

Does the Word Exhaust Meaning?

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The polysemic nature of language may represent a threat to communication. The Confucian wish to “rectify names” (正名) also arises from this altruistic character of language to refer to other elements such as meanings and referents. The “rectification of names” makes clear the arbitrary nature of the “name”, but at the same time gives it a definite orientation. For this reason it forms the basis for political power at the same time as it attempts to dominate language. However language does not let itself be dominated, as is suggested indirectly by the search for an origin for language on which to construct the “rectification of names”. Even a political authority finds limits to its intervention if it plans to restrict itself to mere coercion.

So what can be done with language? In order to dominate it Chinese philosophy discovered methods other than the “rectification of names”. On one hand the total annihilation of language and on the other a better clarification of language than that performed by the “rectification of names”. These two methods come together in the *Xunzi* (荀子), the gap between them being smaller than one might think. Indeed a clear language necessarily leads to the annihilation of language itself.

To examine how the “rectification of names” became radical we shall go backwards in the genealogy of that evolution from the controversy between the theories “word exhausts meaning” (言尽意) and “word does not exhaust meaning” (言不尽意). It occurred in the period of the Six Dynasties, in the second half of the third century in the Christian era.

I. Ouyang Jian: language exhausts meaning

“Does language exhaust meaning?” The question was formulated in this way by Ouyang Jian (歐陽建, 270–300 AD). Against a powerful tradition that said language does not exhaust meaning, he maintained the opposite. Here is the substance of his theory:

Lei Dong went to visit master Wei Zhong. “The polemicists think language does not exhaust meaning, and this debate has a distant origin. Even those who have superior genius and incomparable clairvoyance think so. For example Duke Jiang defends it tooth and nail, and Zhen Hui and Fu Jia display their talent by referring to it constantly. You are the only one to hold a contrary position. Why is that?”

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The master replied: “The Heavens do not say anything but bestow on us the four seasons. The Saint says nothing but uses his judgement. Even if the form is not named, it is clear that what is square is square and what is round is round. Even without naming the colours, what is black and what is white are not in doubt. If we think like this, the name adds nothing to things and language has no effect on the principle (the meaning). But, in the ancient times as well as in the recent times, the Saints and the Sages take care to rectify names and cannot do without words. How is this possible?”

Even if we grasp the principle of things in our heart, we cannot transmit anything without words. Even if we base things on a principle, they cannot mean anything without words. If the word did not express the intention, nothing could establish a contact with the interlocutor. If the name did not distinguish the thing, the judgement would not be activated clearly. When the judgement is activated clearly, we can distinguish the different kinds of names (of things). By words and names it is possible to express emotions and wishes in contact with others.

Let us ask ourselves about the cause and origin of this situation. Things do not have names naturally. The principle does not have that name predeterminedly. Consequently we must distinguish a name if we wish to talk about the reality of a thing. It is necessary to choose a name for the principle in order to present its meaning and purpose. So the name changes according to things, and the word changes according to the principle. It is the same thing as the echo in relation to the voice and the shadow in relation to the form. You cannot separate them. So there is no reason for language not to exhaust meaning. That is why I believe that it exhausts it.” (Ouyang 1985: 348)

Let us reconstruct master Wei Zhong’s argument:

1. If things existed distinctly from one another and if the meaning of things was clear before the appearance of language, supposing that the judgement of the saints was capable of grasping that, then language, through the name, would not add anything to things and their principle (their meaning): it would be unconnected with them.
2. But then why, since ancient times, has the “rectification of names” been practised, why can even the saint not do without language? Without language we cannot communicate with others, and without articulation in language argument cannot be established clearly enough.
3. When you think about it, things do not naturally have names, any more than meaning itself. Language was created for discerning things and the principle.
4. Consequently, like the echo in relation to the voice or the shadow in relation to the form, word and meaning are inseparable. They are identified with each other. So language necessarily exhausts meaning.

