A Proximity of Meaning

“Does the ambiguity of language prevent us from knowing anything?”

Read the following Article and identify:

1. Major knowledge claims that the author makes.
2. How does he claim to “know?”
3. To what extent does the conclusion of the article allow language to be a viable way of knowing?

To say that I “know” something is, if followed to its inevitable conclusion, is a vague if not meaningless statement. I believe this is so for numerous reasons, one of which is the fact that people view “knowing” in many diverse ways, sometimes – usually – without even realizing it. This is caused because knowing, by definition, is inseparable from the complex concept of “truth”.

Here the point may become clearer, for it is commonly understood that some people hold “truth” to be absolute and sovereign while others believe it to be relative and malleable. Post-structuralists have further deconstructed these notions to explore how an absolutist can be sub-defined in terms of whether they believe that absolute truth is actually knowable or not. That is, there is a division among absolutists as to whether we can know absolute truth absolutely, or not.

Likewise, relativists can be sub-classified into those who hold that something is generally true – true for a certain group, nation, culture, etc; and those who hold a more nihilistic relativism in which everyone individually creates their own “truth” and – as such – there is no point of referendum for anyone or anything. These sub-groups can be sub-divided yet further, as post-structuralists continue to apply new labels in a constant process of division and (re-)integration.

In all of this intentional chaos, I have come to a belief that there can be no clear agreement when one speaks of truth, and – by extension – knowing. If your definition of a word is not the same as mine, we may have a conversation (more likely a debate) around it, believing that we are talking about the same thing when, in fact, we are not. This is actually extremely common in our world. A brief example might be the ever-present debate about an embryo’s right to life. The whole debate hinges on the word “life”. While pro-lifers and pro-choicers both know what “life” is in their own way, they do not understand it from the other’s perspective. The flaw that is made is that they both believe that the other group is lying to themselves about their definition. This is not so, they genuinely DO have a different definition, which shapes their understanding of morality in this case. These divergent understandings are demonstrated when the pro-life person calls the life “unborn child” to which the pro-choicer will favor “embryo”.

The question then becomes, *can* two meanings of a word ever mean the same thing to two people (even two people who purpose to “agree”, e.g. can two pro-lifers genuinely say they have the same understanding of “life”)? Take a second and imagine a table; after you have the image in your head, read the next sentence. Do you think that your vision of a “table” is the same as mine? I am imagining an extendable, oblong, light oak table that I grew up with, complete with the surrounding image of my parent’s dining room. Others (or me at another time) may visualize a coffee table, bedroom table, ice cream table, patio table, pool table, etc. Your point of referendum (POR) for the word “table” facilitates your understanding of the word. Interestingly, if you dwell on it long enough, the word may even elicit an emotional response: in my case, nostalgia for my childhood. There is nothing in the syllabic pronunciation of the English word “table” that does these things; it is you and your meaning-making that creates the effect just demonstrated. By extension, it is quite hopeless that my meaning of the table will ever be the same as yours.

You may wish to interject here that when I say “table” you do –in fact—envision some sort of table (as opposed to –say—a hedgehog or a train station) and that there is an approximation of understanding surrounding language. To this, I would fully agree, for if I did not, then I would have no value in trying to communicate at all and would not be taking the time to write this essay. If one meant for a friend to grab a pen for him, and the friend (who physically heard him quite clearly, and is quite sane and serious) brings back a gerbil instead, you can see how our society might quickly collapse for lack of able communication. This is not unlike the story of the Tower of Babel and their respective society. It is none-the-less important to establish the distinction between approximate understanding and exact understanding. The former seems to be more likely to be true, where the latter is all-too-often assumed.

