Critical Thinking and Command of Language

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I. INTRODUCTION

A. Title and Theme

My title is "Critical Thinking and Command of Language." My assign-ment is to talk about the relationship between critical thinking and the command of language. My thesis is straight–forward and perhaps obvious enough on the face of it: to be a critical thinker one must possess a command of language.

I will not be talking in this keynote of rhetoric or literary style. I shall not be discussing what makes for a great orator or rhetorician—a Jesse Jackson or a Barbara Jordan—nor what makes for a Carlos Fuentes or Margaret Atwood (Canada's best known novelist)—not that kind of command of language. Nor am I concerned with the sort of command of language that Sir Arthur Quiller–Couch is thinking of when he recommends that we replace the pretentious, "He was conveyed home in an inebriated condition," with the direct and simple "He was carried home drunk."

For I am not a linguist nor yet a rhetorician. I am (God help me! and please forgive me) a formal logician by training and an informal logician by choice and you will probably find echoes of that orientation in my talk. As many of you know, I have been for some 25 years now working with my colleague, Tony Blair, as part of the team of Johnson and Blair on a variety of issues in the areas of informal logic and critical thinking.

Synchronicity is a wonderful thing. And I am headed toward a terrific example, after one, just one more exclusory comment. The command of language I am interested in has nothing to do with improprieties of expression such as the misuse of "hopefully ..." or the sad state of affairs into which the word "ironically" has fallen of late. Nor yet with such linguistic annoyances as "armed gunman" and "arson fire"—both of which I have heard uttered recently on local TV news broadcasts. In short, I do not wish to appear a linguistic prig like Henry Tilney—a character in Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*.

Just before the passage I am about to cite, Catherine and Henry have been discussing Radcliffe's gothic novel, *The Mysteries of Udolpho* which Catherine refers to as "the nicest book in the world." Henry responds, "By which I suppose you mean the neatest." At which point Henry's sister who has been listening says:

> Henry, you are very impertinent. Miss Morland, he is treating you as he does his sister. He is forever finding fault with me for some incorrectness of language, and now he is taking the same liberty with you. The word "nicest" as you used it, did not suit him; and you had better change it as soon as you can, or we shall be overpowered with Johnson and Blair all the rest of the way.[1]

The command of language crucial for the critical thinking enterprise is the ability to put thoughts into words in such a way as to convey their meaning as clearly and as precisely as is required under the circumstances, mindful of Aristotle's wise saying that it is the mark of an educated person "to look for precision in each class of things just in so far as the nature of the subject admits" (*Nic. Eth.* 1094a25).

Now, to raise the question in an evocative way, I will turn matters over to a great logician—Lewis Carroll.

B. Humpty Dumpty Presents the Question

The text I have in mind comes from *Through the Looking Glass* (Chapter 6), when Alice is talking with Humpty Dumpty and she happens to mention his cravat which, Humpty explains, was a gift from the King and Queen for his "un–birthday." Poor Alice, she doesn't get it. Humpty patiently explains that there is but one birthday each year, leaving 364 un–birthdays! After checking the arithmetic, he says:

> ... 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 present, 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 a rather 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 so many different things."
>
> "The question is," said Humpty Dumpty, "which is to be master—that's all."[2]

The question is: Which is to be master? And what is it to be master? If to be a critical thinker means to exercise command of language, just what does that involve?

C. The Game Plan

In the next part of my keynote, I want to discuss how to achieve clarity at the level of thought. Then I want to discuss what is involved in clear expression of thought. The connection between them is that you cannot have clear expression without clear thought, and that clear expression is itself the path to clear thought. They depend on and reinforce one another. What is required for mastery at the conceptual level, for clarity of thoughts and ideas?

II. CLARITY OF THOUGHT: CONCEPTS AND IDEAS

A. Introduction

What does it mean to be clear about an idea or a concept? Before I wrestle with that question a couple of preliminary remarksare in order.