This debate has its origin in the theory which holds that “language does not exhaust meaning”. For Ouyang Jian it is a naïve theory of reality which says that “the world is articulated independently of language, the meaning and intention of human beings exist without the intermediary of language”. If that is the case, then language becomes pointless and can be abandoned. But in fact this solution is impossible. This contradiction is not solved by the theory that “language does not exhaust meaning” described by Ouyang Jian. It is necessary to reformulate a new framework for relations between language and meaning. Indeed language is a condition *sine qua non* for communicating our intentions but also for developing that skill in distinguishing meaning which is the faculty of judging (particularly as far as our ability to understand others is concerned).

If we examine the discourse on the “rectification of names” in the *Xunzi*, Ouyang Jian’s attitude does not seem especially original. His central argument (“things do not have natural names; the

principle is not called that deterministically; language was created for distinguishing things and their principle in accordance with them”) can be found in a discussion in the *Xunzi* around the theory that the name has no meaning or referent of its own. It is from that point that Ouyang Jian rejects the possibility of separating word from meaning and concludes that language exhausts meaning.

Faced with the logic of the *Xunzi*'s “rectification of names”, which is obsessed with the disorder in names, Ouyang Jian's argument appears a little naïve. Like the theory that “language does not exhaust meaning”, which he criticized himself, he starts out from the supposition that the word is subordinate to the meaning and does not think of the possibility of a word that causes something other than meaning to appear, a word without resonance in meaning. Like others before him he underestimated the polysemy of language.

It has often been thought that this theory of Ouyang Jian's ignored the meaning situated outside words:

Ouyang Jian re-examined the value of language, thus going against all suspicion or disdain towards the utterance. In this way he was returning to a pre-Qin Confucian idea, in direct line from Xunzi, at the same time as he substituted the clear idea of a “principle” for the ambiguous, indeterminate one of “meaning”. But on the other hand we might say that, like the Confucians who preceded the Qin, meaning which is expressed beyond language has been ignored. That is an incomplete feature of his argument. (Hachiya 1985: 141)

The point of Ouyang Jian's argument lies precisely in the rejection of an idea presupposing a “meaning which is expressed beyond language”. But let us leave Ouyang Jian to look deeper into the theory that language does not exhaust meaning.

2. Xun Can: language does not exhaust meaning, nor does the figure

The texts defending the theory that language does not exhaust meaning often mention a biography of Xun Can written by He Shao and quoted in the commentary on the biography of Xun Yu (荀彧, 163–212), which appeared in the *Wei Chronicle*.

Xun Can (荀彧, circa 209–238). His other first name is Fengqian (奉倩). Whereas all his older brothers based their discourse on Confucianism, Can liked to talk about Taoism. He always said: “It is said in the *Analecets*, 5, that ‘Zi Gong never heard the master talk of human nature and the heavenly way’. So the Six Classics are only the Saints' dregs”.

Can's older brother, Xun Yu, reproached him one day: “In the Great Commentary on the *Book of Changes*, it is written that the Saint ‘exhausts meaning because of the figure, [that by the hexagram he exhausts truth and falsehood] and that through commentary he exhausts language’. If it was the case why do we not hear subtle words? Could we not do so?”

Can replied: “In my view the figure cannot express the subtlety of the principle. You said that establishing the figure makes it possible to exhaust the meaning, but that cannot be done for a meaning outside the figure. Furthermore the fact that ‘commentary exhausts language’ does not make it possible either to add anything whatever to the commentary. That is explained by the fact that the meaning outside the figure as well as the language outside the commentary are profoundly hidden originally and do not appear on the outside.”

No master of rhetoric at the time could defeat Xun Can. (Chen 1985: 319–320)

The central point of the text lies in assuming a transcendent instance which is “profoundly hidden” originally and “does not appear on the outside”. The meaning external to the figure and the language external to the commentary belong to it. We should pay careful attention to that. Up to now the transcendent nature of meaning has been stated and little attention has been paid to that of language. In fact, as is written in this text, transcendent meaning and transcendent word are connected. By assuming this transcendent instance what did Xun Can wish to protect? To think about that first let us examine the Great Commentary on the *Book of Changes* which is mentioned by Xun Yu and Xun Can.

