Throughout his writings, Nietzsche criticizes language for what he takes to be its distortions of thought.¹ The social nature of language, he claims, generalizes that which, in experience, is particular and thereby flattens our individual thoughts to communicable expressions. This is part of Nietzsche’s general critique of socialized man; he sees the individual as being compromised by the assimilating power of social norms, including those of language. He puts this somewhat differently in his powerful essay “On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense,” in which he tells a story of the social origins of language and of the arbitrary conceptual framework produced by it. In particular, the concept of “truth;” it is one of the most powerful social fictions, according to Nietzsche, and is a paradigmatic case of the distortion of the particular as something generally conceivable. This account elaborates on his notion of language as productive of the illusion of conceptual generalities and therefore an aberration of our experience of the fundamentally non-conceptual world. that language is derivative of thought and fails to accurately capture it in its attempt to communicate it. The

Maximilian Chaoulideer is a senior studying Philosophy and Germanic Studies at the University of Chicago. Though currently writing his senior thesis on Heidegger's phenomenology of time, he has been most compelled by thinkers who use the poetic to explore the philosophic. After taking a year or two to dabble in professional mixology, he intends to pursue a Ph.D. in either Philosophy or German, hopefully never having to leave the comfortable cocoon of academia.
notion of truth, of communicated experience, and that of the concept at all, are all subject to criticism by Nietzsche because they are share in the fundamental problem with language: it attempt to convey a world of particulars through communicable generalities.

Nietzsche does, however, go beyond the traditional philosophical depreciation of language as the impoverished expression of thought by suggesting that one can preserve the depth of individuality—of asocial thought and feeling—through language by using the conceptual framework for one’s own creativity and self-discovery. The exemplary instantiation of this use of language is the writing of Nietzsche himself. Behind these criticisms directed towards language there is the suggestion that one can move beyond these problems, that one even needs the usually limiting linguistic framework to “play with”—to twist and break its conventions—to be (re)creative of one’s individuality (and thought\(^{i\text{ii}}\)). Thus while it may seem to be a contradiction to both criticize language for its generalization and de-individuation and herald a particular use of language as enriching and creative of the individual, we will see that the latter analysis of language is predicated on the fact contained in the former. It is because language can only convey a thin version of thought that it can be used to stimulate—even demand—individuation. This will become clearer when we look at the relation between Nietzsche’s texts and his reader.

Before trying to explicate the complex manner in which language can be thought of as useful or even necessary to self-discovery as conveyed in the final section of “On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense,” his critique of language as detrimental to our individuality and productive of countless distortions and falsehoods which masquerade as truths must first be understood. Besides “On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense,” there are at least two texts which treat the dissimulation of language explicitly. In The Gay Science, Nietzsche seeks to uncover the development both of consciousness and of language, finding the origins of both in “the need to communicate,” and seeing them both as productive of the same diseases of the individual—or rather, that
all that is problematic in consciousness is made manifest in language: “the thinking which becomes conscious is only the smallest part of it, let’s say the shallowest, worst part - for only that conscious thinking takes place in words, that is, in communication symbols.”

The following passage from this aphorism describe the inherent problem with conscious thought, which is language makes manifest:

    each of us, even with the best will in the world to understand ourselves as individually as possible, ‘to know ourselves’, will always bring to consciousness precisely that in ourselves which is ‘non-individual’, that which is ‘average’; that due to the nature of consciousness - to the ‘genius of the species’ governing it - our thoughts themselves are continually as it were outvoted and translated back into the herd perspective. At bottom, all our actions, are incomparably and utterly personal, unique, and boundlessly individual, there is no doubt; but as soon as we translate them in consciousness, they no longer seem to be [...] everything which enters consciousness thereby becomes shallow, thin, relatively stupid, general, a sign, a herd-mark; that all becoming conscious involves a vast and thorough corruption, falsification, superficialization, and generalization.

This translation of our individual thoughts into the conscious and communicable realm of society has wide repercussions: Nietzsche attributes the loss of our individuality to the introduction of the conscious and the linguistic, a loss which is marked by the replacement of the particular with the universal, the deep with the shallow, the true with the false, and so on.

In Human, All Too Human, Nietzsche presents another negative picture of language, namely “Language as Putative Science” in an aphorism thus named. This aphorism examines language not through its relationship to consciousness and our socialization, but rather as a manmade tool that falsely claims to describe the world truthfully (hence “putative science”). Again, Nietzsche

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tells a brief story of the development of language and how that has lead to error:

The sculptor of language was not so modest as to believe that he was only giving things designations, he conceived rather that with words he was expressing supreme knowledge of things [...] A great deal later - only now - it dawns on men that in their belief in language they have propagated a tremendous error.

