

### **In the Beginning Was “Silence,” Not the “Word”**

Language is considered by linguists as organized thought coupled with sound, and used by the ordinary people as a method of communicating ideas, emotions, and desires. Although it may vary in form among different groups of people, language is, in fact, a psychological entity that reflects the individual type of collective consciousness of certain groups of people. Language can thus be construed as an embodiment of the way people think about life and manifest their attitude toward nature. For instance, during the Spring and Autumn Period (770-476 B.C.), the Chinese Taoists developed a so-called “reverse mechanism,” as an antithesis to the then dominating Confucianist hierarchy of value and ethics, to construct their discourse by negating what had traditionally been regarded as “orthodox” and affirming what devalued as “heretical,” then trying to dissolve all the “binary opposition” ultimately in oneness, as stated in chapter II of the *Tao Te Ching*: “Thus Something and Nothing produce each other.”<sup>1</sup> Their topics range from the metaphysical understanding of the universe, personal conduct, government, to the capacity of language itself. Through all ages intellectuals, like philosophers, and religious advocates, writers, scholars, statesmen, thinkers, who use words as an instrument for their professions, have greatly enhanced the capacity of language.

In Western culture, for example, the Christian’s concept of “word” is a reflection of how Christians see the creation of the world. The Gospel According to John of the New Testament says:

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<sup>1</sup> Li ping-hai 李炳海, “Ni-fan te chi-chih 逆反的機制 (Reverse Mechanism),” in *Tao-chia yu Tao-chia wen-hsueh 道家與道家文學 (Taoism and Taoist’s Literature)*, Taiwan edition (Kaohsiung: Li-wen Cultural Enterprise Ltd., 1994) 507-17. For the dissolution of contradictions, see Yen Ling-feng 嚴靈峰, *Lao Tzu yen-tu hsu-chih 老子研讀須知 (A Must for the Reading and Research of Lao Tzu)* (Taipei: Cheng-chung shu-chu, 1996) 235-248, 272-287, 327-354. For the English quote of chapter II of *Tao Te Ching*, see D. C. Lau, trans., *Tao Te Ching* (New York: Penguin Books, 1981) 58. The following quoted translations of the *Tao Te Ching* are Lau’s unless otherwise specified.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made.”<sup>2</sup>

The capitalized “Word” is in this case equated with God, namely, the creator of the universe. This Christian concept of creation suggests that the “word” is endowed with an unlimited capacity, which has contributed to the development of the so-called “logocentrism,” also called “phonocentrism” by Jacques Derrida in an opposing tone, giving a priority to speech over writing because speech is thought to be closer to the possibility of presence.<sup>3</sup> Even more, the missionaries like C. H. Kang and Ethel R. Nelson had devoted themselves to delving into the immanent mysteries of the Chinese characters in the light of Genesis, the creation of the world. They analyzed the strokes of the Chinese character 造, meaning “create”, and found that it possessed such messages as “dust,” “mouth,” “movement of life,” and “able to walk,” corresponding to the words in Genesis 2:7 “Then the Lord God formed man of *dust from the ground*, and breathed [with his mouth] into his nostril *the breath of life*; and man became a living being (not a baby but an adult, *able to walk*).” They read the Chinese language as the “Word of God”: a search for God’s omnipresence.<sup>4</sup>

Yet, unlike the Christian’s concept of “word,” the Taoists tend to negate the

<sup>2</sup> The Gideons International, ‘Chapter 1 of the Gospel According to John’ in the *Holy Bible (New Testament): Chinese and English Bilingual Edition*, New King James Version (Tai-chung: the Gideons International, 1995) 273. There is another English version, which reads, “Before the world was created, the Word already existed; he was with God, and he was the same as God. From the very beginning the Word was with God. Through him God made all things; not one thing in all creation was made without him.” See *The New Testament of the Good News Bible: Today’s English Version* (London: the United Bible Societies, 1976) 118.

<sup>3</sup> Madan Sarup, *An Introductory Guide to Post-Structuralism and Postmodernism* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1993) 34-41. Derrida argues that “writing is, in fact, the precondition of language and must be conceived as prior to speech.”

