, but there is a huge difference between truth and being literal. In this sense, attaching the notion of truth to "saying what is the case" amounts to value judgment. Saying things as they are is being literal, and if we are always literal we would be compelled to merely respond to the environment around us. On the other hand, arriving at Truth involves imagination, hypotheses, predictions...all of which might be far from truth.



Illustrations: Tasneem Amiruddin

If we are literal, we only respond to the environment around us; but we are most often dissatisfied with the environment around us being as it is. We strive to change it, make it better, and make it the way we want it to be. We do this all the time. When we are irritated with someone, we often wait for a while until we think the other person is receptive and then we politely tell them why they are irritating. We are dealing with a hypothesis – will she be upset if I tell her now? We are predicting – she will be upset if I talk to her now. We are lying by pretending not to be upset, even though we are truly upset. Humans are incapable of saying things as they are.

The ability to use language of a kind

This is because, like Robin Barrow says, we have the "ability to use language that allows us to hypothesize, imagine, predict and lie." He further says,

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"It is this ability to formulate propositions that may be true, false, or imaginary, and by extension, to promise, imagine, and hypothesize, and the consequent ability to explain our world and to some extent predict and control it, that makes us who we are."

Our ability to use this kind of language makes humans who we are! Language does not mean spoken words or sentences. Language is the means through which the mind functions. Thoughts are not thoughts unless they are associated with sentences; and these sentences may not even be spoken. Sometimes we don't even articulate them to ourselves. Language in this sense could be said to be the means that our mind uses to work, to perceive thoughts, to process them, to deal with them. We needn't equate thoughts with words or sentences. They are also physical feelings. When we get angry, we don't say the word anger in our mind. It manifests in our body – racing heart, blood rushing to our face, shaking hands, gritting our teeth. And a split second later the word *anger/kopa/kovam/gussa* appears in our mind, and only later spoken words happen. "Shut Up!", "This is ridiculous!", "How could you do this!" ...Spoken words are thought and considered reactions to the basic linguistic ability of our mind.

Calling it an ability gives us the impression that we can invoke it when we want to. But it is not an ability we have the choice to invoke when we want to. Like Barrow says – that ability *makes us who we are*. We do not have the choice to invoke this ability; that is the way our mind functions. Thoughts in our conscious mind are triggered by sense perceptions – sight, hearing, taste, smell, touch – but immediately after that, the mind's ability takes control of us. We cannot stop ourselves from imagining, hypothesizing and then predicting what might happen, which then leads to either verbal or non-verbal expressions. All the while we are engaging with untruth, leading to truth or possibly lies. If we closely observe the process, truth/lies is a value judgment on the primitive raw material which are in the form of thoughts being processed by our ability to use language of this kind.

Truth as a value judgment?

Calling truth a value judgment sounds scary! Am I being a sceptic who says knowing truth is not possible? Not really! I am noting the process of being justified in arriving at what I think is true – insofar as I am able to comprehend. This process necessarily involves imagining all possibilities, hypothesizing which one of them might be true, and then arriving at a conclusion of what is truth using a rigorous process honestly. Attaching truth as a value to our judgment necessarily involves dealing with untruth.

In this sense of truth as a value judgment, the hero of the movie is attaching the value of truth to something we – the audience – know to be untruth. But in another scene there is an advertisement of Coke in this world of "saying things as they are". A spokesperson for Coke says he would like us to buy and drink Coke, and goes ahead to describe Coke as water with a lot of sugar which causes obesity, with a slight change in the shape of the can, and he would like everyone to continue buying Coke since they enjoy it anyway. Unlike the hero, he is attaching the value of truth to facts about Coke. Even though it only serves as a reminder to continue drinking Coke, rather than selling Coke. In the movie the company does not seem to care about opinions or value judgments. Like everyone else they say things as they are.

Untruth and lies

This scene gives us a sense of relief and implies the beauty of truth, but it is so limiting (not to mention boring). I don't mean to say lies are fun, and truth is not. But if we consider the process of arriving at conclusions and believing them, untruth can gain significant importance. For us teachers this matters a lot. From experience, we all know how boring teaching can be if we insist on saying things as they are. But on the other hand, we would also want students to see learning as fun. But too much focus on fun necessarily involves dealing with untruths. We call this a pedagogical method.



I think it is possible for us to treat dealing with untruth as a process in order to lead learners to arrive at truth with suitable application of rigour to the process. It is possible to see imagining, hypothesizing, predicting as a sequence of steps in this process. We could start with imagination of all kinds of possibilities without caring for whether it is believable or not, true or not. Then we engage in arriving at various hypotheses. Then we consider the grounds for each hypothesis. Weigh the grounds for each of them, and compare the probability of each hypothesis being true. Then lead them to predict what might be the truth.

Am reminded of the famous Gettier problem, where he points out that even if a person knows the truth, but on grounds that are not considered well enough. One famous example, and there could be many, is that of a person seeing the clock and determining the time of day. He sees the old clock (with the dial, hour hand, minute hand, etc.) at the exact moment when the time is 11am. The clock shows that it is 11am, and he concludes that it is 11am. But unknown to him, the clock had stopped working 12 hours back. So it was showing 11pm last night. Would we say he knows the time is 11am, even though it is true? Edmund Gettier pointed out that he has not considered whether the clock is working fine or not. He is justified in knowing it is 11am, but on

false grounds. He thought the clock is working fine as usual, but it was not.

We could say that in this situation the hypothesis should have included the possibility that the clock has stopped working. Then he would have checked another clock that is working. Or he would have checked multiple clocks and then decided what the time is.

This example is trivial, the point I am trying to make is that it is important, even necessary to include imagination and hypothesizing in our pedagogical method. We can imagine various parts of the syllabus we teach and we will see numerous claims that we teach. The earth revolves around the Sun. Gandhi's fast unto death led to the stopping of communal riots in Calcutta. Caste discrimination is practiced by educated people...take any claim, and see what possibilities there are to arrive at a conclusion, if it is true or not. We need to train our learners to imagine, then hypothesize and only then conclude. This could be like a game we play, but seriously. Ask them to proffer all possible options of what they think is true, and the reasons why they think so. It will make available all evidences that learners are considering. We could then lead them to examine each of them and check to see if the evidences themselves are false, or if that evidence is defeated by some other evidence and to know if the evidences they thought of conclusively leads them to know truth.

Learners believing in a claim is not the only important thing. Why they believe it, and examining the grounds or reasons why they believe the claim is equally if not more important. Or else the possibility of their lying unknowingly becomes strong. While the movie is indeed fun to

watch, it warned me of the danger of an obsession with truth as being pure and objective, and lying as morally wrong. Truth is a value judgment that we have to put careful effort in because it is important for all of us to deal with numerous possible untruths before we arrive at the final conclusion. We don't want a boring, humourless world rife with truth; that could be as decrepit as the world in this movie becomes at the end when lies prevail over truth.

References

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