Confucius said: “The written text does not exhaust the word. The word does not exhaust meaning.” Then can the Saint’s meaning appear? Confucius said: “the Saint exhausts meaning by establishing the figure, because of the hexagram he exhausts truth and falsehood and through commentary he exhausts language”.

Whether by the spoken or written word it is not possible to exhaust the “Saint’s meaning”. But that does not mean that this meaning stops at a transcendent instance. It is possible to exhaust it through those special words that are the figure, the hexagram and the commentary. In short, in the Great Commentary on the *Book of Changes*, those privileged words were introduced in favour of that transcendent meaning which is the “Saint’s meaning” and based on recognition of the fact that the word does not exhaust meaning in day-to-day language.

Hence Xun Yu stated that it was possible to exhaust “the Saint’s meaning” and “the subtle sense” through a special language, whereas Xun Can thought that, despite the introduction of that special language the “subtle word” and the “Saint’s meaning” remain forever on the outside, and that even so the figure does not exhaust meaning.

Wang Baoxuan (1987: 325–326) summarizes the situation as follows:

Up to now it was thought that according to Xun Yu “language exhausts meaning” and that Xun Can thought the reverse, but in fact that is wrong. As it is written in the biography of Xun Can on the subject of the Great Commentary, it is because “the written text does not exhaust the spoken word and the word does not exhaust meaning” that it is necessary to set up the figure so that it may exhaust meaning. If language can exhaust meaning setting up the figure is utterly pointless. It is because Xun Yu tries to “set up the figure and exhaust meaning” that he accepts the theory that “language does not exhaust meaning”. In short the controversy between him and Xun Can takes place around a common assumption, that is, that “language does not exhaust meaning”. The debate is not about whether it is possible for language to exhaust meaning, but about whether or not the figure exhausts meaning. Xun Yu is in favour of setting up the figure to exhaust meaning, but Xun Can is not. [...]

Here we should note that the idea that “the figure does not exhaust meaning” is not the object of Xun Can’s discourse, but its starting point. Xun Can develops two arguments. First he supports the idea that the figure does not exhaust meaning in order to show that the Saint’s meaning should not be understood in the ordinary sense, but as a meaning outside the figure, a “subtlety of the principle” that cannot be expressed by the figure, a “nature and a human way” that cannot even be understood. Secondly, though he states that the figure does not exhaust meaning, this is not in order to maintain the impossibility of expressing the “Saint’s meaning” but to explain that it should be expressed through means other than the “figure” or the “figure plus commentary”. These means are the “words beyond the figure plus commentary”.

A problem remains: can we say that Xun Can, by the “words beyond the figure plus commentary”, has tried to exhaust “the Saint’s meaning”? Wang Baoxuan puts on an equal footing the “words beyond the figure plus commentary” and the “subtle words”; he states that Xun Can

expresses a “meaning outside of the figure” because of the “words beyond the figure plus commentary” and that this move is summarized in the phrase “the subtle language exhausts meaning” (Wang 1987: 328). Xun Can is said to have set up a transcendent instance through the “figure outside of meaning” and the “words beyond the figure plus commentary. But if the “words beyond the figure plus commentary” exhausted “the Saint’s meaning”, which is “outside the figure”, Xun Can could support the theory that language exhausts meaning. Finally, is his position so very different from Xun Yu, for whom it is the figure that exhausts meaning and who tried to exhaust the Saint’s meaning through a privileged language?

