

Language as a Living Organism: A Corpus-based Study on Gramsci's Linguistic Philosophy

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Abstract: This paper explores the linguistic philosophical views of the Italian Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci through corpus analysis. By collecting, organizing, and analyzing Gramsci's collected works, this paper uncovers his core ideas and theoretical contributions in the field of linguistic philosophy. Section 1 introduces Gramsci's language research, outlining Gramsci's foray into language issues and the motivations driving his linguistic inquiries. Section 2 presents the research methods, with a particular elucidation on the Corpus. In section 3, through corpus analysis, key terms together with their grammatical and collocational structures are examined to uncover how his linguistic philosophical views are manifested and developed at both textual and contextual level. Furthermore, section 3 moves on to discuss Gramsci's ideas on language, based on the statistics significance of the corpus. The paper concludes in section 4 by summarizing the implications and ramifications of the views developed in the previous sections as well as providing new perspectives and insights for a deeper understanding of Gramsci's linguistic philosophical ideas.

Keywords: Gramsci, Linguistical Phylosopy, Language.

1. Introduction

Antonio Gramsci is one of the greatest philosophers of the 20th century who introduced many distinctive issues and key-concepts, such as cultural hegemony and organic intellectuals. Gramsci's philosophy stands out because of his focus on language, connecting it to human history and practice. He maintained a strong interest in language research and produced extensive study notes on language issues (Shupak, 2024). For example, in a letter to her sister-in-law Tatiana Schucht from prison, he mentioned four themes to be systematically studied in prison: the formation of the Italian spirit; comparative linguistics; the drama of Pirandello and the evolution of Italian theatrical tastes; and popular tastes in serialized newspapers novels. It is evident that language and literature held significant positions in Gramsci's prison research agenda. Despite the scattered nature of Gramsci's language research, he interwove the ideas of language study throughout the different sections of his practical philosophy. Through his study of language, Gramsci transformed the subject of philosophical inquiry, proposed an alternative path for revolution, and crafted a linguistic philosophical system. His contributions prompted deeper contemplation on the role of language in society and stimulated profound reflections and discussions on cultural, political, and social issues.

Influenced by philosophers such as Giambattista Vico and the idealist Benedetto Croce as well as the linguist Bartoli, Gramsci's language research relied on Italy's rhetorical and humanistic traditions (Brunello, 2024). During his studies at the University of Turin, Gramsci discussed linguistic issues with Bartoli. Bartoli proposed "new linguistics", opposing the language views of the new grammar school, emphasizing that language is a spiritual activity reflecting individual creativity and the application and alteration of individual will. Moreover, Croce emphasized the creative and expressive characteristics of language, viewing the philosophy of language as an artistic philosophy. Gramsci went further, asserting that language is not merely grammar and vocabulary, but an inseparable part of the historical processes intertwined with politics and

culture. By intertwining language with cultural creation, social history, and real politics, his attention to language extended into everyday life, highlighting distinct linguistic philosophical features (Boothman, 2012).

A review of the existing literature and a close scrutiny of the publications on Gramsci reveal a paucity of textual analyses of his works. The overwhelming majority of scholars, commentators, and critics, including several of those who made highly valued and widely acclaimed contributions to Gramscian studies, has either ignored or avoided dealing with the complexities and intricacies of the Gramscian oeuvre (see on literature (Brunello, 2022; 2024); on language (Buey, 2015; Boothman, 2020); on education (Nicholson, 2012; Mayo, 2015; Bertozzo, 2023; Martins and Bergamini, 2024; Jeice and Padmanabhan, 2024); and so many other researches on his famous cultural hegemony. This research aims to address the underexplored area of Gramsci's linguistic philosophy and fill this significant research gap by examining the full text data. Rigorous analyses of the text are surely needed, not only to address this gap in Gramscian studies but also to provide the grounds for richer, more reliable interpretations of Gramsci's overall legacy.