<sup>4</sup> C. H. Kang and Ethel R. Nelson, *The Discovery of Genesis: How the Truths of Genesis Were Found Hidden in the Chinese Language* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1979) xi-xviii. The other example they give is: “the character 船, meaning *boat*, had been analyzed as follows: 舟 a vessel; 八 eight; and 口 mouth or person. A comment followed that, interestingly, Noah’s ark, the first great boat, had just eight passengers: Noah and his wife, with his three sons and their wives.”

transcendental role of language in their discourse. They do not attribute the creation of the universe to the “Word” or God; instead, they refer to it as “something undifferentiated and yet complete,”<sup>5</sup> as Lao Tzu phrases it in chapter XXV of the *Tao Te Ching*:

There is something formless yet complete,  
That existed before heaven and earth;  
Without sound, without substance,  
Dependent on nothing, unchanging,  
All pervading, unfailing.  
One may think of it as the mother of all things under heaven.  
Its true name we do not know;  
‘Way’ is the by-name that we give it.

Then immediately following this, Lao Tzu says, “Were I forced to say to what class of things it belongs I should call it Great (ta).” Also, in chapter XXXII Tao is described as “Tao is eternal, but has no fame (name).”<sup>6</sup> It is very clear from the above quoted lines that we see the Taoist is kind of forced to choose the word “Tao” (Dao) to signify this “something”. This idea is echoed in the *Chuang Tzu*. In “Discussion on Making All Things Equal” Chuang Tzu remarks, “The Great Way is not named; Great Discriminations are not spoken. . . .If the Way is made clear, it is not the Way.”<sup>7</sup> The word “Tao” or “Way” is generally understood as the origin of the universe.<sup>8</sup> In XLII of the *Tao Te Ching*, Lao Tzu writes, “Tao

<sup>5</sup> Wing-Tsit Chan, *The Way Of Lao Tzu (Tao-te ching)* (New York and London: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1987) 144.

<sup>6</sup> Arthur Waley, *The Way and Its Power: A Study of the Tao Te Ching and Its Place in Chinese Thought* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1958) 174, 183. D. C. Lau translates this line as “The way is for ever nameless.” See D. C. Lau, trans., *Tao Te Ching* (New York: Penguin Books, 1981) 91.

<sup>7</sup> Burton Watson, trans., *Chuang Tzu: Basic Writings* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1964) 39-40. “Discussion on Making All Things Equal” is Watson’s translation of the Chinese title of “Chi-wu-lun” 齊物論.

<sup>8</sup> Yu Pei-lin 余培林, *Hsin-yi Lao Tzu tu-pen 新譯老子讀本 (A New Translation of the Lao Tzu)* (Taipei: San-min shu-chu, 1981) 17.

produced the One. The One produced the two. The two produced the three. And the three produced the ten thousand things.”<sup>9</sup>

For Tao is that “something” existing before heaven and earth. Then what comes prior to Tao? Is it “Nature (*ziran* 自然)”? This question is suggested in a hierarchy set up in chapter XXV of the *Tao Te Ching*:

Man models himself after Earth,  
Earth models itself after Heaven,  
Heaven Models itself after Tao,  
And Tao models itself after Nature.<sup>10</sup>

If we take into account what Lao Tzu states in chapter XL: “All things in the world come from being. And being comes from non-being,”<sup>11</sup> then this “Tao” (something) as “being” or “existence” must have come from “nothing (*wu* 無).” Then can “nothing” in this case be equated with “Nature”? Although some critics interpret “Tao” as “Nature,” Professor Yen Ling-feng, after having analyzed the syntactical parallelism of the three lines concerned in the hierarchy, holds that “Nature” should come before “Tao” and “nature” is “nothing.”<sup>12</sup> Therefore, no concept of the “creator” of the universe, as “God” in Christianity, is found in Taoism; even “nothing” is neither thought nor used as a material with which a myriad of things are created by any so-called supernatural being.

It is Tao, a confusedly formed thing, which is “silent” and “void” as D. C. Lau renders it, that gave birth to “heaven” and “earth.”<sup>13</sup> The concept of silence, namely, “speechlessness,” is emphasized in Taoism, presenting to be a sharp contrast to the sound-image of the “word” or “speech” in Christianity. The idea of “reticence” and “silence” as the highest state of Being is also found elsewhere in

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<sup>9</sup> Wing-Tsit Chan, *The Way Of Lao Tzu (Tao-te ching)* 176.

<sup>10</sup> Wing-Tsit Chan (1987) 144.

<sup>11</sup> Wing-Tsit Chan (1987) 173.

<sup>12</sup> Yen Ling-feng (1996) 367-368.

