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Google: Words beyond Grammar

Human life can be described as a prolonged dialogue with the world. Man interrogates the world and is interrogated by the world. This dialogue is regulated by the way in which we define the legitimate questions that we may address to the world or the world may address to us—and the way in which we can identify the relevant answers to these questions. If we believe that the world was created by God, we ask questions and wait for answers that are different from those that we ask if we believe that the world is an uncreated “empirical reality.” And if we believe that the human being is a rational animal we practice this dialogue differently from the way we do if we believe that it is a body of desire. Thus our dialogue with the world is always based on certain philosophical presuppositions that define its medium and its rhetorical form.

Today, we practice our dialogue with the world primarily via the Internet. If we want to ask the world questions, we act as Internet

users. And if we want to answer the questions that the world asks us, we act as content providers. In both cases, our dialogical behavior is defined by the specific rules and ways in which the questions can be asked and answered within the framework of the Internet. Under the current regime in which the Internet functions, these rules and ways are predominantly defined by Google. Thus, today Google plays the role that was traditionally fulfilled by philosophy and religion. Google is the first known philosophical machine that regulates our dialogue with the world by substituting “vague” metaphysical and ideological presuppositions with strictly formalized and universally applicable rules of access. That is why it is central to contemporary philosophical research to analyze Google’s mode of operation, and in particular to analyze the philosophical presuppositions that determine its structure and functioning. As I will try to show, Google, as a philosophical machine, has its genealogy in the history of philosophy—especially recent philosophy.

Let us consider Google’s rules of dialogue with the world. According to these rules, every question has to be formulated as one word or a combination of words. The answer is given as a set of contexts in which this word or combination of words may be discovered by the search engine. This means that Google defines the legitimate question as one about the

meaning of an individual word. And it identifies the legitimate answer to this question as a display of all the accessible contexts in which this word occurs. The sum of all displayed contexts is understood here as the true meaning of the word that was asked by the user. And because there is no other question that can be formulated by Google besides the question concerning the meaning of an individual word, this true meaning appears as the only possible truth that is accessible to the contemporary subject. Accordingly, true knowledge as such is understood here as a sum of all the occurrences of all the words of all the languages through which mankind currently operates.

Thus, Google presupposes and codifies the radical dissolution of language into sets of individual words. It operates through words that are liberated from their subjection to the usual rules of language—to its grammar. Traditionally, when we chose language (and not, for example, religious ecstasy or sexual desire) as a medium of dialogue with the world, we assumed that our questions—to be legitimate—had to take the form of grammatically correct sentences, like “What is the meaning of life?” or “Is the world created by a higher intelligence?” etc. Obviously, these questions could and should be answered only by a grammatically correct discourse—by philosophical teaching, a scientific theory, or a literary narrative.

Google dissolves all discourses by turning them into the word clouds that function as collections of words beyond grammar. These word clouds do not “say” anything—they only contain or do not contain this or that particular word. Accordingly, Google presupposes the liberation of individual words from their grammatical chains, from their subjection to language understood as a grammatically defined word hierarchy. As a philosophical machine, Google is based on a belief in extragrammatical freedom and the equality of all words and their right to migrate freely in any possible direction—from one local, particular word cloud to another. The trajectory of this migration is the truth of an individual word as it is displayed by Google. And the sum of all these trajectories is the truth of language as a whole—the truth of language that has lost its grammatical power over words. Grammar is the means by which language traditionally created hierarchy among its words. And this hierarchy informed and even determined the way in which the traditional philosophical questioning of knowledge and truth functioned. Questioning via Google presupposes, on the contrary, an extragrammatical set of word clouds as an answer—the word clouds in which the sought-for word occurs.

In fact, the understanding of truth as the true meaning of individual words is not exactly philosophical news. Plato had already begun

to question the meaning of individual words like “justice” or “good.” Thus Plato started the process of liberating words from their subjection to the grammar of mythical narratives and sophistic discourses. But he believed that this meaning could be found only in a unique word cloud that had its place in the transcendent sky of pure ideas. Later, encyclopedias and dictionaries tried to define the privileged, normative meanings of individual words. These encyclopedias and dictionaries made the next step in the history of the liberation of words from language. But the freedom of the words was still restricted by their use in normatively prescribed contexts. Twentieth-century philosophy futhered this process of liberation. Structuralism—beginning with Ferdinand de Saussure and Roman Jakobson—shifted its attention from the normative use of words to their factual use in the framework of living, contemporary languages. It was a huge step toward the liberation of words, but the concept of the normative context of usage remained basically intact. The present, living, contemporary language became the typical normative context. The same can be said about the Anglo-American tradition of the investigation of “ordinary language” that is also based on an ideology of presence. The real change began with poststructuralism—especially with Derridian deconstruction. Here, individual words began to migrate from one

context to another, permanently changing their meanings on the way. Accordingly, any attempt to establish a normative context was declared futile. But this migration was understood by deconstruction as a potentially infinite migration with an infinite trajectory, so that every question that concerned the meaning of words was declared to be unanswerable.

