

Is Dr. Z an Elephant or Not an Elephant? That is the Question!

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This paper seeks to demonstrate that we are all victims of social constructivism in that we presume whatever it is that society has taught us in order to think about what we are seeing as a basis for our world understanding. Therefore, in trying to prove that Dr. Z could in fact be considered a pink 'elephant' according to the beholder if that is what society has taught them to believe through a discussion of social constructivism, Piagetian theory of assimilation and accommodation, biological essentialism, and the philosophy of language and symbols, the paper aims at stressing the struggle over what signifier is to become common, a struggle over the boundaries of differentiation.

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Dr. Z is a pink elephant. □ Wait, no! □ He is a yellow lamp post with polka dotted light beams, or a fluffy dog with three legs - none of which is in any way meant as an insult! □ Or he is a father, a husband and a philosophy teacher at NJC. □ According to society he is simply seen as what ever society has decided he should be labeled as. □ Human nature needs an explanation for him, and so we have trapped him in a box. □ Labels, labels, labels! □ He is a boy, and she is a girl. □ That is a grasshopper, and this is a squirrel. □ So what? □ Why must we categorize according to otherness? □ Why must we proclaim objects and peoples differences and use those to stick a label onto something? She may be black and he may be white but surely they are more than just black or white? They are people with brains, emotions, beliefs. □ And we classify them as a black person or a white person. □ We use a limited language to describe what it is that a person is, and in doing so, we negate all of the many other aspects of the person that are true, for which we are yet to find a label. □ But either way, we create words to express our construed judgments. In other words, we are all victims of social constructivism. □ We presume whatever it is that society has taught us in order to think about what we are seeing as a basis for our world understanding. Therefore, *I* will be trying to prove that Dr. Z could in fact be considered a pink ‘elephant’ according to the beholder, if that is what society has taught them to believe. □ In order to achieve this *I* will discuss social constructivism, Jean Piaget’s theory on assimilation and accommodation, biological essentialism, the philosophy of language and symbols, and the question of power in accordance with language.

“Social constructivism emphasizes the importance of culture and context in understanding what occurs in society and constructing knowledge based on this understanding” (online 1). Basically, society dictates how we see the world around us. □ A good example of social constructivism in our society would be the paradigms which emerge in a high school about individuals with something we like to call ‘characteristics.’ □ A pretty female ‘cheerleader’ will automatically be associated with other connotations such as blonde, popular, snobby, and rich. □ A ‘nerd’ will be assumed to be smart and awkward, with large glasses and high pants, and a person who fits this description will probably be considered a nerd. The ‘cheerleader’ that we are addressing may in fact be more socially awkward than the ‘nerd.’ Or she may even be smart! □ Could it really be? □ Well yes. □ Now think about social constructivism in the context of Dr. Z in elephant form. □ □ □

Perhaps we have seen Dr. Z and we have born witness to his long trunk like nose, his four legs, and his pink skin.□Although he may not be an elephant, he has certain characteristics that we associate with being an elephant and so society tells us that we call him an “elephant”. He (*sic*) is not exactly like any other elephant which we have perceived on the internet (he doesn’t have the floppy ears), but we still categorize him as an elephant because that is the closest comparison we know of, and because we can only compare from the basis of the elephant which we know.□Since society has told us ‘this is what an elephant is’ and he fits under that category, then he is indeed that.□Although this sounds confusing it really isn’t so complicated.□To go back to the idea of skin complexion, some people may be considered to be black, white, or even yellow or red.□These people all have different skin tones, but is a black man’s skin not really more brown than black, and a white man’s skin more beige and pink rather than white?□To use the Saussurian terms, humanity has put a “signifier” in order to label the “signified,” and in this case the signifier might as well be that of an “elephant”.

Jean Piaget believed in a cognitive development theory which promoted the idea that when babies come into the world they do not know how to deal with the perceptive impressions around them, and must rely on assimilation and accommodation.□A baby that was just newly born would be witnessing unknown and strange experiences, and therefore the child would have to create a new set of rules called schemata that would work as a starting block to assimilate new experiences through impressions.□Each old impression would be influenced by the baby’s previous knowledge. This would be similar to people in general.□As a person has new experiences their impressions are impacted by previous knowledge.□□Piaget also said that “If impressions are too alien to be aligned to an older, already assimilated experience, they are either not perceived at all or give rise to the accommodation of those existing schemata, which are appropriately adjusted in order to include the new ‘exotic’ experience. With each of these assimilating or accommodating steps the child constructs another piece of reality.”□□This means that if the relationship between the signifier and the signified changes, and Dr. Z who was once labeled as “human being” was to be relabeled as ‘elephant,’ than the child would have to assimilate and accommodate with the new definition of social constructivism – without necessarily changing

his specific characteristics (i.e. the signified) (online 3).

“Essentialism is most commonly understood as a belief in the real, true essence of things, the invariable and fixed properties which define the 'whatness' of a given entity” (online 2). To be more specific, biological essentialism focuses on distinguishing between entities through physical characteristics. □ When *I* say that Dr. Z couldn't possibly be an elephant because he does not have floppy ears or four legs, but rather has little ears and only two legs, then *I* am using a form of biological essentialism to determine this. □ We use appearances to make assumptions in order to classify what we perceive. □ Perhaps it may seem that by using this type of classification one can't go wrong, but really we should not rely on it. We can not simply judge a book by its cover. □ If Dr.Z appears to be a human being, but his mind really works like that of an 'elephant', and then wouldn't he be an 'elephant'? □ If we rely on biological aspects to define our perspectives we encounter problems such as racism and sexism, where an entity is valued according to its physicality rather than it's interior substance. □ There are almost always exceptions to every rule. □ If Dr.Z decided to get his trunk exterminated and alter his physique through plastic surgery, and he appeared more like a human being than an elephant, it would still only be his nose which would differ. □ Would a lack of a trunk make him less of an elephant? □ No, in all fairness it wouldn't. □ Just like Rudolph is still a reindeer despite his red nose, Dr.Z is still an elephant despite his lack of trunk.