<sup>13</sup> See D. C. Lau, trans. (1981) 82.

the *Tao Te Ching*. For instance, in chapter XLI, it reads: “Great sound is silent.”<sup>14</sup> Yet, there are subtle differences among critics in their interpreting the Chinese word “hsi”希 in such collocations as “hsi-sheng”希聲 (XLI) and “hsi-yan”希言 (XXIII). Some interpret it as “faint,” or “rarefied,” or “rare”; some as “silent,” or “inaudible,” or “simple and quiet.”<sup>15</sup> Yet, in chapter XIV the word “hsi” is defined as: “Listen to it but you cannot hear it! Its name is Soundless.”<sup>16</sup> In fact, Tao’s being silent in the metaphysical realm has been a common sense to the Chinese, regardless of their religious or philosophical backgrounds. Even Confucius, for instance, emulated this idea of “silence” when he instructed his students:

The Master said, “I would prefer not speaking.”

Tsze-kung said, “If you, Master, do not speak, what shall we, your disciples, have to record?”

The Master said, “Does Heaven speak? The four seasons pursue their courses, and all things are continually being produced, but does Heaven say anything?”<sup>17</sup>

Here, the word “Heaven” refers to the “Way.” It is obvious, to the Taoist and the Confucianist alike, that in the beginning of Being there was only “silence,” namely, Tao, neither the “Word,” nor God, as stated in the New Testament.

### **To Use Words but Rarely Is to Be Natural**

Because Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu all advocate the philosophy of “no

<sup>14</sup> John C. H. Wu, trans., *Lao Tzu: Tao Teh Ching* (New York: St. John’s University Press, 1961) 61.

<sup>15</sup> D. C. Lau renders it as “rarefied.” See D. C. Lau, trans. (1981) 102. Arthur Waley translates the word “hsi”希 as “faintest”; Yu Pei-lin interprets it as “without.”

<sup>16</sup> John C. H. Wu (1961) 17. Waley translates it as “Because the ear listens but cannot hear it, It is called rarefied.” (p.159) Lau’s translation is: “What cannot be heard is called rarefied.” (p. 70)

<sup>17</sup> James Legge, trans., *The Confucian Analects of The Four Books* (Hong Kong: Wei Tung Book Store, 1971) 160.

action” or “actionless activity” (*wu-wei* 無爲),<sup>18</sup> the idea of “reticence” and “silence” is also applied to personal conduct. To be qualified as a Taoist sage, one should keep “to the deed that consists in taking no action and practices the teaching that uses no words.”<sup>19</sup> In chapter XXII of the *Chuang Tzu*, we find “The best language is that which is not spoken; the best form of action is that which is without deeds.”<sup>20</sup> Similarly, in chapter LVI of the *Tao Te Ching* Lao Tzu remarks: “One who knows does not speak; one who speaks does not know.” People are encouraged to follow how Tao regulates the four seasons in a silent way and to avoid clever manipulation. Also, in chapter V Lao Tzu says, “Much speech leads inevitably to silence.”<sup>21</sup> Again, in chapter XXIII he writes, “To use words but rarely is to be natural.”<sup>22</sup> Arthur Waley comments on this line as “‘Talking’ here refers to government by laws and proclamations.”<sup>23</sup> These passages make mention of how a ruler in management should behave in conforming to Tao. The leader is advised not to use “language” too much; yet, the advice is hardly taken; therefore, in chapter XLIII Lao Tzu, expressing his disappointment or sympathy with those who miss the benefit of practicing “no action” in instruction, says, “The teaching that uses no words, the benefit of resorting to no action, these are beyond the understanding of all but a very few in the world.”

Since ancient times in the Confucianist-dominated society, language has traditionally been regarded by the Chinese as one of the *Imperishable Three*, namely, the Establishments of Virtue (立德), Merit (立功), and Word (立言).<sup>24</sup>

<sup>18</sup> In chapter III of the *Tao Te Ching*, Lao Tzu says, “Do that which consists in taking no action, and order will prevail.” (Lau, p. 59) Waley’s translation is “Yet through his actionless activity all things are duly regulated.” (p.145)

<sup>19</sup> D. C. Lau, trans. (1981) 58.