Was what Xun Can tried to protect with a transcendent instance of word and meaning an extension of the theory that language exhausts meaning, or rather a “word that transcends meaning” and “a meaning that transcends meaning”, which cannot be reduced to a general word and meaning? It is hard to judge from the text because Xun Can did not interrogate at all the relations between word and meaning as Ouyang Jian had done in an innovative way. Even if he touched on the issue of the word that goes beyond meaning, it is difficult to see a satisfactory conceptual development in the mere statement of the existence of a privileged meaning and word.

It is time to look at the person who went furthest with interrogating the relationship between language and meaning, Wang Bi.

3. Wang Bi (I): the search for “exhausting meaning”

Wang Bi (王弼, 226–249) thought language exhausts meaning. However he is among the supporters of a theory that the word does not exhaust meaning, a theory that he developed quite a lot. The question is how Wang Bi conceived of a language that exhausts meaning. So let us look at his writings:

- I) The figure is what manifests meaning. The word is what explains the figure. To exhaust meaning there is nothing like the figure; to exhaust the figure there is nothing equal to the word. The word arises from the figure, so we can examine the word to see the figure. It is the figure that makes it possible to exhaust meaning, it is the word that makes it possible to clarify the figure.
- II) Thus the word is the tool to explain the figure. Once we have grasped the figure we can forget the word. It is like a snare whose use is to capture the hare: once the hare is caught we forget the snare. Or like the trap whose use is to capture the fish: once the fish is netted we forget the trap [cf. the *Zhuangzi* (莊子), “Waiwu” (外物)]. The word is the trap that catches the figure; the figure is the net that holds the meaning.
- III) That is why the person who focuses on the word will never reach the figure; and the person who focuses on the figure will never get to the meaning. The figure arises out of the meaning, but if we focus on the figure we do not really have the figure of the meaning. The word arises from the figure, but if we focus on the word, we do not really have the word of the figure.
- IV) So it is by forgetting the figure that we get to the meaning, and it is by forgetting the word that we get to the figure. Getting the meaning involves forgetting the word. Getting the figure involves forgetting the word. Thus when we present the figure and so exhaust the meaning we must forget the figure. When we accumulate writings [as the figure] and so exhaust the intention, we should forget the writings. (Lou 1980: 609)

Wang Bi has been classified among those who thought that language does not exhaust meaning. But his argument is neither a naïve theory that “language does not exhaust meaning”, which would

put the existence of meaning before language and be exposed to Ouyang Jian's criticism, nor a theory that would deny ordinary language the possibility of expressing a privileged meaning. It is a discourse that tries rather to safeguard exhausting meaning by defining more clearly the role of the special language contained in the Great Commentary on the *Book of Changes* mentioned by Xun Yu and Xun Can. However his move differs from those of Xun Yu and Xun Can.

1. Unlike Xun Can, who contrary to the Great Commentary suggests a language and a meaning outside the figure, the hexagram and rhetoric, Wang Bi stipulates, as does the Great Commentary, that "it is the figure that can best exhaust meaning". Nevertheless Wang Bi remains with a very ordinary language and meaning, and does not recognize either Xun Can's transcendent language and meaning, or the privileged language and meaning conceived of by Xun Yu.
2. Xun Yu and Xun Can juxtaposed language and meaning, agreeing on that point with the Great Commentary. On the other hand Wang Bi sets up a hierarchy of meaning, figure and word in which meaning wins out over language (the figure and the word); then he asked how to exhaust meaning by means of the tool that is language.

That distance appears in the powerful interpretation of the Great Commentary which we owe to Wang Bi. As regards the first point, whereas the Great Commentary discusses the "Saint's meaning", the privileged sense, Wang Bi acts as if anyone whatever could explain meaning in general. He subsequently states that "the word explains the figure" and that "it is the figure that can best exhaust meaning". By putting relations between word and figure together with those between figure and meaning he sets up a hierarchy between meaning, figure and word which does not appear anywhere in the Great Commentary. In addition it is wrong to introduce a meaning-figure relationship where the Great Commentary restricts itself to the relationship between word and rhetoric. It is also mistaken to interpret the phrase "exhaust the word" in the Great Commentary as "exhaust the figure".