First Remark: In the heyday of what is sometimes called linguistic philosophy (or analytic philosophy) both of which stressed the importance of clarity, a stock criticism was expressed in the saying that "clarity is not enough." I agree. One can be very clear and yet not get out of the starting block in the critical thinking enterprise. But I cannot think that one can expect to get very far out of the block if one is not thinking clearly, if one does not have mastery of the concepts and ideas one is using.

Second Remark: I am treating conceptual clarity as funda–mental because our ideas and concepts are the building blocks for the other larger elements of discourse. Statements and assertions, theories and arguments, positions and counter–positions—all of these are formed by combining concepts and ideas. If the ideas, the building blocks, are not clear, then it is likely that the larger units constructed from them will not be clear either.[3]

Third Remark: There are some who would want to say that what is important for thinking critically is that one grasp "the logic of the concept."[4] Thus, one might say that part of "the logic of *desire*" is that the object that is desired is not possessed. "Joan desires a broach" means that Joan does not now have a broach. This sort of logic, an informal rather than a formal logic, is necessary if one is to have the mastery of concepts required for critical thinking.

I have two points to make here. First, it seems unlikely that if someone is unclear about the concept of desire that understanding its logic (in this sense) will be of much help. To be seriously puzzled about the concept of desire, one would already have to have mastered its "logic" in this sense. Second, I have a wholly different understanding of the nature of informal

logic, preferring to see it in a more limited, but no less important role—rather as the logic of argumentation. But that is not a matter I can discuss here.[5]

B. Conceptual Clarity

Logicians have given a lot of thought over the centuries to this matter of clarity, and I would like to share (we say in California) some of their ideas in this keynote.

THE ROLE OF DEFINITION

Some people think: To be clear about the meaning of a concept or idea means having a definition. Hence the call to "Define Your Terms." The practice of constructing a definition as a way to achieve clarity can be traced back to Aristotle in the *Organon*. A definition is an attempt to capture the *essence* of the thing: to state in a formula what makes the thing what it is.[6] To have a clear conception of triangle is to grasp the essence of triangle, to grasp what makes a triangle what it is and what differentiates it from all other plane figures, and to be able to state that essence in a formula—the definition.

For centuries, philosophers and logicians followed the path laid down by Plato and Aristotle, thinking of clarification as largely the work of the definition. I won't here attempt to recount that journey. But there have been significant developments since the time of Aristotle, and I want to turn to some of them now.

One of the most important modern contributions to our thinking about how to achieve clarity is due to the scientist–philosopher, Charles Sanders Peirce, who in the late 1800s began to develop a theory of inquiry modeled after the empirical sciences rather than the mathematical sciences. Peirce was attempting to break free from the Platonic–Cartesian tradition which placed emphasis on achieving, in a systematic way, necessary and eternal truths. His work laid the foundation for pragmatism and the pragmatists who followed in his wake, but there is not time to discuss their work here.[7]

PEIRCE'S CONTRIBUTION

Peirce's "How to Make Our Ideas Clear" was published in 1878 in *Popular Science Monthly*. Speaking of the importance of clear ideas he writes this:

> It is terrible to see show a single unclear idea, a single formula without meaning, lurking in a young man's head, will sometimes act like an obstruction of inner matter in an artery, hindering the nutrition of the brain, and condemning its victim to pine away in the fullness of his intellectual vigour and in the midst of intellectual plenty. Many a man has cherished for years as his hobby some vague shadow of an idea, too meaningless to be positively false; he has, nevertheless, passionately loved it, has made it his companion by day and by night, and has given to it his strength and his life, leaving all other occupations for its sake,

and in short has lived with it and for it, until it has become, as it were, flesh of his flesh and bone of his bone; and then has waked up some bright morning to find it gone, clean vanished away like the beautiful Melusina of the fable, and the essence of his life gone with it.[8]

If we were to ask this young man whether his idea was clear, he would assure us that it was. He is probably Cartesian enough to think that if the idea seems clear to him, then it is clear.[9]   The Cartesian mentality forgets—and Peirce cashes this in better than any other philosopher I know of—is that *clarity is an intersubjective phenomenon.*   It's not enough for me to just think and think within my own mind. What is necessary is that I articulate my thought and then receive feedback from others on its clarity and intelligibility. But I am getting ahead of myself here.