<sup>20</sup> Chang Keng-kuang, trans. & annot. 張耿光譯注, *Chuang Tzu* 莊子 (Taipei: Taiwan Ku-chi chua-pan kung-si, 1998), II, 466. The Chinese word “Chi” 知 is a person’s name, meaning “knowledge” used here as a pun. The English quote is from Chapter XXII “Knowledge Travels North” (*Chih pei you* 知北遊) of the *Chuang Tzu*. See Herbert A. Giles, trans. “Knowledge Travels North,” in *Chuang Tzu: Taoist Philosopher and Chinese Mystic* (London: George Allen & Unwin LTD., 1961) 220.

<sup>21</sup> D. C. Lau (1981) 61.

<sup>22</sup> D. C. Lau (1981) 80.

<sup>23</sup> Arthur Waley (1958) 172.

<sup>24</sup> *The Imperishable Three*, meaning “san bu-hsiu” 三不朽, is found in *Tso-chuan* 左傳, the

Later on, Tsao Pi (187-226), Emperor of Wei, reinforced the notion of the importance of “writing” by stating that “literary writing is the grand business for the management of the country and the exalted affair for the establishment of eternity as well.”<sup>25</sup> Although the Confucianists hold a positive attitude toward language, they are surely aware of the evil aspect of language, that is, the beautiful word, lest it should divert people from the right track. In the *Confucian Analects*: Book V the Master Confucius says, “Fine words, an insinuating appearance, and excessive respect;---Tso Ch’iu-ming 左丘明 was ashamed of them. I also am ashamed of them.”<sup>26</sup> In Book IV the Master also says, “The superior man wishes to be slow in his speech and earnest in his conduct.”<sup>27</sup> Again, in Book XVII, the Master says, “Fine words and an insinuating appearance are seldom associated with virtue.”<sup>28</sup> Afraid that language might be abused, the Master in Book XV says, “In language it is simply required that it convey the meaning.”<sup>29</sup> According to Confucius, “the reason why the ancients did not readily give utterance to their words, was that they feared lest their actions should

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famous commentary on *Chun-chiu* 春秋 (*The Spring and Autumn Annals*). It was in the twenty-fourth year of Hsiang Kung 襄公, corresponding to 549 B.C., when Mu Shu 穆叔 of the Lu explained to Fan Hsuan-tzu 范宣子 of the Chin about the difference between “earthly prosperity” (*shih-lu* 世祿) and “eternity” (*bu-hsiu* 不朽). *Tso-chuan* is said to have been written by Tso Chiu-ming 左丘明, also a disciple of Confucius. See *Chun-chiu Tso-chuan* 春秋左傳 (*Tso’s Commentary on the Spring and Autumn Annals*), annot. Wang Shou-chien 王守謙 etc. (Taipei: Taiwan Ku-chi chu-pan-she, 1996), II, 1321-1323. Also, *Tso-chuan ching-hua* 左傳精華 (*Abstract of Tso-chuan*) (Taipei: Shi-chieh shu-chu, 1989) 189.

<sup>25</sup> Tsao Pi 曹丕 (187-226), Emperor Wen of the Wei, wrote a criticism titled “Lun-wen” 論文 (Essay on Literature) in which he upheld the importance of the literary writing in government. See Hsiao Tung 蕭統, ed., *Chao-ming wen-hsuan* (*Chao-ming’s Anthology of Literature*), trans. & annot. by Chang Chi-cheng and Hsu Ta etc. (Taipei: Taiwan ku-chi chu-pan-she, 2001), VII, 3992-4000. The literary essay (*wen-chang* 文章) had not been recognized as an independent art before Tsao Pi. See Torao Suzuki 鈴木虎雄, *Zhongguo shilunshi* 中國詩論史 (*The History of Chinese Poetry Theory*), trans. Xu Zong 許總 譯, (Guangxi: renmin chubanshe) 37-38.

<sup>26</sup> James Legge, trans. (1971), *Confucian Analects of The Four Books*, p. 36.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 27-8.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 159.

<sup>29</sup> James Legge, trans. (1971) 142. Also, Arthur Waley thinks that the word “tz’u” 辭 means “pleas, messages, excuses for being unable to attend to one duties, etc.” Hence, Waley translates the word “tz’u” into “speeches,” instead of “language.” Waley’s rendition reads, “The Master said, In official speeches all that matters is to get one’s meaning through.” See Arthur