2. The Gramsci Linguistic Philosophy Corpus

The establishment of a dedicated corpus from Gramsci's collected works is essential for conducting a thorough analysis of his linguistic philosophy. This paper deeply roots in Gramsci's text, and close adherence to the text, which was collected from the website Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937) (marxists.org, www.marxists.org/archive/gramsci/). The primary corpus consists of Gramsci's collected works, including his letters from prison. The fourth-generation corpus analysis software, Sketch Engine, was employed to analyze the data. Sketch Engine is a leading corpus analytical tool and has been widely used in various disciplines. As illustrated in Figure 1 below, the Sketch Engine dashboard offers several key functions. One of its primary features is the

keyword function, which generates a list of words and word forms based on specific statistical criteria by identifying terms that occur with varying frequencies within the corpus. This function allows for the production of a keyword list, enhancing the basic frequency list by comparing the

frequency distributions of two distinct corpora. By contrasting a large general corpus with a smaller specialized one, this technique facilitates the identification of keywords unique to the latter, thereby enriching the analysis of Gramsci's linguistic philosophy.

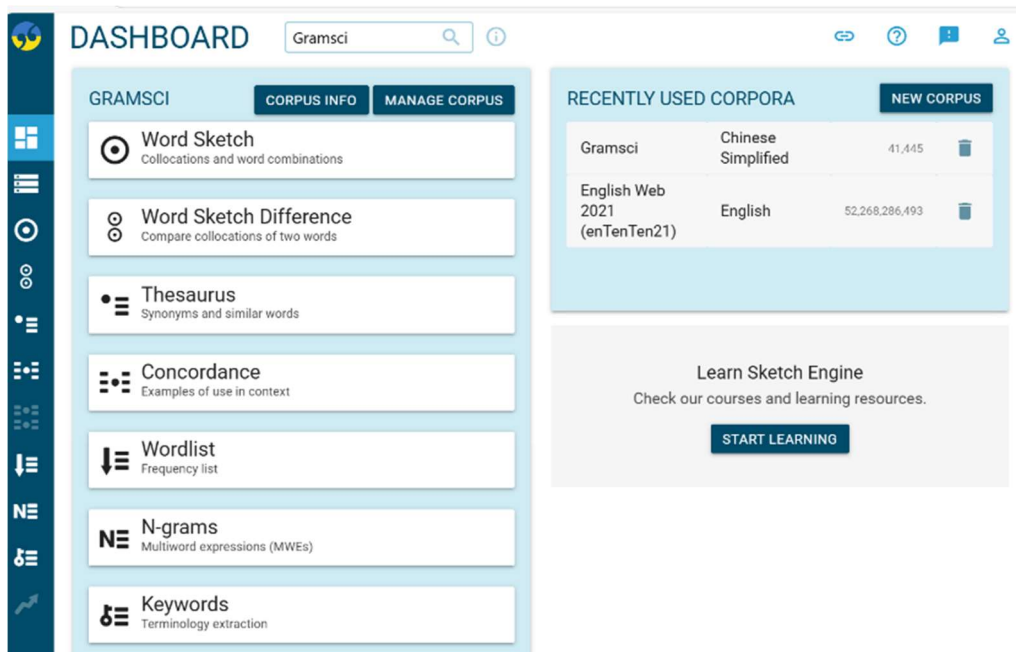


Figure 1. Sketch Engine

3. Linguistic Philosophical Views

This section delves into the linguistic philosophical views articulated by Gramsci through a detailed analysis of the identified keywords by Sketch Engine. This examination

reveals how these key words encapsulate the central themes and concepts within his thought, providing deeper insight into his linguistic philosophy.

3.1. Lingua and Linguaggio

Table 1. word sketch of “language”

And/or	Subject of	Object of	A-modifier	Possessor	N-Modifier	Possession
poetry	maintain	study	standard	previous	Linguistics	illusion
lingua	eliminate	speak	official	present	phenomenon	translatability
metaphor	rid	use	foreign	cultural	knowledge	content
	exert		academic	ethnic	problem	tendency
	symbolize		ethnic	political	philosophy	status
			daily	written	education	
			history	unified	idea	
					movement	

In Table 1, it can be seen that Sketch Engine has grouped the collocates of language into seven main grammatical patterns, or frames. The first column of Table 1 shows words that occur in the frame {language and/or x}. This pattern is useful in identifying other groups or issues that tend to get associated with language. Here, in the first column, the only group are poetry, langue, and metaphor. The second column {language + [verb]}, language is the subject (or doer) of the verb. The third column identify the opposite pattern, cases when language is the object (direct and indirect object) of the verb – or, rather, when language is the receiver of the action. The verbs (maintain, eliminate, rid, exert, symbolize) in the second column demonstrate the power of language.