This aphorism suggests that this error lies in man’s notion that his grasp of the world is sufficient to be able to construct a parallel world (in language) that could “make itself master” over the world it describes—that is, that the linguistic world could somehow grasp and even inform our experience of the world. The sketch of this thought found in Human, All Too Human, is derived from his earlier essay, “On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense,” in which this criticism of language is expanded but also greatly complicated.

In contrast to these two relatively straightforward aphorisms, both of which present language simply as a propagator of error, “On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense” paints a more nuanced and compelling picture of language and its relation to our thought. Nietzsche again uses a genealogy to frame his analysis. The essay focuses on the emergence and dominance of the concept “truth,” providing a theory of language that helps to bridge the two different criticisms presented above.

“The ‘thing in itself’,” Nietzsche tells us, is “something quite incomprehensible to the creator of language and something not in the least worth striving for. This creator only designates the relations of things to men, and for expressing these relations he lays hold of the boldest metaphors.” These metaphors, he continues, are twice removed from what they attempt to describe: words are “imitations” of images, which are themselves “imitations of nerve stimuli.” Each of these metaphorical translations maps the original stimulus onto an entirely different sphere incapable of preserving the content of the former. That is, just as a smell can never be captured by sound, no matter how complex,
nerve stimuli are simply not reproducible as images or as sounds, and any translation into these latter forms is therefore a severe distortion of the former. This idea of something being lost in translation into language is prominent in the aphorism in The Gay Science mentioned above as well; there is something about language that renders it incompatible with our thought, our experience of particulars.

Nietzsche pins this incompatibility on language’s fundamentally conceptual nature: any translation into language is a translation into concepts. The distortion in this translation then stems from the imposition of generalities, or concepts, onto actualities, which are particular: Nietzsche posits that “we obtain the concept, as we do the form, by overlooking what is individual and actual; whereas nature is acquainted with no forms and no concepts, and likewise with no species, but only with an X which remains inaccessible and undefinable for us.” Language forces dissimilar things into one conceptual unit, he claims, not only producing the illusion that they are similar, but that they share some underlying essence which makes them what they are; concepts bring with them false essences which lead us to draw the conclusion that, for example, those things we call true are true because of some truthfulness, some essential quality that makes them true. This entirely disguises the fact that its truth is merely the product of its being linguistically designated as such. This illusion behind the concept of truth applies to everything conceived linguistically.

What does this discussion of fictitious universals and linguistic concepts have to do with the criticism leveled in The Gay Science; what import does this have on man’s individuality? This question is answered by the second section of “On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense” in which Nietzsche sets up the contrast between what he calls the “rational man” and the “intuitive man.”

This “rational” man is the one who is the subject of On the ‘genius of the species’, the passage from The Gay Science we looked at earlier; he is the one who suffers from a lack of individuality at the hands of his linguistic socialization. The entire edi-
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face of metaphor in which he lives and thinks is one of “averages,” one of generalizations. He expresses himself through the language of society (for there is no other kind of language available to him), and thereby loses sight of his individuality, his uniqueness. It is the same loss described in the case of truth, or of any concept: all of these linguistic abstractions of universals from particulars constitute the abstraction of the social from the individual: man’s sociality is his being bounded by society’s linguistic conventions. It is here that one begins to see where Nietzsche might see a way out; that though, generally, language is a medium inclined towards the social, it is its restrictiveness in particular, its complete obedience to convention, which is problematic.

Beyond making the core of his critique of language clear, this essay also acknowledges language to now be inseparable from man. He rightly rejects the possibility of reverting to a non-linguistic, asocial state by flatly stating that “the drive toward the formation of metaphors is the fundamental human drive, which one cannot for a single instant dispense with in thought, for one would thereby dispense with man himself.”

Nietzsche therefore works to conceive of a way to undo the loss of the individual without discarding language altogether. This is what makes the essay so interesting: not only does Nietzsche beautifully articulate the obstacles inherent to linguistic expression, he also recognizes man’s attachment to language and suggests a way to remain faithful to oneself through ‘individual creativity’ (this rather vague phrase will hopefully become clearer later) while remaining a linguistic animal.