not come up to them.”<sup>30</sup>

Although Lao Tzu doesn’t agree with the Confucianist’s moral-based criticism of language, as Wu Chih-hsueh puts it,<sup>31</sup> it is still interesting to see that in their teaching both the Confucianist and the Taoist appreciate the personal quality of being “ne”訥(slow-tongued, tongued-tied, or stuttering). In Book XIII of the *Confucian Analects*, the Master values “ne” in the light of “virtue”, for “ne” is near to it.<sup>32</sup> In chapter XLV of the *Tao Te Ching* Lao Tzu advocates “ne” in terms of “verbal skill” when, referring to argument, he says, “Great eloquence (argument) seems tongue-tied.”<sup>33</sup> Lao Tzu’s idea of “tongue-tiedness” in speech is furthered by Chuang Tzu to the extent that “Great eloquence (or Great Discriminations are) is not spoken.”<sup>34</sup> Surely, the Taoists are wary of the danger of rhetoric, especially of its delusive nature. The last chapter of the *Tao Te Ching* reads: “Truthful words are not beautiful; beautiful words are not truthful. Good words are not persuasive; persuasive words are not good.”<sup>35</sup> By the same token, they discourage the concept of “colorfulness” because beautiful and persuasive words are colorful things and thus capable of creating confusion. Therefore, in chapter XII Lao Tzu states, “The five colours make man's eyes blind;/ The five notes make his ears deaf;/ The five tastes injure his palate.” ‘Five’, in this case, represents ‘plurality,’ or ‘variety,’<sup>36</sup> so, these colors, notes, and tastes are virtually no less than “beautiful rhetoric.” Chuang Tzu also sees the positive effect of staying “pure and simple” in handling the troubled worldly affairs, as he states in

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Waley, trans. And annot., *The Analects of Confucius* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989) 201.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., Legge, p. 27.

<sup>31</sup> Wu Chih-hsueh 伍至學, “Lao Tzu yu-yen che-hsueh yen-chiu 老子語言哲學研究 (A Study of Lao Tzu’s Philosophy of Language),” (Diss. National Taiwan U, 1995) 70.

<sup>32</sup> James Legge, trans. (1971) 115.

<sup>33</sup> D. C. Lau (1981) 106.

<sup>34</sup> Huang Chin-hung 黃錦鉉, *Hsin-yi Chuang Tzu tu-pen 新譯莊子讀本 (A New Translation of the Chuang Tzu)* (Taipei: San-min shu-chu, 1983) 64. For an English version of “Discussion on Making All Things Equal,” see Burton Watson, trans. (1964) 30-40.

<sup>35</sup> D. C. Lau, p. 143.

<sup>36</sup> According to Wing-Tsit Chan, the five colors are green, yellow, red, white, and black; the five sounds, the full tones in the Chinese musical scale; the five tastes, salt, bitter, sour, acrid, and sweet. See Wing-Tsit Chan, *The Way Of Lao Tzu* (New York and London: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1963) 121.



chapter XIII: The Tao of God, “and by confining yourself to the pure and simple, you will hinder the whole world from struggling with you for show.”<sup>37</sup> According to Wu Chih-hsueh, there are three basic types of language that Lao Tzu criticizes, namely, “the beautiful” used for pretense, “the argumentative or eloquent” used for fighting, and “the verbose” used for bluffing. The three types of language that Lao Tzu prefers are “truthful words,” “constructive words,” and “faint or inaudible words.”<sup>38</sup> “To be silent (or near to silence) or to be simplistic like a log is, in accordance with the philosophy of “no action,” “inaction,” or “actionless activity,” considered as the highest form of the application of language.

### **The Identity Is Not Identical with Its Expression**

From the aforementioned remarks we clearly see how language has been evaluated by both the Taoists and the Confucianists on an ethical or moral basis. Since they are not linguists in a strict sense, their discussions of language do not focus on the structural factors concerning such Western linguists as Ferdinand De Saussure and Edward Sapir, who do scientific analyses of language. Instead, language in both the *Tao Te Ching* and the *Chuang Tzu* is employed mainly as a vehicle or a signifier for the sake of teaching as well as the revelation of Tao (Way). It is in these two aspects that language is found an insufficient instrument.

To Lao Tzu, language is, as mentioned above, a “forced” choice in order to convey what Tao is; on the other hand, for not ‘hurting’ Tao, Lao Tzu advocates “the teaching that uses no words, the benefit of resorting to no action” (XLIII), and “one who knows does not speak; one who speaks does not know” (LVI). For Lao Tzu thinks, “To use words but rarely is to be natural” (XXIII). Certainly, Lao Tzu is conscious of the fact that language has its limited capacity when he writes down:

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<sup>37</sup> Herbert A. Giles (1961), “The Tao of God”(Tien-tao天道) 132.