How do we achieve clarity at the level of ideas according to Peirce? The first step, says Peirce, is familiarity. We have to be familiar with the idea and a variety of its applications. The second, he says, is definition. It may help to define it, to attempt to map where the boundary lies between it and other terms with which it is associated. But Pierce does not stop there. He proposes a third grade of clarity and a test: What are the effects/consequences of this idea? How does the idea make contact with reality? What differences does it make in how we manage the flux of sensations?   To be clear about an idea we must understand its effects.

To be clear on a concept like *electricity* or *gravity* or *force* is to understand how this idea functions and works for us.[10] It is not a matter of grasping some mysterious entity or elusive essence but rather seeing how it works to help us manage the flow of our sensations and experiences.

> In how many profound treatises is not force spoken of as a mysterious entity... In a recent admired work on "Analytic Mechanics," it is stated that we understand precisely the effect of force but what force itself is, we do not understand ... If we know what the effects of force are, we are acquainted with every fact which is implied in saying that a force exists, and there is nothing more to know.[11]

In other words, Peirce would have that an idea is clear when it helps us to manage the flow of our sensations, when we know how it is used and can put it to work for us within the human community. (And we can do this often without having a formal definition.) What Peirce is talking about here is what later will be called operationalization.

WITTGENSTEIN'S CONTRIBUTIONS

A number of important contributions to our understanding of clarity emanate from Wittgenstein's work. Wittgenstein began his philosophical career under the influence of the German mathematician–logician Gottlob Frege—who held that clarity requires precise definition—a view natural enough in mathematics but problematic when generalized to other areas.   For Frege, a concept marks off a definite area, so to be clear about that concept, we must

be clear where its borders begin and where they end. It is but a short step to the notion that for a concept to be functional, it must define a precise area.

Wittgenstein eventually broke free of these Fregean logico–semantic doctrines and developed his own views about language and meaning. (I think they are tantalizingly similar to Peirce's.) The meaning of a word, Wittgenstein says, is not its definition nor yet the object it stands for (since not all words stand for objects), nor yet the idea or image it conjures in your mind. The meaning of a word is its *use* in the language.[12] For Wittgenstein, words are like tools that we use to get jobs done, various jobs (PI, #11). Even if I cannot define the term "chair" in any rigourous way, I know what it means because I have mastered the use of the term in most contexts. Thus to be clear about a concept is to master what Wittgenstein calls its *depth grammar* (PI, #664).

Certainly in the controversies that we are likely to engage in when we think critically about such complex real–world issues as assisted suicide, abortion, affirmative action and such, we are going to encounter terms we cannot define precisely and which we still must be able to clarify in some way. That is why the challenge to "define your terms" can very often be counter-productive to critical thinking.

When we do not, and can not, agree about the use of the term, it is important to be clear about the differences. Sometimes we can achieve agreement in certain cases. And that leads me to discuss the notion—also attributed to Wittgenstein—of clarification of meaning by the paradigm case.

THE PARADIGM CASE

Often we explain the meaning of a term by pointing to an example— or paradigm case. If you wanted to explain to someone what a skyscraper was, you might attempt to offer a definition but you might do just as well to point to a clear case (the Empire State Building, the Sears Tower) and then guide the person in filling in around that. So if we are having trouble with a specific term, then this would suggest that one way to manage the disagreement is to find clear cases on which we can agree, and then work out from there to a discussion of the more problematic ones.