Google, therefore, can be seen as an answer to deconstruction in at least two ways. On the one hand, it is based on the same understanding of language as topological space, in which individual words follow their own trajectories—undermining any attempts to territorialize them in fixed, privileged, normative contexts and to ascribe normative meanings to them. On the other hand, Google is nonetheless based on the belief that these trajectories are finite—and because of this can be calculated and displayed. Of course, we can imagine an infinite number of contexts and therefore infinite trajectories for every individual word. Yet this kind of imagination neglects the fact that every context has to have a certain material bearer—a medium—to be “real.” Otherwise, such a context is merely fictional and therefore irrelevant as regards our search for knowledge and truth. One can say that Google turns deconstruction from its head onto its feet by substituting a potentially infinite but only imaginary proliferation of contexts, with a finite search engine. This search engine

looks not for infinite possibilities of meaning but for a factually available set of contexts through which meanings are defined. In fact, the infinite play of imagination has its own limitations within the situation in which all words occur in all contexts. In such a limit situation all words become identical in their meaning—they collapse into one floating signifier with zero meaning. Google prevents such an outcome by limiting its search to really existing and already displayed contexts. The trajectories of different words remain finite and therefore different. One can say that every word becomes characterized by the collection of its meanings—a collection of the contexts that this word has accumulated during its migration through language, and that can be characterized as this word's symbolic capital. And these collections—being “real,” i.e., material—are also different.

In the context of a Google search, the Internet user finds him or herself in a metalinguistic position. Indeed, the user as user is not presented in the Internet as a word context. Of course, one can google one's own name—and get all the contexts in which this name appears. But the results of this search manifest the user not as a user but as a content provider. At the same time, we know that Google tracks the search habits of individual users and creates contexts out of their search practices. But these contexts—used primarily for the

targeting of advertisements—usually remain hidden from the user.

Heidegger spoke about language as a house of being—a house in which man dwells. This metaphor presupposes the understanding of language as a grammatical construction: the grammar of the language can indeed be compared to the architectural grammar of a house. However, the liberation of individual words from their syntactic arrangements turns the house of language into a word cloud. Man becomes linguistically homeless. Through the liberation of words, the language user is sent on a trajectory that is necessarily an extralinguistic one. Instead of being a shepherd of words, as Heidegger suggested, man becomes a word curator—using old linguistic contexts, places, or territories, or creating new ones. Thus, man ceases to speak in the traditional sense of the word. Instead, he or she lets words appear or disappear in different contexts—in a completely silent, purely operational, extra- or metalinguistic mode of practice.

This fundamental shift in the use of language is well reflected by the growing equivalence between affirmative and critical contexts. The dissolution of grammar and the liberation of individual words make the difference between yes and no, between affirmative and critical positions, increasingly irrelevant. What is important is only whether a certain word

(or name, theory, or event) emerges in one or many contexts. In terms of a Google search, an occurrence in an affirmative or a negative context brings a word the same amount of symbolic capital. Thus the basic linguistic operations of affirmation and negation become irrelevant and are substituted by the extralinguistic operations of the inclusion or exclusion of certain words in certain contexts—which is precisely the definition of *curatorship*. The “word curator” operates with texts as with word clouds—he or she is interested not in what these texts “say,” but in what words occur in these texts and what words do not.

In fact, this development had already been predicted by advanced artistic movements at the beginning of the twentieth century—especially by the Italian Futurist Filippo Tommaso Marinetti in his text of 1912 on the “destruction of the syntax,” in which he explicitly called for the liberation of the words from syntactic chains.¹ Around the same time, in 1914, he proposed an early version of word clouds that he named *parole in libertà* (words in liberty).² And, as is well known, he began consciously to practice art and politics that had the goal of shocking and disturbing bourgeois cultural European milieus. In this way, Marinetti invented what one could call negative self-propaganda. He understood that in an era of liberated words, to be an object of public

1 | Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, *Les mots en liberté futuristes* (Lausanne: Éditions l'Âge d'Homme, 1987 [orig. 1919]), pp. 13ff.