Unlike Xun Can, in attempting to solve the question of language exhausting meaning Wang Bi did not assume any transcendent language. Above all he tried to define a language able to exhaust meaning: to do so he concentrated on a new privileged language, the figure. This language is no longer transcendent but transcendental, and represents the condition of possibility for exhausting meaning.

4. Wang Bi (2): the "forgotten language" as a transcendental language

How is Wang Bi's argument concretely articulated? What transcendental language did he think up? Here we must pause around the relationship between exhausting or even grasping meaning and language ("figure" and "word"). This relationship rests on the following structure:

- A: Language goes to the bottom of meaning (I).
- B: If the meaning is grasped, the language can be forgotten (II).
- C: To grasp the meaning the language must be forgotten (III, IV).

Wang Bi starts from stage A. Meaning is exhausted by the figure and the figure is exhausted by the word. However that does not mean that language is capable of exhausting meaning unconditionally. After dealing with "forgetting the language" in stage B, language is particularized in C: it

becomes a transcendental language, that is, a “forgotten language”. This “forgotten language” is what makes it possible to exhaust meaning.

But how should we conceive of this movement from A to B then C? When mentioning Wang Bi everyone has somehow referred to this “forgetting language” but few have analysed in detail the means of this movement from A to C. Horiike Nobuo has presented the most philosophical explanation:

His argument [in IV] progresses at high speed and finally does a u-turn. He says that, in order to grasp the “figure”, the “word” is forgotten and that to grasp the “meaning” the “figure” is forgotten. The very fact of forgetting becomes a goal in itself. It is not a means to achieve the goal. If we do not forget we cannot achieve the goal. It is a strange idea. But for Wang Bi, even if this argument falls into aporia, “figure” and “word” must be forgotten. (Horiike 1988: 460)

So according to Horiike Wang Bi’s logic is “strange” and caused by an aporia.

According to Wang Bi the “figure” arises from the “meaning” and the “word” arises from the “figure”. From the logical point of view the “meaning” represents the type of the “figure” and the “figure” represents the type of the “word”. The hierarchy of these ideas means that the “meaning” cannot be included in the “figure” and that the “figure” cannot be included in the “word”: rather the reverse. If, as Wang Bi says, the “figure” exhausts the “meaning” and the “word” exhausts the “figure”, then we cannot assume relations of type and species as we have just done, because the relationship between these ideas can only be one of equivalence. From this aporia arises the need to conceive the “word” and the “figure” as tools, in the same way as the *Zhuangzi*’s snare and trap: “the word is the means to clarify the figure”, “the figure is the means to grasp the meaning”. This means that the “meaning” represents the exhaustion of the “figure” and the “figure” represents the exhaustion of the “word”. Here Wang Bi’s argument is not without danger. However characterizing the “word” and the “figure” as means, like the snare and the trap that you throw away after catching the hare and the fish, makes it possible to justify forgetting them. This would be without effect if relations between meaning, figure and word corresponded to relations of type to species, or even to a relationship of equivalence. To grasp the “meaning” it is necessary to forget the “figure” and the “word”, which are likely to become handcuffs following this logic. (Horiike 1988: 458–459)

The aporia Horiike asserts in assuming hierarchical relations of type and species between meaning, figure and word, whereas the fact of one exhausting the other introduces a relationship between them that can only be one of equivalence. But do we really find such an aporia? In fact it cannot simply be said that Wang Bi bases the relationship between meaning, figure and word on a relationship of “type and species”. There is no doubt that in I Wang Bi establishes a stratification between these three levels. But he does so in order to show that there is a difference of degree in their relations, rather than to introduce a classification by groups, or even by type and species. The relationship between type and species can be defined as the addition of some difference to a “type” to obtain a “species”: but nothing allows the introduction of this difference into the relationship between meaning and figure. And it is hard to think that the figure is part of the meaning.