FAMILY RESEMBLANCE

Another important contribution from Wittgenstein is a way of thinking about the meaning of general concepts. He offers the notion of family resemblance as alternative to the notion of essence—that which is common in all uses of a general term like *justice*. Some will suppose that every term has meaning in the way that Plato's essentialist views would dictate. There are ideas that behave this way, mathematical being one such. And not only those. Consider a term like an "alcoholic beverage": there is an essence here, some one feature that all beverages which are alcoholic must have—and that is alcohol.[13]

But other terms do not appear to satisfy this essentialist model and looking for the essence and trying to capture it in a definition is not the way to proceed. Wittgenstein asks: "What is the essence of language? What is the essence of a game?" Here Wittgenstein predicts that you will not find any one feature that is shared in common by all games but rather a criss–crossing set of features: like the traits that characterize a family. So to be clear about some ideas, if Wittgenstein is right, is not to look for and attempt to capture in a formula that which is common but rather to understand the family relationships that exist among the various uses of the concept. Wittgenstein holds our notion of game as a family resemblance concept is such that there is no feature that is common to all games (amusement, for example) but rather a set of features that together are involved in our conception of a game.[14]

Sometimes then in pursuit of conceptual clarity, we may benefit from this intervention: "Am I looking for some one feature which is common to all instance of X, when maybe I should be looking rather for a set of features?"[15]

Thus if we follow Wittgenstein, we might say that to be master of a concept is essentially to be clear about its use and its applications. Hence the move that says "define your terms" is not necessarily the move to make and may in a number of circumstances be uncritical.

How, then, do we achieve clarity at the level of our thinking? I have mentioned the following:

by constructing a definition (in some cases)
by explanation by means of a paradigm case (in some cases)
by pointing to family resemblances (in some cases)

Being attentive to concepts and ideas, and their combinations in statements and larger units, therefore, seeing their range of application, their type, their connections—all of this is crucial in thinking critically. But our concepts take on expression in language, and hence to be a critical thinker one must be attentive not only to the concept but also to its expression in terms, words, and language. That brings me to our next topic which is the role of language in critical thinking.

III. CLARITY OF EXPRESSION

Mastery of the concept or the idea naturally enough finds expression in language that is clear and intelligible to its audience. The influence is reciprocal: where there is clear expression, there is typically clear thought; and where there is not clear expression, there is typically muddy, fuzzy and unclear thought.

The critical thinker strives for clarity in the *expression* of his thoughts and ideas. What is this clarity of expression? What are the obstacles in the culture to clarity that a critical thinker might encounter in achieving this clarity of expression?

Suppose that I have thought through an issue, and I have my position clear in my own mind. How do I achieve the clarity of expression that is the hallmark of the critical thinker? The view that I want to urge is one I take from the pragmatists—all of whom practice an intersubjective approach to understanding clarity of expression. My thought has been clearly expressed just when you tell me it's clear. I may think what I am saying is clear, but if you tell me that it's not, then I had better check it out. The fact that it seems clear to me is not sufficient.[16]

Obstacles to clarity in the culture

In striving for clear expression, the critical thinker must contend with resistance. For our culture does not place great value on clarity of expression. There are regions in the culture where you might hear someone say: "Well, you know, it's like ... Well, it's like totally awesome, kinda like really total, you know what I mean...." Here we have an example of what has been called the dumbing of America. That's one end of the spectrum. At the other end of the spectrum, we find the use of highfalutin langauge, not for the purpose of communication but rather for the purpose of concealing meaning. Thus: "The patient did not fulfil his wellness potential."

Let us at least begin to take the measure of some of the obstacles and traps to the achievement of such clarity. I have half a dozen of them to present.

TRAP1: "I KNOW WHAT I MEAN; I JUST CANNOT PUT IT INTO WORDS."

There are many things it is difficult to put into words. It's very hard, for example, to put into words a Bach violin sonata. And I am sure that all of us have had those moments of life which resist being put into words. And there are things it is not necessary to put into words—moments when a glance or a touch says more than words can convey.

But once we have entered into the realm of critical thinking, the moment of articulation is with us and we must strive to find the words that render the thought available to others. One way to do that is to put the thought into words, provisionally, and then check it out for clarity with someone whose thinking abilities you respect. Get feedback, and, if necessary, reformulate the thought.

TRAP2: "I KNOW WHAT I MEAN AND THAT'S ALL THAT COUNTS; BECAUSE WHAT IT MEANS TO ME AND WHAT IT MEANS TO YOU ARE DIFFERENT ANYWAY."