Nietzsche’s suggestion is as follows: out of the conceptual bonds which tie rational man to convention and his sociality, another man (the “intuitive” one) is able to become “creative” by bending and breaking those norms of metaphor. This very nietzschean notion of rediscovering—or perhaps simply discovering—oneself by finding a creative mode within or out of the stifling framework responsible for that initial loss of individuality is beautifully (though admittedly obscurely) related through his description of the intuitive man, the “free intellect”:
that immense framework and planking of concepts to which the needy man clings his whole life long in order to preserve himself is nothing but a scaffolding and toy for the most audacious feats of the liberated intellect. And when it smashes this framework to pieces, throws it into confusion, and puts it back together in an ironic fashion, pairing the most alien things and separating the closest, it is demonstrating that it has no need of these makeshifts of indigence and that it will now be guided by intuitions rather than by concepts. There is no regular path which leads from these intuitions into the land of ghostly schemata, the land of abstractions. There exists no word for these intuitions; when man sees them he grows dumb, or else he speaks only in forbidden metaphors and in unheard-of combinations of concepts. He does this so that by shattering and mocking the old conceptual barriers he may at least correspond creatively to the impression of the powerful present intuition.\footnote{The intuitive man frees himself by shedding his conceptual bonds, by de- and reconstructing the metaphorical framework, by “playing with seriousness.” But what would it look like to be creative in this way, to be playful in the manner just described? I would suggest that the best guides to understanding this intuitive man are Nietzsche’s writings themselves.}

As any reader can attest, Nietzsche is conspicuously convoluted:\footnote{As any reader can attest, Nietzsche is conspicuously convoluted: he purposefully makes himself difficult to understand and paraphrase. He writes in metaphor and in parable—his prose rarely lends itself to any immediate understanding, what we might call poetic prose. We should see this as necessary for Nietzsche for two complimentary reasons. The first has to do with the production of writing itself: he avoids the dangers of language sketched out above for himself. That is, he manages to preserve himself in his writing. The second regards its reception: his style is meant to produce a philosophical language that will} he purposefully makes himself difficult to understand and paraphrase. He writes in metaphor and in parable—his prose rarely lends itself to any immediate understanding, what we might call poetic prose. We should see this as necessary for Nietzsche for two complimentary reasons. The first has to do with the production of writing itself: he avoids the dangers of language sketched out above for himself. That is, he manages to preserve himself in his writing. The second regards its reception: his style is meant to produce a philosophical language that will
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have the pedagogical effect on his readers he extolls in so much of his writings. First let us think about the manner in which Nietzsche’s writing style is exemplary of the productions of an intuitive man.

The intuitive man “speaks only in forbidden metaphors and in unheard-of combinations of concepts,” he tells us. One cannot help but be reminded of Zarathustra’s bizarre speeches, the countless metaphors used in foreign contexts—what one might call a linguistic playfulness. His unconventional use of metaphor and conjunctions of otherwise entirely disjointed things is a perfect demonstration of a certain freedom from the conceptual boundaries language generally imposes upon us. There is still the question of why it would be that creativity or originality in writing should be thought of as personal or individual, why one should think that unconventional—and in that sense creative—usage of language constitutes an expression of individuality. If we take Nietzsche’s texts, particularly Thus Spoke Zarathustra, to be paradigmatic of the intuitive man, the answer to this seems clear.

The rational man is he who speaks and writes (and therefore thinks) using a framework he has adopted, taken from others. He is rooted to society’s perspective, not his own, and is therefore merely regurgitating that which has been given to him. This is the rational aim: to remove the differences that arise from perspectives and attain some universal truth or view that is meant to be compatible with anyone. But in truth it is compatible with no one: though every individual speaks in the same manner and is consistent in their language, they are not doing this qua individual, but rather qua member of society. It is this man to whom Nietzsche stands in such stark contrast. If we understand the poetic quality of Nietzsche’s writing to be symptomatic of his dedication to writing as an individual rather than his being obscure for the end of not being understood by the common or some other such motivation, it becomes clear in what manner he stands so opposed.

The intuitive man uses a form that must be foreign to others, it must appear strange and unapproachable; for the language to
be Nietzsche’s own, it cannot be entirely ours as well. Hence, such convolution is the product (though of course not always indicative) of successfully individuated writing, writing which is free from the rigid framework that would socialize it and render it easily accessible to all readers. Thus, the intuitive man is marked by his creative (re)individuation. He is able to preserve the individual in a medium that is initially and primarily averaging and social.

