



# Digitality, granularity and ineffability

Ruiqing Liang\*

College of Foreign Studies, Jinan University, Guangzhou 510632, China

## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 2 March 2010

Received in revised form 26 August 2010

Accepted 30 August 2010

### Keywords:

Sensory experience

Phenomenal ineffability

Phenomenal effect

Digitality

Granularity

Map theory of language

## ABSTRACT

Digitality and granularity are two distinctive features of human language and both of them, as argued in this paper, contribute to ineffability, and the ineffability problem, not surprisingly, constitutes a serious challenge to what Harris [Harris, R. (ed.), 2002. *The Language Myth in Western Culture*. Curzon, Richmond] has called “the communication myth” in the Western culture. Based on a conceptual analysis of the notion of ineffability, the present paper argues that there is indeed a descriptive gap between language and experience, but sensory experience is only *phenomenally* ineffable in an attenuated sense, namely that the phenomenal content of sensory experience (e.g. the aroma of coffee), largely effable, cannot be conveyed in words only in an exhaustive sense. Furthermore, the strength of phenomenal ineffability is in direct proportion to that of dynamic phenomenal effect sensory experience exerts on the experiencing subject. This weak thesis of phenomenal ineffability is ultimately motivated by the map theory of language, which provides a unified explanation for what is said, what is unsaid, and what cannot be (exhaustively) said. Phenomenal ineffability is not something that should be avoided; instead, it helps to save us from a language that is too cumbersome for acquisition and communication.

© 2010 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

## 1. Introduction

Human language is often construed as a digital signaling system (Ross 2004; Ogryzko 1996), though it remains open to suspicion on the part of integrational linguists whether this system is a set of fixed, rule-governed digital codes (Harris 2002, p. 6; Love 2004, 2007). Thus, compared with a sensory experience itself (say, a splitting headache), which is typically considered analogical, a verbal description of the pain, namely “a splitting headache”, is digital (à la Love 2007, p. 692) because the utterance consists of some discrete digits, or rather words. What interests me here in this paper is whether there is a *descriptive gap* between language, the so-called digital signaling system, and analogical sensory experience. In other words, the present paper is aimed to address a particular version of the traditional ineffability problem, that is, whether analogical sensory experience can be digitally represented in words in an exhaustive way.

The traditional ineffability thesis takes many forms, as will be examined in Section 2, but its basic tenet is that there exists a certain entity *X* such that some information about *X* cannot be adequately expressed or communicated in terms of linguistic signs. Such an entity might be a supreme metaphysical entity (e.g. medieval theologians' *God*, Neo-Platonists' *One*, or Chinese Buddhists' *Chan*), or an object of mundane sensory experience (say, Beethoven's Fifth Symphony or Leonardo da Vinci's Mona Lisa). This follows that there exists something that is beyond words and that language, as a digital signaling system, has limits. It is perhaps for this reason that many scholars (e.g. Alston, 1956; Knepper, 2009) have taken ineffability theses simply as incoherent and self-defeating, or at most hyperbolic. One recent but familiar attack is found in the second edition of the *Encyclopedia of Language and Linguistics*. After taking various kinds of ineffability claims to task, Priest (2005, p. 158)

\* Tel.: +86 20 8522 3529.

E-mail address: [richardlrqing@gmail.com](mailto:richardlrqing@gmail.com)

points out that “at the heart of the view that language has limits is a fundamental paradox,” for any claim that *X* is ineffable necessarily involves a lot of talk about *X*. I do not think such criticisms have done justice to ineffability claimers. One important reason is that ineffability has often been regarded by critics as a matter of yes or no rather than a matter of degree. Another, not less important, reason is that few have ever attempted to identify different varieties of ineffability. I have more to say about the first reason when we talk about phenomenal effect, but the top priority, I suppose, is to do a little conceptual analysis so as to clarify the well-entrenched notion of ineffability in both Eastern and Western cultures.

It seems that ineffability theses also constitute a serious challenge to what Roy Harris (2002, p. 6) has dubbed the “communication myth”, which suggests that grasping the semantic knowledge of certain invariant verbal or non-verbal signs guarantees the communicability of the messages conveyed by such signs. This having been said, the ineffability problem, so far under-researched in language sciences, is intertwined with the problem of human communication and deserves intensive research as a legitimate topic in its own right.