This is Humpty Dumpty's theory with a vengeance. Humpty can make "glory" mean whatever he wants it to mean, which is likely not what it means to you.[17]

Now if each of us is master, then what a word means for you is not necessarily what a word means for me. What you mean by "blue" and what I mean by "blue" are quite different. Yours is dependent on your experience and mine on my experience. We can make this argument run the gamut from "blue" to "critical thinking" right though to "love" and "honour" and so on.

As much as we need to make allowance of subjectivity and individuality, if Humpty's view is right, it seems to me to spell the death of critical thinking––and indeed of most thinking period.

To avoid this trap, it is useful to remember Wittgenstein's view that words are tools (PI, #11). I can attempt to invent a new tool, but it is up to others to decide whether that tool performs useful work. Or, Wittgenstein says, think of words as like pieces in a chess game (PI,#33, 563). And this may help us to deal with the question of mastery. No chess master is free to make the queen mean what he or she wants it to mean. Given the rules that govern its use, there is a great deal of skill to be acquired. Later on, such mastery may manifest itself in creative and innovative moves (like the famous Fisher queen–sacrifice in his 1972 match with Boris Spassky.)

TRAP3: "WELL, IT'S ALL JUST SEMANTICS ANYWAY."

"Just semantics?" As though meanings were tangential and unimportant. Such a statement reveals an impoverished view of the richness and importance of language in our life. People who say this ought to take into account Wittgenstein's remark: "Commanding, chatting, questioning, recounting are as much a part of our natural history as walking, eating, drinking, playing" (PI, #25).

This view of language may find expression among those who are suspicious of words and concepts as being "mere labels." Such people will say that terms like "Republican" and "Democrat," "Liberal" and "Conservative," don't mean anything. They may well be right, although the last time I checked, these labels seemed to be working tolerably well. Whatever the case, it is impossible to think, much less think critically, without concepts and labels. By all means let us be suspicious of labels. Yet even those who wish to express their scepticism of labels must use them to that degree. So the task is to learn how to do it well, part of which means how to do it clearly.[18] Which just means that we must be critical about our concepts and ideas, and be prepared to clarify, revise and if necessary discard them when they are not working.

TRAP4: "LANGUAGE DETERMINES WHAT WE THINK."

Here's the other side of the Humpty Dumpty coin—the idea that what we think is determined by our conceptual scheme and our language. We are, as it were, mere slaves to these conceptual schemes and ways of thinking.

Thus it has been argued that we in eastern European culture see the world in terms of subjects and objects because we have that sort of grammar: a subject–object grammar.

There is no question that there is a connection between our concepts and our experiences, that what we see is at least in part a function of what our experience (and here I include our conceptual experience) has prepared us to see. In our world, snow is not so important so we have just the one word "snow"—whereas in Eskimo (Innuit) there are 7 according to Whorf, 50 according to Lanford Wilson in his play *The Fifth of July* and 100 in a *New York Times* editorial in 1984.[19]

There is no denying that we think in language and that langauge differs in structure and vocabulary and that we may rightly expect these to have an influence on how we think. But we also have the power to become aware of these influences. And have exercised that power. Hence the suggestion that language determines, in any hard sense, how and what we think strikes me as naive.

TRAP5: "SOUNDS GOOD TO ME."

In the culture there are those who seek to bewitch us with their words, to stun us into mental inertia and inactivity, to produce the kind of response envisaged by Reginald Bunthorne in Gilbert and Sullivan's operetta, *Patience*:

> You must get up all the germs
> of transcendental terms
> and plant them everywhere
> and everyone will say
> as you walk your mystic way
> "If that young man expresses himself
> in terms too deep for me,
> why what a very singularly deep young man
> that deep young man must be..."

This is the trap that the diffident mind falls into because it is unwilling or afraid to say: "Huh? What?" Or: "Run that by me again, please."