The fifth and sixth columns in Table 1 are where language is modified by an adjective {[A-modifier] + language}. These adjective collocations are mainly political related, showing authority; or history related. Gramsci challenges the traditional perspective on language structure, transforming linguistics from a narrow natural science to a historical science. He emphasizes the variability and historical

development of language, shifting the focus of language research to the dimensions of time and space, rather than adhering to static structural concepts. This perspective brings new ways of thinking and research directions to the field of linguistics. The last two columns are noun modifiers {[N-modifier] + language}. These modifiers mainly indicate issues related to language, for example, {[good (domestic)] + women} and {[Western] + women}. Collocates in this column can be seen as issues that are related to women.

When a group of collocates of a particular word all have a similar meaning or function, then this can be called a semantic preference of that word (Stubbs, 2001). It is sometimes possible to take this kind of analysis a step further, particularly when a set of related collocates, examined in context, seems to suggest a particularly passive stance and thus reveals a discourse (or way of representing an aspect of the world). Table 2 Categories of Collocates for the word language can be called a semantic preference of that word (Stubbs, 2001).

Table 2. Categories of Collocates

Category	Collocates
types of language	poetry, linguistics, metaphor, lingua, written, daily, foreign, standard, unified, academic
authority	official, status, ethnic
	political, ethnical, cultural
history	present, previous,
verb	maintain, study, eliminate, speak, rid, use, exert, symbolize
problem	movement, translatability, problem, phenomenon, history, tendency, illusion, knowledge, content, philosophy, education, idea

These collocations possess academic and authoritative characteristics and strong political connotations. The North-South divide in Italy of course includes the fight for the power dynamics of language. Bartoli's spatial linguistics theory suggests that there is competition between languages, where the languages of more economically and culturally developed regions influence the languages of neighbouring subordinate regions. In other words, language is a product of conflict, and language choices entail political and cultural struggles. This viewpoint significantly influenced Gramsci. Within a country, among south and north, different social classes, there may also be influences. This demonstrates that Gramsci's believes that language is not just a creation of human intelligence; one cannot discuss the essence or changes of language without considering the social environment. He views the process of language change as a political metaphor for the formation of cultural hegemony, where the acquisition of cultural leadership in civil society is gradually achieved through a process akin to "molecular infiltration".

Gramsci vehemently opposes the mechanical and rigid scientific empiricism research methods that simply examine language evolution starting from phonetic or written forms. In Gramsci's view, the variability of word meanings, language forms, and speech patterns is primarily due to their national and cultural characteristics. He argues that differences in language writing forms, oral expression patterns, and cognitive methods of understanding the world emerge from various factors such as geographical location, natural environment, customs, religious beliefs, ethical practices, stages of social historical development, and levels of productivity within different countries and ethnic groups (Francese, 2023).

The following subsections each focus on one key word generated in section 3.1 respectively: history, politics, philosophy and culture.

3.2. History

Modern linguists, Saussure for instance, tend to assume a static, ahistorical language structure (Carpinelli, 2024). However, as said, Gramsci challenges this static view of language structure. He argues that language is a dynamic system that evolves over time, reflecting the changing social dynamics and cultural influences in a society. Gramsci holds that language contains social-historical content, asserting that even non-natural languages carry limited social-historical content. He emphasizes the historical generation and variability of word meanings, viewing this historical materialist approach to language as central to his theory. Gramsci's perspective challenges traditional views on language structure, shifting linguistics from a narrow natural

science to a historical science rather than adhering to static structural notions (Boldo, 2023).

In his exploration of language history, Gramsci pays attention to the ways in which language shapes and is shaped by social interactions, power relations, and historical events. Gramsci's approach to studying language history delves deeply into the social-historical content embedded within language. He emphasizes that language is not just a tool for communication, but a reflection of social relations, power dynamics, and historical contexts. By analyzing dialects, vocabulary, and linguistic structures, Gramsci uncovers the historical development of language and how it reflects the evolving social consciousness and cultural practices of a society. By examining the origins of words, the evolution of linguistic structures, and the ways in which language is used in different contexts, Gramsci uncovers the historical roots of language and its role in shaping social reality. Through his study of language history, the philosophical qualities and cultural functions of language are further explored, forming the foundation of Gramsci's unique linguistic political theory. He believes that the history of language is the history of human culture, and this viewpoint has brought new ways of thinking and research directions to the field of linguistics.