In this paper, I argue that there is indeed a descriptive gap – though not unbridgeable – between language and experience, but all traditional ineffability theses are “disguised” to some degree except a weak thesis of phenomenal ineffability, which states that the phenomenal content of sensory experience is ineffable only in a weak sense. Then it is argued that this version of ineffability is determined to some extent by the digitality and granularity of linguistic signs, and is ultimately motivated by the map theory of language, which ontologically speaking flies in the face of the code view of language. So construed, ineffability should not be taken as a limitation of language; rather, it helps to “avoid the sensory overload” (Musacchio 2005, p. 405) and make language acquisition and communication much easier.

## 2. Some varieties of ineffability

In this section I would like to conduct a conceptual analysis of the notion of ineffability in the tradition of the analytic philosophy of language. This is, I suppose, not only necessary but also important because a linguistic investigation like this can hardly be carried out without reference to relevant philosophical research, especially when the topic under investigation concerns the ontology, the nature and the functions of language, which is itself a heated topic in the analytic philosophy of language.

Such a conceptual analysis of ineffability can vary significantly from perspective to perspective. From the perspective of what *substance* or *entity* or *state* is claimed to be ineffable, we can distinguish perceptual ineffability from aesthetical ineffability (De Clercq 2000; Raffman 1993), mathematical ineffability (Kukla 2005, p. 1), and religious ineffability, etc. From the perspective of what *causes* an ineffable state, we may ascribe ineffability to lexical, syntactical or pragmatic constraints, to cognitive constraints, or even to pathological factors. As such, we can respectively talk about lexical ineffability, syntactical ineffability, pragmatic ineffability, cognitive ineffability, pathological ineffability, and so on and so forth. Let us call the first perspective the substantial view of ineffability, and the second one the causal view. I take it as a matter of fact that the two views do overlap with each other, for two or more entities or states of affairs which are claimed to be substantially ineffable can obviously have one and the same causal interpretation. For brevity sake, I compress lexical ineffability and syntactical ineffability into one and the same kind of ineffability and, to use Halliday's well-established concept, call it “lexicogrammatical” ineffability. Now suppose *X* is an entity *E* or an experience of *E*<sup>1</sup>, a state of affairs, or a truth, and suppose *S* is a speaker of the language *L*, we can then give, on the causal view, a rough characterization of five varieties of ineffability, as follows:

- (1) **Lexicogrammatical ineffability:** *X* is lexicogrammatically ineffable to *S* (or a whole linguistic community or all linguistic communities) if no lexical items or syntactical structures can be found in *L* (or any other human language) to express *S*'s thoughts<sup>2</sup> about *X*. An often cited example of lexicogrammatical ineffability is the obvious mismatch between color concepts and color shades: the latter are much finer-grained and thus outnumber the former to a great extent. This sort of ineffability, also called unrepresentability or unencodability, is often regarded as the prototype of ineffability<sup>3</sup>.
- (2) **Pragmatic ineffability:** *X* is pragmatically ineffable if it is infelicitous for *S* to produce certain utterances, or perform a certain speech act, about *X* on a certain occasion. Pragmatic ineffability arises out of the fact that language speakers are often supposed to observe some pragmatic rules in production and use of language, any violation of which would, in most cases, result in communication failures, misunderstandings, or other unfavorable results. This includes various socio-cultural and ideological taboos. A case in point is the infelicity of telling blue jokes to your boss, though you may feel free to exchange them with your friends of the same age and sex. In the case of religious experience, the very speech act of naming or predicating a supreme entity, say, *God*, *Chan*, or whatever, is sometimes deemed as profane or blasphemous.

<sup>1</sup> Let's ignore for the time being the difference between the ineffability of an entity and that of experience of the entity. I will pick up this point later.

<sup>2</sup> Obviously, the notion of thought here is used in a broader sense than that of Fregean thought, which is confined to what can always be couched in terms of propositions.

<sup>3</sup> For the notion of unrepresentability, see André Kukla (2005, p. 135). For discussion about the difference between communicability and encodability, please see Robyn Carston (2002, p. 33).

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/1103515>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/1103515>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)