This is the mind that the familiar Jargon Generator[20] was made for. First, one selects any three digit number, like 345. The chart then generates a a corresponding phrase—"intuitive sociometric structure"—that sounds very impressive, but which actually has no assigned meaning. What is the point? The point is that something can sound wonderful and mean nothing.

The reverse is true; that something can sound like gibberish and be quite meaningful.

In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre describes human reality in the following terms: We have to deal with human reality "as a being which is what it is not and which is not what it is."[21] In *The Sickness Unto Death*, Kierkegaard offers the

following "definition" of the self: "The self is a relation which relates itself to itself; or it is that in the relationship which accounts for it that the relation relates itself to own itself."[22] Each of these statements is abstract and at first hearing may sound like complete gibberish. Yet each receives its full quota of meaning in the work from which it has been taken. So you cannot place too much reliance on this intuitive measure of meaning.

I come then to the final trap—it is a big one in this culture.

TRAP6: "HAVE YOU OPERATIONALZED YOUR PARAMETERS INTO A FUNCTIONAL MATRIX?"

In this culture, there are people who do not want you to understand what they are saying and yet they must give the appearance of wanting to communicate. These people are attempting to use language to conceal meaning rather than to communicate it. These are people who say "It was a therapeutic misadventure" when they mean "The patient died." There are people who will say that someone was "terminated without prejudice" when they mean "he was killed."

There is a lot of this semantic mischief in our culture. This kind of thing, we must be vigilant about. Let me refer to this type of language, where the intent is to conceal rather than reveal, as *obfuscation*. It's a perfectly horrid word, I know, but it will serve the purpose here for we want to be able to distinguish this phenomenon which impedes clear expression and therefore critical thinking from other phenomena which it may appear to resemble. Let me say something about each of these in turn.

JARGON: Often there are the terms that go with a particular discipline or undertaking, like "lunar module" and "extra vehicular activity," (instead of "space–walk"). During the Olympics, the argot of gymnastics (axels etc) was much with us. Sometimes such terms work their way out from the area to which they belong into the wider culture. Think of the term "bottom line."

In my view, there is nothing inherently wrong with jargon in its place. It is meant to expedite communication and it typically does so in context though it can be confusing outside the context. If a sign on the door says "NPO," a visitor may not know that it means no food but the hospital staff does and that's what counts.

EUPHEMISM: A euphemism is a soft way of putting something that is harsh or unpleasant. It is saying "Aunt Sally passed away" rather than "Aunt Sally is dead." Such a locution is meant to soften the meaning which, it is presumed, all understand. It is not intended to conceal meaning. From the standpoint of critical thinking and the need for clear expression, I see no objection to euphemism.[23]

SEMANTIC INFLATION: This phenomenon seems a bit like euphemism. It is the phenomenon a "garbageman" becomes a "sanitary engineer," a short person is "vertically challenged," a shaver becomes "a shaving system."[24] The intention here, as with euphemism, is not to conceal meaning but rather to alter the way we think about something. The substitution of "hearing impaired" for "deaf" is meant to break some of the unfortunate associations that have accumulated with the use of the latter, to the disadvantage of those who have this condition. This shift can be undertaken in legitimate and illegitimate ways, but in my view there is nothing inherently wrong with what I have called semantic inflation.[25] Too much of it is another matter.

VAGUENESS: In my view, vagueness occurs when the meaning of a message is just not clear to the receiver though the receiver can reasonably expect such clarity. Sometimes vagueness is intentional, as in the language of diplomacy, a diplomat may say "We are keeping all options open." This is meant to be unclear, meant to keep the other side guessing as to the meaning and intent. Vagueness also occurs in some advertising where the purpose is to implant the name of the product while at the same time saying something but not too much. A paradigm case here is the slogan: "Coke is it!" To criticize this slogan as vague is to miss the point: it is meant to be vague.

Vagueness becomes problematic when it is both unintentional (the sender of the message intended to be clear and thought that he or she was clear) and unwelcome (the receiver did not get the thought and needs to get it). Here vagueness is an obstacle because it impedes our ability to think clearly and critically. A critical thinker must be prepared to identify such instances of vagueness and receive the needed clarification.