2 | *Ibid.*, pp. 40–41.

disgust or even hatred causes one's name to occur more often in the media than to be an object of public sympathy. We all know how this strategy has become a standard tactic of self-publicity in the Google era.

Another early source for the emancipation of the word from grammar can be seen in the Freudian use of language. Individual words function here almost as Internet links: they liberate themselves from their grammatical positions and begin to function as connections to other, subconscious contexts. This Freudian invention was used extensively by Surrealist art and literature. The Conceptual art of the 1960s and 1970s created installation spaces for word contexts and word clouds. Avant-garde art has also experimented with the liberation of sound fragments and individual letters from their subjugation to grammatically established word forms. One is reminded of these artistic practices when one follows the Google search “in real time”—here, the search engine begins its work before the grammatically correct form of the sought-for word emerges.

Thus one can say that Google—with its metalinguistic, operational, and manipulative approach to language—establishes itself even more in the tradition of twentieth-century avant-garde art than in the tradition of advanced philosophy. But at the same time it is precisely this artistic tradition that challenges

Google's practices. The struggle for the liberation of words is also a struggle for their equality. The radical equality of words—liberated from the hierarchical structures dictated by grammar—projects language as a kind of perfect word democracy that corresponds to political democracy. Indeed, liberation and the equality of words among themselves also make them universally accessible. One can say that avant-garde poetry and the art of the twentieth century have created a vision of a utopian Google—of the free movement of liberated words in social space. The factual, really existing Google is obviously a technico-political realization but also a betrayal of this utopian dream of word liberation.

Indeed, one could ask whether Google actually displays every really existing context when we use it to reveal the truth of language—namely, the complete sum of trajectories of all individual words. Obviously the answer to this question can only be negative. First of all, many of these contexts remain secret—to be able to visit them one needs special access. Additionally, individual contexts are prioritized by Google—and the user generally restricts his or her attention to the first few pages that are displayed. But the most important problem relates to the metalinguistic position of the Google search engine itself. The user of the Internet search operates, as has already been said,

in a metalinguistic position. He or she does not speak—but practices the selection and evaluation of words and contexts. However, Google itself also escapes linguistic representation. It practices preselection and a prioritization that are also acts of word curatorship. The subject of the Internet search knows that his or her selection and evaluation of contexts depend on the processes of the preselection and pre-evaluation that were effected by the Google search engine. The user can see only what Google shows. Thus, Google is inevitably experienced by its users as a hidden (and potentially dangerous) subjectivity—operating in a mode of world conspiracy. Such conspiratorial thinking would be impossible if Google were infinite—but it is finite and therefore suspected of manipulation. Indeed, the following questions become unavoidable: Why these and not other displayed contexts? Why this and not other prioritizations of search results? What are the hidden contexts that Google creates by observing the search practices of individual users?

These questions lead toward a phenomenon that increasingly defines the intellectual atmosphere of recent decades. I speak here about the political and technological turn in the history of metaphysics. There was—and still is—much talk about the end of metaphysics. But I would argue that in fact, the contrary is true: we are experiencing not the end of metaphysics but

the democratization and proliferation of metaphysics. Indeed, every Internet user is not “in the world” because he or she is not in language. And Google presents itself as a metaphysical machine that is also manipulated by a meta-linguistic, metaphysical subjectivity. Thus the subject of a Google search becomes involved in a struggle for the truth that is on the one hand metaphysical and on the other hand political and technological. It is metaphysical because it is a struggle not for this or that particular “worldly” truth or—to put it in other terms—for a particular context. Rather, it is a struggle for access to the truth as such—understood as the sum total of all materially existing contexts. It is the struggle for a utopian ideal of the free flow of information—the free migration of liberated words through the totality of social space.

However, this struggle becomes technico-political, because if all words are already recognized as “metaphysically” free and equal, every particular instance of their inclusion or exclusion must be identified as an act of political, technological, or economic power. Without a utopian vision of the fully liberated word, Google would be impossible—and a critique of Google would also be impossible. Only if language is already transformed into a word cloud may the question concerning the symbolic capital of every individual word be asked—because only in this case does the symbolic capital of

individual words become a result of the extra-linguistic practices of inclusion and exclusion. “Really existing” Google can only be criticized from the poetic perspective of what can be called a utopian Google—a Google that embodies the concept of equality and freedom for all words. The utopian, avant-garde ideal of the liberated word produced a “difficult poetry” that for many readers seems inaccessible. However, it is precisely this utopian ideal that defines our contemporary, everyday struggle for universal access to the free flow of information.

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