Furthermore the word and the figure are presented from the outset as tools. But, even if we were ready to recognize an aporia in Wang Bi’s discourse, would it not be enough to state that language exhausts meaning, as Ouyang Jian did, rather than taking the detour of the trap and the snare mentioned in the *Zhuangzi*? After all it is difficult to believe that Wang Bi moves from A to B then to C because of a “logical aporia”.

Just after the passage quoted Horiike added another reason for this movement:

If we take a step further in reflection, we may wonder whether Wang Bi stops his logical progression word-figure-meaning in order to grasp meaning directly and intuitively. In fact the truth which goes beyond the statement cannot be apprehended by language except intuitively. However Wang Bi attempts to give discursive form to that intuition. [...] In the *Zhou Yi lüeli* (周易略例) the status Wang Bi confers on the “figure” and especially the “word”, that of tools which have to be forgotten, is explained fundamentally by a thought that language (words) does not necessarily reflect reality. Like Xun Can Wang Bi believed firmly that truth went beyond the statement. But precisely because it goes beyond the statement that truth needs to be grasped intuitively. Forgetting the “word” (and the “figure”) is not unconnected to this. (Horiike 1988: 460)

Horiike says that, by forgetting the “word” and the “figure” through a discursive search, it is possible to apprehend intuitively a truth going beyond the statement. But this truth in itself is posited from the outset, which raises a certain problem. “Believing firmly that truth goes beyond the statement” – what do we mean by that? What does “intuition” signify? Even if we admit that Wang Bi shared this conviction, ought we not to wonder about the meaning of a “truth going beyond language” and “intuition”?

Unlike Xun Can Wang Bi does not mention any “meaning outside the figure”. We do not find in his work the slightest trace of a privileged “truth”. He does not ask whether or not there is a privileged “meaning” but seeks to establish whether language can communicate without harming the meaning, in what conditions that is possible and what comprises a “transcendental language” in accordance with that objective. Going from A to B, then from B to C, Wang Bi shows that this ideal language is a “forgotten language”. Its purity protects the permanent, fundamental, true nature of meaning because it makes it possible to forget the alterity of the language that expresses another meaning. Let us read the following text:

Thus the use of the word loses the permanent character [of what is designated by Way, Dark, Profound, Wide, Subtle, Distant]. By giving it a name we distance ourselves from its truth. The action harms the original character. When we seek to grasp it we lose its basic character. That is why the Saints did not deem it necessary to speak through words. Thus there was no risk of moving away from the truth and its permanent nature by giving it a name. In refraining from acting they were not harming the primal character of the truth. In refraining from grasping it they were not losing anything of its fundamental character. (Lou 1980: 196)

Even though a word may be magnificent it necessarily brings with it an element of falseness. (Lou 1980: 94)

We cannot attain the truest extreme through naming. Absence of a name is the best of names. (Lou 1980: 53)

Language give rise to a “falseness” that threatens the truth of meaning. It is associated with “loss”, “distance” or “error”. Wang Bi hates the alterity of language, which harms the purity of the truth and the identity of meaning. It must be annihilated at all costs. But how? If we remain at stage A, the alterity of language is immediately activated. If language increases its ability to express meaning then we must forget it at once. To proceed to this reduction of language which is forgetting, the snare and the trap from the *Zhuangzi* were introduced deliberately at stage B.

Nonetheless Wang Bi does not stop there. He pushes the argument to the point where he turns it on its head. Even if we make the effectiveness of the ban retroactive we cannot completely protect the perfection of meaning. What persists in the story of the snare and the trap is incompleteness and at the same time chance. We must forget language from the outset before its alterity can appear. It is total forgetting. It is necessary to act on language before it starts to work. Language must be

reduced “transcendentally” from the start. Perhaps we have to get to that in order to protect the purity of meaning. Finally, at stage C the appearance of “forgotten language” is not “strange” according to this logic.