Now having indexed these phenomena, I want to place all of them on one side of the table and here on the other side the abuse of meaning that I am concerned about and which I believe critical thinkers must be vigilant about.

OBFUSCATION: (bafflegab,[26] gobble–de–gook, doublespeak)

This is where we meet with seemingly innocuous forms of speech like therapeutic misadventure and terminate with prejudice where the sender is seeking to give the appearance of conveying his meaning but in effect is attempting to cloak it.

While I was working on this keynote. I received a letter (marked "Personal and Confidential") from ACG Independent Judging Organization which claimed that I had won $7500 and enclosed a token check; i.e., something which looked like a check but was not a check. I found this jewel in the last paragraph which reads: "Do not confuse this letter with a solicitation. This is a judging organization cash check disbursement authorization!"[27] There is as fine an example of obfuscation as you could possibly want.

In a culture in which this sort of talk is commonplace, the critical thinker must constantly strive for clear expression of clear ideas, be vigilant for these traps, and stand ready to expose them and the murkiness that lies at the bottom.

V. Conclusion

Well, I have led you on quite a tour on this question of the command of language and critical thinking, and quoted quite a range of guides from Aristotle to Wittgenstein.

Who gets the last word here?   Lewis Carroll, of course, who has the Duchess delivering this wise advice to Alice: "Take care of the sense, and the sounds will take care of themselves."[28]

Endnotes

[1]   Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey,* New York: The Modern Library, 1995, p. 75. The "Johnson" is, of course, Samuel Johnson the "Blair" referred to here is the Scottish rhetorician, Hugh Blair (1718–1800). Blair was the first Regius Professor of Rhetoric and Belles–Lettres at Edinburgh University.

[2] Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking–Glass,* New York: Collier Books 1962, p.247.

[3] *Caveats* a–plenty are needed here. There are those (Frege and Russell to name but two) who would argue that the fundamental unit of meaning (and therefore clarity) is not the idea but rather the statement or assertion. Quine argues (in *Two Dogmas of Empiricism*) that the fundamental unit of assertion (and therefore clarity) is much broader—is nothing less than the whole of empirical science. (I think Quine's views are a bit excessive.) So the assumption I have made here is not unproblematic. Second, even if the individual concepts are clear, that does not guarantee that the larger structure composed of them will be. Here is Wittgenstein's counter–example (in *The Blue Book*): "I feel" seems clear and "the water" and "three feet underground," but put them together and the entire statement may well not be clear. And one can imagine many other such examples. Third, there are additional things that need to be said about achieving clarity at the level of statement, or theory. But I cannot enter into that discussion in this keynote.

[4]   Ryle takes this view (see *Dilemmas,* 1962, Chapter VIII, "Formal and Informal Logic"). Richard Paul also take this view of the nature of informal logic.

[5] See Blair and Johnson's "Informal Logic; Past and Present," in *New Essays in Informal Logic,* ed. Ralph H. Johnson and J. Anthony Blair, Windsor; Informal Logic Enterprises.

[6] See *Posterior Analytics,* Book II, Chapter 20, 93b29–94a19.

[7] William James and John Dewey both made important contributions to thinking about the nature of ideas and how we achieve clarity here. One might argue that the shift effected by the pragmatists was away from seeing an idea as a copy or a picture to seeing it instead as a tool, or what Dewey calls "a recipe for action." Dewey's approach would not have been possible without Peirce's revolutionary ideas. Nor would James's wonderful saying: "A difference which makes no difference is no difference." At the same time, it must be noted that Peirce was not happy with some of James's views and

his appropriation of the term "pragmatism" so bothered Peirce that he coined the term "pragmaticism" which, he says, "is a name ugly enough to be safe from kidnappers."

[8] From *Classic American Philosophers*, ed. Max H. Frisch, New York: Appleton–Century–Crofts, 1951. p. 73.