<sup>38</sup> Wu Chih-hsueh (1995) 67.

The way that can be spoken of  
Is not the constant way;  
The name that can be named  
Is not the constant name.

This prototypal concept of language as a limitation is also addressed in chapter II: "On the Equality of Things" of the *Chuang Tzu*, in which Chuang Tzu says: "Tao has no distinctions. Speech cannot be applied to the eternal. Because of speech, there are demarcations."<sup>39</sup> This is the Taoists' common agreement over the finite capacity of language. The ideal state in Lao Tzu's eyes is that "the people will return to the use of the knotted rope" (LXXX). Lao Tzu would probably think that by returning to the 'knotted rope,' the people might be able to avoid using 'language.' Yet, it seems not to make much difference insofar as both the knotted rope and language serve as the sign of expression.

It is ironic, if viewed from language itself, while preaching "the teaching that uses no words," Lao Tzu also commits himself to the *Establishment of Word*, namely, the *Tao Te Ching* (it is said that he *was asked* to write before he passed a checkpoint and disappeared). Failing to escape the world of word, Lao Tzu has finally to appeal to word as the last resort in conveying his idea about Tao. For in chapter LXX he utters, "My words are very easy to understand and very easy to put into practice, yet no one in the world can understand them or put them into practice." Without doubt, Lao Tzu is trapped in this verbal-nonverbal dialectical predicament. This contradiction appears to be an impasse to philosophers like Hui Neng 慧能, the wisest monk and sixth patriarch of the Zen sect in the Tang Dynasty. As an advocate of anti-verbalization in achieving sudden enlightenment, Hui Neng still could not escape the world of word either but leave a corpus of words, the *Sutra of Platform* (壇經), to his disciples. And this

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<sup>39</sup> Fung Yu-lan, *Chuang-Tzu: A New Selected Tradition with an Exposition of the Philosophy of Kuo Hsiang* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1989) 49. Fung's translation of "On the Equality of Things" is what Burton Watson's translation of "Discussion on Making All Things Equal."

dialectical dilemma can also be applied to those Taoists in the *Chuang Tzu*, who try to “sit in forgetfulness” (*tso-wang* 坐忘), and to find “a man who has forgotten words so I can have a word with him.” (XXVI)<sup>40</sup> In order to possibly solve this type of linguistic impasse lying in the nature of the relationship of language and the Tao, like Lao Tzu’s statement “The name that can be named is not the constant name,” Robert E. Allison, proposes that one should look at it from outside the Taoist perspective. Allison argues:

Whatever linguistic description is given of the Tao, it misses its target. It does not follow that all linguistic description is of no use. . . . It is clear that all linguistic descriptions must be misdescriptions; it remains open whether certain misdescriptions can be less false than others. . . . From inside the Taoist perspective no linguistic description is possible. It remains an open question whether certain linguistic descriptions which take place outside the Taoist perspective can be less false than others.<sup>41</sup>

In the *Chuang Tzu* the issue of language is discussed more specifically than that in the *Tao Te Ching*. It is frustrating to see that in the *Tao Te Ching* only general statements are made concerning the problem between language and Tao, and not much detailed exploration is found when the very topic of language is actually touched upon. Some of those statements are already mentioned above, say, “To use words but rarely is to be natural.” or “Great eloquence (argument) seems tongue-tied.”<sup>42</sup> The possible reason that may account for the lack of detailed investigations is that Lao Tzu is so much obsessed with what Tao is and its application to government, though he is surely aware of the power of language.

Yet, the relationship between language and meaning (essence) is described

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<sup>40</sup> Burton Watson (1964), “External Things” (*Wai-wu* 外物) 140. Also see Herbert A. Giles, trans. “Contingencies” (1961) 265.

<sup>41</sup> Robert E. Allison, “Moral Values And The Taoist Sage In The Tao De Ching,” in *Asian Philosophy* 4.2 (1994): 3, [Academic Search Elite](#), Online, EBSCOhost, 3 Jan. 2002.

