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Humpty Dumpty's Philosophy of Language

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In Chapter 6 of _Through the Looking Glass_, Alice meets Humpty Dumpty, who she recognizes immediately since she knows about him from the nursery rhyme. Humpty is a bit irritable, but he turns out to have some thought-provoking notions about language, and philosophers of language have been quoting him ever since.

Must a Name Have a Meaning?

Humpty begins by asking Alice her name and her business:

> 'My _name_ is Alice, but—'
>
> 'It's a stupid name enough!' Humpty Dumpty interrupted impatiently. 'What does it mean?'
>
> '_Must_ a name mean something?' Alice asked doubtfully.
>
> 'Of course it must,' Humpty Dumpty said with a short laugh: '_my_ name means the shape I am–and a good handsome shape it is too. With a name like yours, you might be any shape, almost.'

As in many other respects, the looking glass world, at least as described by Humpty Dumpty, is the inverse of Alice's everyday world (which is also ours). In the everyday world, names typically have little or no meaning: 'Alice,' 'Emily,' 'Jamal,' 'Christiano,' usually do nothing other than denoting an individual. They can certainly have connotations: that's why there are so many more people called 'David' (the heroic king of ancient Israel) than are called 'Judas' (the betrayer of Jesus). And we can sometimes infer (though not with perfect certainty) incidental acts about a person from their name: e.g. their sex, their religion (or that of their parents), or their nationality. But names usually tell us little else about their bearers. From the fact that someone is called 'Grace,' we can't infer that they are graceful.

Apart from the fact that most proper names are gendered, so parents don't usually call a boy 'Josephine' or a girl 'William,' a person can be given pretty much any name from a very long list. General terms, on the other hand, cannot be applied arbitrarily. The word 'tree' can't be applied to an egg, and the word 'egg' can't mean a tree. That is because words like these, unlike proper names, have a definite meaning. But in Humpty Dumpty's world, things are the other way round. Proper names must have a meaning, while any ordinary word, as he tells Alice later, means whatever he wants it to mean–that is, he can stick them on things the way we stick names on people.

Playing Language Games With Humpty Dumpty

Humpty delights in riddles and games. And like many other Lewis Carroll characters, he loves to exploit the difference between the way words are conventionally understood and their literal meaning. Here are a couple of examples.

> 'Why do you sit out here all alone?' said Alice…..

> 'Why, because there's nobody with me!' cried Humpty Dumpty. 'Did you think I didn't know the answer to *that*?'

The joke here stems from the ambiguity of the 'Why?' question. Alice means 'What causes have brought it about that you sit here alone?' This is the normal way the question is understood. Possible answers might be that Humpty dislikes people, or that his friends and neighbors have all gone away for the day. But he takes the question in a different sense, asking something like: under what circumstances would we say that you (or anyone) are alone? Since his answer rests on nothing more than the definition of the word 'alone,' it is completely uninformative, which is what makes it funny.

A second example needs no analysis.

> 'So here's a question for you{says Humpty]. How old did you say you were?

> Alice made a short calculation, and said 'Seven years and six months.'

> 'Wrong!' Humpty Dumpty exclaimed triumphantly. You never said a word like it.'

> 'I thought you meant "How old *are* you?"' Alice explained.

> 'If I'd meant that, I'd have said it,' said Humpty Dumpty.

How Do Words Get Their Meaning?

The following exchange between Alice and Humpty Dumpty has been cited countless times by philosophers of language:

'…and that shows that there are three hundred and sixty-four days when you might get un-birthday presents—'

'Certainly,' said Alice.

'And only *one* for birthday presents, you know. There's glory for you!'

'I don't know what you mean by "glory",' Alice said.

'Humpty Dumpty smiled contemptuously. 'Of course you don't–till I tell you. I meant "there's a nice knock-down argument for you!"'

'But "glory" doesn't mean "a nice knock-down argument", Alice objected.

'When *I* use a word,' Humpty Dumpty said in rather a scornful tone, 'it means just what I choose it to mean– neither more nor less.'

'The question is,' said Alice, 'whether you *can* make words mean different things–that's all.'

'The question is,' said Humpty Dumpty, 'which is to be master–that's all'

In his *Philosophical Investigations* (published in 1953), Ludwig Wittgenstein argues against the idea of a "private language." Language, he maintains, is essentially social, and words get their meanings from the way they are used by communities of language users. If he is right, and most philosophers think he is, then Humpty's claim that he can decide for himself what words mean, is wrong. Of course, a small group of people, even just two people, could decide to give words novel meanings. E.g. Two children could invent a code according to which "sheep" means "ice cream" and "fish" means "money." But in that case, it is still possible for one of them to misuse a word and for the other speaker to point out the mistake. But if one person alone decide what words mean, it becomes impossible to identify mistaken uses. This is Humpty's situation if words simply mean whatever he wants them to mean.

So Alice's skepticism about Humpty's ability to decide for himself what words mean is well-founded. But Humpty's response is interesting. He says it comes down to 'which is to be master.' Presumably, he means: are we to master language, or is language to master us?

This is a profound and complex question. On the one hand, language is a human creation: we didn't find it lying around, ready-made. On the other hand, each of us is born into a linguistic world and a linguistic community which, whether we like it or not, provides us with our basic conceptual categories, and shapes the way we perceive the world. Language is certainly a tool that we use for our purposes; but it is also, to use a familiar metaphor, like a house in which we live.