[9] Of Descartes, Peirce says: "The distinction between an idea *seeming* clear and really being so, never occurred to him" (*Ibid.*, p. 71.)

[10] Peirce is thinking here mainly of what he calls intellectual concepts, like those of physics. But he does not exclude common sense notions such as "hardness."

[11] Frisch, 1951, p. 82.

[12] See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1958, #43. Subsequent references to this work will be indicated: PI,#.

[13] This is the example that John Wisdom give in his "Memoirs of Wittgenstein." See *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Man and his Philosophy*, ed. K. T. Fann, New York: Dell, 1969, p. 46.

[14] Wittgenstein mentions amusement, rules, winning and losing and competition, luck, and skill in PI, #65.

[15] On numerous occasions, I have made it clear that I would like to find an essentialist account of the term "critical thinking." Richard Paul is closer to the Wittgensteinian approach in suggesting that there is nothing amiss in having a number of definitions each of which brings to the fore some important aspect of critical thinking. The only difficulty here is that we need to ascertain that these definitions are, in fact, compatible.

[16] The pragmatic approach to meaning presupposes that the receiver of the message is knowledgeable in appropriate ways, both linguistically and in terms of the subject under discussion.

[17] It may be of some interest to know that this trap has captured some pretty smart thinkers, like Bertrand Russell who writes in *The Philosophy of Logical Atomism*: "The whole question of the meaning of words is very full of complexities and ambiguities in ordinary language. When one person uses a word, he does not mean by it the same thing as another person means by it. I have often heard it said that this is a misfortune. That is a mistake. It would be absolutely fatal if people meant the same things by their words" (195). What leads Russell to take this position is beyond our discussion here but it is worth noting that this position has attracted some very powerful minds.

[18] Nietzsche's point is well–taken: We must not let our concepts get in the way of seeing things clearly. I believe this is Nietzsche, but, alas, I cannot find the source.

[19] For the details on this linguistic myth, see Pullum, "The great Eskimo Vocabulary Hoax" in *Natural Language and Linguistic Theory*, 7 (1989), pp. 275–281. I am grateful to a letter writer to *The Globe and Mail* (Joyce Hildebrand of Calgary) for bringing this to my attention (April, 1995).

[20] This version comes from "Faking It," Arthur Herzog, *Saturday Review*, 1973, p. 36.

[21] Jean–Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel Barnes, New York: Philosophical Library, 1956, p. 58.

[22] Soren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, trans. Walter Lowrie, Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1954 p. 146. In *My Philosophy*, Woody Allen quotes the above definition and adds: "The thought brought tears to my eyes."

[23] But much depends on just how we understand euphemism. Some understand it (too broadly, as I think) in such a way that it would include a lot of what I later term obfuscation. See "The E Word," by Colleen Murphy, *The Atlantic Monthly*, September 1996, pp. 16–18. She gives as an example of euphemism the statement: "We are not at war with Egypt. We are in a state of armed conflict." This statement, she attributes

to Anthony Eden, in 1956 during the Suez Crisis. This does not accord with my understanding of euphemism. I suspect that there are reasons why Eden could not call the conflict "war."

[24] I suppose then that a "pencil" becomes "an information encoding and erasure system."

[25] I cannot here discuss the phenomenon that some call "political correctness," which very term carries with it judgements and evaluations that may well want challenging in certain cases.

[26] Warren Clement's, *The Globe and Mail*, June 8 1996, D6, claims that the term "bafflegab" was invented in or around 1952 by Milton Smith, assistant general counsel for the U.S. Chamber of Commerce. He created the word for contest and won for devising it along with its definition: "multiloquence characterized by a consummate interfusion of circumlocution...and other familiar manifestations of abstruse expatiation commonly utilized for promulgations implementing procrustean determinations by governmental bodies."

[27] The scam: To get the check authorized, you must call a 1–900 number which costs $5/min. They tell you, if you read the letter carefully, that the average call will take 8 minutes which will cost the caller about $40, a goodly portion of which, I would imagine, goes into ACG's pockets to finance this whole undertaking.

[28] Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland*, p. 113.