<sup>42</sup> For reference, the chapters having words, in a broad sense, to do with language are as follows: 1, 2, 5, 8, 10, 12, 14, 15, 17, 19, 20, 21, 23, 24, 25, 27, 32, 34, 39, 41, 43, 45, 56, 62, 63, 66, 70, 73, 78, 80, and 81.

in chapter XIII “The Tao of God” of the *Chuang Tzu*, it is written: “But books are only words, and the valuable part of words is the thought therein contained. That thought has a certain bias which cannot be conveyed in words.”<sup>43</sup> Later, in “Autumn Floods;” Chuang Tzu states, “The greatness of anything may be a topic of discussion, or the smallness of anything may be mentally realized. But that which can be neither a topic of discussion nor be realized mentally, can be neither great nor small.”<sup>44</sup> These words suggest ‘something’ existing beyond ‘discussion’ and “mental realization.” In other words, a disjunction or splitting between language and meaning (essence) is indicated. This gap existing in the triangular relationship among the idea, the material (object), and language is also delineated by an ancient Chinese scholar Lu Chi 陸機 in his book on literary criticism entitled the *Wen-fu (Prose-poem on Literature)*. Lu is afraid that “The idea fails to support the material (object), and words fail to capture the idea.”<sup>45</sup>

This limited capacity of language is further stated in the last paragraph of Tse Yang (XXV) of the *Chuang Tzu*, which reads:

Were language adequate, it would take but a day to fully set forth Tao. Not being adequate, it takes that time to explain material existences. Tao is something beyond material existences. It cannot be conveyed either by words or by silence. In that state which is neither speech nor silence, its transcendental nature may be apprehended.<sup>46</sup>

Then what is ‘that state’ between ‘speech and silence?’ “Possibly, the state

<sup>43</sup> Herbert A. Giles (1961) 139.

<sup>44</sup> Herbert A. Giles (1961), “Autumn Floods”(Chiu-shui 秋水) 160.

<sup>45</sup> The Chinese original for “The idea fails to support the material (object), and words fail to capture the idea” is 意不稱物，文不逮意。Lu Chi 陸機, also known as Lu Shi-heng 陸士衡 (261-303), wrote a book on literary criticism entitled the *Wen fu* 文賦 (*Prose-poem on Literature*). For a detailed discussion of Lu Chi’s *Wen Fu*, see Chen Zhaolin 譚兆麟, *Zhongguo gudai wenlun gaiya* 中國古代文論概要 (*An Introduction to the Selections of Ancient Chinese Literary Discourses*) (Hunan: Wenyi chubanshe, 1987) 148-163. Also, see Sam Hamill, trans. & aftwod., *Wen fu: the Art of Writing* (Portland, Oregon: Breitenbush Books Inc., 1987).

<sup>46</sup> Herbert A. Giles (1961), “Tse Yang” (*Tse Yang* 則陽) 258. Tse Yang is the name of a person of the Lu (魯).

between speech and silence is metaphor or parable, in which one does not state something directly but points at a profound truth, as in much of the *Chung Tzu* inner chapters,” says Professor Jeannette Faurot. Or we can treat ‘speech’ as a limitative material existence as Terry Eagleton puts it. Yet, what is ‘silence’ in this case? Is it a ‘neutral’ state--the place where Tao cannot be spoken of? Nonetheless, one thing we can be certain of is that Tao is beyond any sign of communication, for ‘speech’ is a sign, so is ‘silence.’ In other words, Tao can never be fully deciphered by any means (material existences). All material things have their limit. It is as if we compared Tao to the original text in the practice of translation, and then we would find that there weren't any target language capable of ‘fully’ conveying it. Walter Benjamin has words for this kind of dilemma in translation: “In all language and linguistic creations there remains in addition to what can be conveyed something that cannot be communicated; depending on the context in which it appears, it is something that symbolizes or something symbolized.”<sup>47</sup> As a result, Tao, like the source language, can never be completely translated by any “son of Subordinate Ink” (*fu mo chih tzu* 副墨之子), and any “grandson of Repeated-Recitation” (*lo sung chih sun* 洛誦之孫).<sup>48</sup> These two metaphors, found in chapter VI: the Great Teacher of the *Chuang Tzu*, are of paramount significance in the explication of the Taoist concept about language in relation to Tao. In Chinese “fu” is an attributive meaning “subordinate or assistant” showing Ink’s rank next to the Great Master, namely, Tao. ‘Ink’ is a symbol of writing--also the Writing of all writings; then whatever generates from it is its descendant, (for example, criticisms or meta-criticisms of the original text). “Recitation,” a form of “Speech” (speaking), is an emblem of words--also the Repeated-Recitation of all repeated recitations of words; then whatever flows from it is its offspring. Here, in terms

<sup>47</sup> Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator" in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1978), p. 79.