If you, like me, are a particularly critical type and enjoy exploring ideas, you may also raise the objection that you can – of course – point to a specific table and make that table a shared point of referendum (POR). In English, the article “the” makes this distinction clear. If a man were to ask his wife to please “get the car” this means something significantly different than “get a car” which might send her happily looking for a mom-mobile. In the “the car” case, the man is referring to a shared POR, again, and this is vital for our ability to communicate effectively. However, this is still – at a deeper level – only an approximation. The man’s wife has a different understanding or meaning of the same car. Where a man is more likely to see a vehicle as a recreational, freedom-inducing, or a practical machine, a woman is more likely to make meaning of it in relational terms of transporting friends and family. It is the same car, but the meaning made is different. The wife will indeed come back with the correct car because she understands the request against a given POR, but this is not the same as the deeper understanding or meaning; it is only the surface level that the two share, in this case. The difference in meaning when it comes to vehicles may be seen clearly in the types of cars men and women would be more likely to select, if given their pick. Does a man’s choice of a Viper or Silverado and a woman’s choice of a mini-van or Beetle (being intentionally very stereotypical here) reveal a deeper understanding of what a car can/should be?

Now, this may all seem highly irrelevant, but bear in mind that trough our fairly silly analysis of tabular and vehicular perspectives, we have established two key points: (1) no one can hope make the same meaning out of something as another. Whenever we interpret or “decode” a word (any word) it is done so with our own perspective, which is as unique as our DNA, shaped by an innumerable volume of sources and – what’s more – constantly evolving. (2) communication and (by extension) society depend on some proximity or approximation of meaning made from sounds and characters. This agreement and approximation is what we call the system of language, and without language, cognition –individually or communally – is impossible. One further point here is that language is only partially based on PORs. When we are children, a teacher might point to an apple while teaching us to say “ay, ah, apple” (and thus is initiating us into the “English Language System”. Later in life, of course, we do not keep that original image when someone asks us if we want an apple, but we redefine our understanding of apples each time we experience them. Tables, cars, and apples all have some commonality in being concrete nouns – objects as it were. But what about words that are more complex and/or abstract? How do we come to understand *concepts*?

One cannot picture a word such as hope or inspiration. They may make associated images with these words, but the concept itself is not visualizable. These words are learned through associating language (e.g. hope) with specific psychological and/or physiological stimuli. This is increasingly true the more abstract a concept is. For example, we come to understand the number “3” by first seeing, holding, or experiencing three *somethings* (let’s say, three pencils). We cannot, however, have that same quality of experiential understanding for the number 200 billion. What about infinity? These, we may say, are inconceivable ideas by nature of the fact that we have no and can have no point of reference for these. Even so, we have chosen to keep them in our language and use them as if we had *at least* proximal understanding. In reality, what we have for these sorts of concepts (and I might include other big ideas like justice, love, life, or peace here, also) might be better described as a proximal dis-understanding (not misunderstanding, we aren’t missing it, we just don’t *have* it). We are united in our joint inability to conceive these clearly. Therefore, when the government spends $700 billion on a bail out of Wallstreet, we are shocked – not because we know what this means, but because we have learned and agreed that shock is the socially-appropriate reaction to such a figure being doled out by one’s government. After all, we *do* have the IRS as a point-of-referendum for this one.

So far we have established that language is – at best – a system of approximate shared understanding and – in some cases – concepts and things that have PORs allow for greater accuracy in understanding – though this is still on the surface; things that do not have PORs are far more difficult to understand and –therefore – have a greater margin for error and dis-understanding (when applied in conversation, **misunderstanding** can also occur and further complicates this matter). I will now return to my hook: to say that I “know” something is, if followed to its inevitable conclusion, a vague if not meaningless statement.

Everything you think you know is contingent on your language with which you process the thought. Your language, as demonstrated, is contingent on your experiences, emotions, culture, etc (unique as your DNA). These are largely factors that are beyond your control. Bottom line: you believe you understand something based on whatever criterion you value, but you have no objective perspective to validate this claim, nor the ability to perfectly communicate it, even if you did.

This is not to say that all is meaningless. On the contrary, this is a call to make meaning and then make it again. This, when applied to culture or faith systems can help us distinguish between tradition and traditional. All traditional things were once original expressions. We could argue that the tradition in our strongest cultures and faith systems is to develop new ideas and meanings through ongoing creative expression. I have the impression that early expressivists, artist, musicians, tailors, etc… in any culture or faith would encourage us to move beyond their ideas to keep the tradition of creating alive. Perhaps it is in this imagination (not imaginary), this expression of life, wonder, and possibility that truth truly lies.