But really what the whole argument boils down to is the inevitable question of linguistics. □ We chose words to communicate a representation of ideas, and concepts (which include tangible objects). □ Being a form of communication we must address the Saussurian ideals of the signified symbolized by which can also be signified. A word, as Bourdieu (1987) suggests has been given authority to represent and speak on behalf of the represented. □ If you were born and your mother pointed at Dr.Z and said “elephant,” you would automatically assume that Dr.Z was none other than an “elephant.” □ After that, anything else that was similar to your first perception of “elephant” (i.e. anything that carries common characteristics to the first “elephant” you encountered) may also be considered to be an “elephant.” □ If your mother also informed you that the word 'human being' stood for our common perception of an “elephant,” then you would

assume that the “elephant” was a ‘human being’ and the ‘human being’ was an elephant. □ If your mother altered the rules of linguistics, and said that the “elephant” was really what you new as a ‘human being,’ and the ‘human being’ was really what you new as the “elephant”, you would be quite baffled. But before you were told that that wasn’t right, you never would have known. To you, the word elephant would probably be the signifier for what we see as a man.

Taking a quote from Lewis Carroll’s *Through the Looking Glass*, “When I use a word,” Humpty Dumpty said, in a rather scornful tone, “it means just what I choose it to mean - neither more nor less.” “The question is,” said Alice, “whether you can make words mean so many different things.” “The question is,” said Humpty Dumpty, “which is to be master - that's all” (online 4.)

This quote addresses the question of semantics and the study of the meaning of words, as well as who has the authority to create signifiers. For Michel Foucault (1971) authority to do this is given to the institution – any social arrangement. For Foucault authority to do this is given to the institution which is any social arrangement. To insinuate a conclusion to the constant bafflement of the origin of speech and language is beyond *my* comprehension. Each dialect must have had some kind of beginning – perhaps some person who had a reasonable amount of power was able to create another step in the foundation of building blocks of our constantly evolving languages. But either way, we have a form of communication with words that we can rely on to imply the signifier and the signified. We have tools to label surroundings with. But who is it that has the ability to create new words? Can *I*, a commoner, come up with the imaginary word ‘*falufalofuling*’ and expect it to be included in the next Canadian Oxford High School English dictionary? That would be quite improbable. *I* do not have the authority to do this. But if *I* began using the word myself, and its use became popular among *my* friends, and those friends inspired their families to adopt it, and the individuals of the families continued to spread the word through society until it became a word that was commonly used, perhaps *my* initiation of the use and the popularity of this new concept, have given me authority to create a new term. And what if *I* took this concept even further and said that *I* wanted to make elephant a polysemic word (i.e. one with a plurality of meanings.) If *I*

begin to refer to Dr. Z as an elephant, while not disregarding the initial meaning of the word elephant, and it becomes part of every day speech, then *I* have been “endowed” the ability to manipulate language because, contrary to Foucault’s belief, every person who can use language has the right to manipulate it apart from any institution. This would also make Dr. Z an elephant by the standards of my adaptation of the English language. If a political leader decided to rearrange or change many words in a language, such as Robespierre did during the terror of the French Revolution by changing the signifiers for the months of the years, then these new words would become the official terms (Newman, 2002) Therefore, if the government of Switzerland decided to label all philosophy teachers as elephants, then society would have to adapt and Dr. Z would, in fact, be an elephant (online 5.)

In conclusion, we have seen that societal surroundings decipher our reactions to our environment. We label according to our judgments which are greatly stimulated by those around us, such as is expressed by social constructions. This would mean that if society expressed the signifier of Dr. Z as elephant then that is what he would be. And if we were to change a label for a signified then a human being would most likely assimilate and accommodate, so that they would adapt to the new expressions and see Dr. Z as an “elephant.” Furthermore, just because Dr. Z does not appear to be an “elephant” according to biological essentialism doesn’t mean that he is not an “elephant,” because after all, looks can be deceiving! Suppose his innermost thought is exactly like that of which we call “elephant!” That would almost certainly make him more elephantine (with it’s plurality of meanings which I have manipulated as an example) than human! Moreover, we must not neglect the issue of linguistic development which was here proposed. You learn how to address your environment and experiences through words, so whatever signifier you have learnt will be what you use to label the signified. At least, unless a person with authority changes the name for the signified. In this case, although initially our English speaking context refers to Dr. Z as Dr. Z, *I* am hoping that *I* have the authority to create the new nick name of ‘Elephant’ for him, which will hopefully become a nickname that competes with that of Dr. Z and becomes a struggle over what signifier is becoming more common (Bauman, 2001) Therefore, hopefully you have been convinced that Dr. Z is indeed a pink elephant, which would mean that because

society has been taught to see Dr. Z as a pink elephant, Dr. Z is in fact a pink elephant! So what does that make of you? It seems to be human nature to create language to express what we witness, but with labels we are in fact almost limiting what we are seeing. Aren't we?

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