We see in “On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense,” that Nietzsche does much more than present two (perhaps even conflicting) analyses of language—one distorting, the other enriching. Rather, the intuitive man’s creative use of language is made possible by the degraded nature of the medium. This is clearer in the creativity required on the part of the reader than on the part of the writer. Beginning in his early essay Schopenhauer as Educator and continuing through Thus Spoke Zarathustra, Nietzsche impresses over and over that the culmination of education lies in the overcoming of the educator, in taking that which one has learned from the educator and making it one’s own, and in this sense rejecting the teacher and their teachings. At the end of the first part of Thus Spoke Zarathustra, Zarathustra directs his disciples to do precisely this:

> go away from me and resist Zarathustra! And even better: be ashamed of him! Perhaps he deceived you. [...] You had not yet sought yourselves: and you found me. Thus do all believers; therefore all faith amounts to so little. Now I bid you lose me and find yourselves; and only when you have all denied me will I return to you.\(^{xii}\)

This sentiment courses throughout the book and, as I said, its earliest expression can already be found in Schopenhauer as Educator.\(^{xiii}\)

I suggest that we take Zarathustra’s relation to his disciples to be analogous to the relation Nietzsche would like his readers to have to his texts. Zarathustra is a successful educator because of his poetic use of language. He does not speak or act in a way which can be straightforwardly adopted: both for the obvious
reason that nothing he says is clear or consistent enough to be treated as direct prescriptive doctrine and because—as illustrated above—he makes explicit the kind of education he wants to foster. His disciples have to form their own individuated response to the example set Zarathustra before they can be said to be followers of him at all. Similarly, Nietzsche’s style is meant to force an engagement with the text which requires the reader to read into it, to further determine his meaning; the text’s resistance to being immediately and passively taken on requires that the reader interpret the text and thereby make it their own. Both Nietzsche and Zarathustra avoid systematic doctrine and instead use poetic language to convey their thoughts; not to perfectly preserve their individuality in their language, but to prompt the interpreter to impose their own individuality onto the language.

If we return to the notion in the Gay Science which holds that linguistic expression is the “flattening” of thought and that this is a problem that becomes salient in the context of communication, we might think of our experience of actuality, of our individuated thoughts, as a deep well which is dried up when expressed in language. The task is therefore to produce language which demands refilling, re-enrichment. Or, put differently, language which prompts the reader to reread, reflect, reject, question—to think for themselves—is, though itself impoverished, productive of a richness perhaps equal to the original thought behind the language. To read in this way is to make language one’s own, to take that dried up, derivative reminiscence of—in this case Nietzsche’s—perspective, and give it depth again, restore its individuality. This restoration will have the effect of restoring perspective of a new kind, since it is now the reader’s thought, not Nietzsche’s. This is precisely why it is an inherently impoverished medium that is needed to produce the kind of demand on the reader or interlocutor stimulated by both Nietzsche and Zarathustra.

Presenting the reader with texts that require this re-enrichment of thought should then be thought of as teaching that reader to seek re-individuation through language. It is in this
sense that Nietzsche’s unusual metaphors, his bizarre and unconventional use of parable and quotation, even his use of punctuation, all function as ways of jarring the reader and thereby forcing them to interpret, drawing them out of their rationalist passivity and compelling them to intuitively contribute their own personal richness to that language. This is the pedagogical power of the intuitive man.

We see then, that Nietzsche’s sharp denigrations of language and its place in obscuring individuality as well as his abstruse prose are in the service of arousing our ability and desire to move beyond conventional linguistic expression as well as produce philosophical engagement arising from their individuality, not their appropriation of socially prepared concepts. As with so much of Nietzsche’s ostensibly negatively charged analysis of society, it is motivated entirely by the positive aim of discovering and extolling that which is unique to each of us, to shed the social in favor of the individual and spark that discovery in his reader.
Notes

i. “Thought” is meant here to get at the individual’s rich experience of the world. A non-linguistic and uncommunicated sensation, feeling, or whatever else we might think of in an immediate encounter with the world. This may well mean that such a “thought” is not a conscious one, that it is, so to speak, not even communicated to ourselves. Though there are interesting and difficult questions to be pursued here, this paper attempts solely to flesh out Nietzsche’s positions on language and will leave the precise nature of “thought” largely untreated.

ii. I will be using “the individual” more or less interchangeably with personal “thought,” an equation the reasons for which should become clear.


iv. Ibid.


vi. Ibid.

vii. Ibid., §1.

viii. Ibid., §2.

ix. Ibid., §2.

x. Ibid., §2.

xi. In particular, the later writings of Nietzsche in which his voice has evolved and he approaches literary as opposed to traditional philosophical prose.

See Schopenhauer as Educator, §§1 and 7, for example. His idea of the exemplar—a figure to surpass, not to merely emulate—is comparable to the role of Zarathustra here.

Bibliography