However we cannot admit that logic and that transcendental language as they are. This not only because it is impossible but also because a very great violence is involved. In order to reduce the alterity of language in the places where it is concretely active and a violence operates to annihilate all traces of language. This violence denies all past, it recognizes only the present and rejects everything that is different from it, everything that is not itself. It is a denial of all temporality and all historicity. The death of language is simply the death of time. In the world of pure spotless meaning that Wang Bi outlines nothing happens, time is dead.

5. Wang Bi and the *Xunzi*, the encounter between two extremes

The attitude of Wang Bi, who tries to grasp a true fundamental meaning through a “forgotten” language via the reduction of the alterity of that same language, is based on a political vision.

Earth and Heaven are given over to the spontaneous and are uncreated inaction, but the ten thousand beings agree to govern themselves. That is why Earth and Heaven do not know the virtue of humanity [...] If one is inaction faced with ten thousand beings, these beings find their position appropriate, and nothing is left over. (Lou 1980: 13)

The purpose of talking of nothingness is to use it with a view to profiting. That is why all people act with nothingness as their basis. (Lou 1980: 27)

Being in inaction, thinking of the absence of words as teaching, deeming disinterest to be the savour, that is perfect government. (Lou 1980: 164)

Thus the world which reaches inaction and absence of words expresses a state of government that has obtained profit and is positioned where the ten thousand beings are all used. Once more this means bringing everything down to the One.

Everything that has a form is reduced to the One. How does one reach the One? Through nothingness. (Lou 1980: 117)

In work there is a central principle, in things there is a central element. Even if their paths are different, their conclusion is the same. Even if thoughts are different their endpoint is identical. (Lou 190: 126).

Totality comes down to the One. In Wang Bi’s ideal world, which controls language and where time and events no longer exist, all alterity has disappeared. Each thing, each person stops at a certain point, acts in an appropriate manner and receives a profit. All possibility of “disorder” is eliminated. The process of annihilation of language’s alterity has succeeded in making alterity itself disappear. Control of language has metamorphosed into control of the world.

But had this politics based on a control of language not already been seen in the *Xunzi*’s theory of rectification of names? The mastery of language through rectification of names has the aim of transmitting meaning smoothly and unifying the people; if that is achieved language can be abandoned. Those are the *Xunzi*’s arguments. As regards the research which has studied the opposition between the two theories of language that exhausts or does not exhaust meaning, this coincidence

may appear strange. In fact the *Xunzi*'s theory of language has always been categorized at the other extreme from Wang Bi's, among those that say language exhausts meaning. And yet the opposition between these two theories is not at all absolute. The central issue is knowing whether, and under what conditions, language becomes necessary to exhaust meaning. The two positions are distinguished by the choice of language to be used.

So we can say that Wang Bi and the *Xunzi*, seen till now as two opposite extremes, both support the theory of language exhausting meaning. Wang Bi tries to grasp meaning with the forgotten language ("forget the figure to obtain the meaning"), the *Xunzi* rectifies language and includes meaning within this rectified language, then does without it in the end ("transmit the meaning to abandon language"). Both of them aim for a world in which meaning is perfectly transmitted through a perfect language which exhausts it.

This position differs from Ouyang Jian's. As we have seen at the start of this paper, in his work word and meaning are identified with one another but he is not interested in "the language that goes beyond meaning". In the *Xunzi*, on the other hand, the argument is set up based on a "disorder" arising from the absence of a match between name and reality. In other words we are here face to face with that alterity of language which is "the word that goes beyond meaning". Through "rectification of names" the *Xunzi* attempts to avoid this danger. Wang Bi also tries to annihilate the alterity of language and does so through a logical process moving from "forgetting language" to "forgotten language". Unlike Ouyang Jian, both the *Xunzi* and Wang Bi try to annihilate language. What they are aiming at in seeking the death of language is a world of pure meaning, a world that maximizes happiness and which is governed magnificently – a world where everything is subsumed in the One.

Translated from the French by Jean Burrell

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