<sup>48</sup> The Chinese word “fu副” (subordinate or assistant) is used here as an attributive modifying “mo 墨” (Ink); see Huang Chin-hung (1983) 113. Burton Watson’s translation of “*fu mo chih tzu* 副墨之子” as “the son of Aided-by-Ink” doesn’t clearly show the inferior status of Ink to the Great Master. The quoted English translation of “*lo sung chih sun* 洛誦之孫” is from Burton Watson’s;

of nearness to Truth (Tao), unlike Western phonocentrists or deconstructionists, Chuang Tzu neither asserts that speech takes precedence over writing, nor does he set forth a theory that writing takes priority over speech. For him, both speech and writing are limited and thus can not be counted upon. Therefore, we can say, to the Taoists, writing and speech (speaking) are, by analogy, 'twice moved' from Truth (Tao) as Plato says of it in Book X of the *Republic*. In short, being distant from Truth, speech and writing are not Tao itself, nor identical with Tao, but merely the media through which we might be able to apprehend what Tao is. As Burton Watson puts it, "But, like all mystic, Chuang Tzu insists that language is in the end grievously inadequate to describe the true Way, or wonderful freedom of the man who has realized his identity with it."<sup>49</sup> Taoists do not believe that language as a sign is a trustable vehicle for the expression of Tao.

One striking idea in the *Chuang Tzu* is about the signifying process of language, in particular the relation between the word as the signifier and its possible signified, which cannot be found in the *Tao Te Ching*. The idea is shown in a metaphorical speech at the end of "External Things" (*wai-wu* 外物):

The fish trap exists because of the fish; once you've gotten the fish, you can forget the trap. The rabbit snare exists because of the rabbit; once you've gotten the rabbit, you can forget the snare. Words exist because of meaning; once you've gotten the meaning, you can forget the words. Where can I find a man who has forgotten words so I can have a word with him?<sup>50</sup>

From the above-quoted passage it can be inferred that people would traditionally think that there "always" exists a definite referent of the signifier in the process of deciphering. Actually it is not quite true; the lines about language in "On the Equality of Things" read: "Speech is not merely the blowing of winds. It is intending to say something. But what it is intending to say is not absolutely

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see Watson: *Chuang Tzu: Basic Writings*, p.79.

<sup>49</sup> Burton Watson (1964) 6-7.

<sup>50</sup> Burton Watson (1964) 140.

established” (Fung). Fung Yu-lan's comment on these lines goes: “What is affirmed by one may be denied by another.”<sup>51</sup> Fung further comments that “any word can be the predicate of anything. Every word is appropriate everywhere.” Since, to the Taoists the nature of language is as such--uncertainty, no wonder Chuang Tzu raises the following questions: “Is there really such a thing as speech? Is there really no such thing as speech?” He even wonders if there is any distinction between speech and the chirping of young birds in this aspect, for they are but uncertain signs. Yet, taken from a positive viewpoint, this uncertain nature of language, which is at the same time liberating, helps to create an imagined or symbolic space for readers to “word-their-way” toward altered states of awareness.<sup>52</sup> This is the exact issue that the later Western semioticians, such as Umberto Eco, Roland Barthes, and Erving Goffman, have worked on in their play of coding and decoding.

However, what concerns the Taoists most is not the scientific analysis of language as a signifying system but, as mentioned above, the function and capacity of language in expressing Tao, for Tao is the ultimate ground, the “transcendental signified,” for everything. Regarded as a barrier on the way to Tao, language, to those Taoists, is still the first and last choice in this connection. For Tao abides in ‘neither speech nor silence.’ Under such circumstances, the Taoists cannot but appeal to the use of a kind of ‘pure or log’ (*pu* 樸) language and get rid of beautiful words, in pursuing simultaneously their ideal dialectic: “Without language, contraries are identical. The identity is not identical with its expression: the expression is not identical with its identity. . . . Language not expressed in language is not language. Constantly spoken, it is as though not spoken. Constantly unspoken, it is not as though not spoken” (XXVII: Language).<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Fung Yu-lan, 1989, p. 43.

<sup>52</sup> Lyall Crawford, “Wording-Our-Way Toward Altered States,” *ETC: A Review of General Semantics*, Spring 53.1 (1996), Academic Search Elite, Online, EBSCOhost, 3 Jan, 2002.

<sup>53</sup> Giles, p. 266-67.

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