Firstly, Gramsci did not have a concept of metalanguage. He never believed that language possesses essence or core that transcends history. On the contrary, he viewed language as a manifestation of culture and philosophy and as a crucial component of social reality. Gramsci posited that language arises alongside human practice, and its formation and evolution are natural historical processes. Because of this, the question of language origin is unresolvable, as it is impossible to find historical documents that record the origin of language.

In the 1860s, however, Alessandro Manzoni advocated for the enforced promotion of a unified standard Italian, specifically the Tuscan dialect, through administrative orders. In contrast, the Italian Socialist Party proposed the use of Esperanto as the standard Italian language. These singular language proposals were criticized by several Italian intellectuals. Gramsci sharply criticized both practices, asserting that "even a national language cannot be artificially created by state command; the Italian language has evolved organically, and it only comes into being when the common life of the state establishes numerous and stable connections among its parts; the dissemination of a particular language arises from the writing, trade, and productive activities of its speakers. (Gramsci, 1991, p 28)" Being disconnected from its living context would constrain or distort people's thoughts, turning language into a mechanical and rigid dead tongue. For Gramsci, real language should encompass broad social and historical content; the transformation of language encapsulates shifts in "cultural, political, moral, and emotional environments." In other words, language changes in accordance with historical developments. It is under this circumstance that Gramsci pointed out, "the history of language is the history of linguistic innovation, but these innovations are not individual (art is one such case); instead, they emerge from a complete social group renewing its culture and achieving historical progress. Inevitably, individuals will emerge, but these are not artistically individualistic figures; rather, they are complete, determinate historical and cultural elements. (Gramsci, 1991, p 177-178)" Thus, the transformation of language is a spontaneous process that must arise organically from the grassroots rather than through top-down imposition.

Secondly, Gramsci regarded language as a historical process of semantic evolution. The social and historical differences reflected in language give rise to what positivists call “barriers” or “sources of misunderstanding”. To pursue precision in scientific expression, Pareto proposed a set of solutions to avoid the misunderstandings generated by metaphors or figurative meanings in language. Gramsci criticized this assertion to “arbitrarily create new words”, arguing that a language cannot exist arbitrarily from its metaphorical or extended meanings. In modern societies where language systems are well-established, vocabulary always exists in metaphorical meanings; for instance, the term “disaster” originally derived from astrology, yet no one today associates it with divination. Consequently, Gramsci concluded, “The entirety of language is a continuous metaphorical process, and semantic history is an aspect of cultural history; simultaneously, language is both a living entity and a museum of the fossils of life and civilization. (Gramsci 2000, p 363)” It is in this sense that Gramsci claimed that linguists are fundamentally historians.

Lastly, Gramsci’s absolute historicism underscores human creative activity, diminishing non-human static factors in historical research, highlighting the movement and openness inherent to human practical cultural creativity. Gramsci’s perspective accentuates historical dynamism and the importance of human cultural development, emphasizing human creativity’s active role in historical processes. By delving into human practices and creative activities, a better understanding of historical development and cultural evolution can be achieved, and historicism is a linguistic matter. Absolute historicism is closely tied to human practical cultural creativity, as individuals live within real language and cultural environments, engaging in actual cultural creative activities. The theoretical viewpoints of absolute historicism provide a significant framework and concepts in understanding historical and cultural processes.

3.3. Politics and Grammar

Gramsci’s linguistic research transcended theoretical exploration, intimately linking to real political issues, focusing on everyday life language use. Gramsci identified two key aspects of language: intrinsic grammar and normative grammar. The intrinsic grammar refers to “the implicit rules by which people speak—rules that they may not be consciously aware of but operate within the structure of language itself”. This intrinsic grammar can be found across various languages and is characterized by its universality and spontaneity. In contrast, normative grammar resembles the codified rules found in modern grammar, deliberate and goal-oriented, serving primarily to facilitate a better learning of the language through explicit explanations of its structure. Gramsci believed that normative grammar arises from political choices concerning intrinsic grammar, representing a conscious organization of diverse intrinsic grammars. The function of normative grammar is to enable clearer and more precise expression, aiding individuals in establishing critical and systematic worldviews (Boothman, 2020).

Traditional linguists often attribute the formation of normative grammar to historical traditions or logical choices. In their analysis of grammar, they tend to focus on linguistic features while neglecting the political dimensions of grammar. For Gramsci, the formation of normative grammar is not a logical choice detached from social life, but rather a consequence of the competition between various intrinsic

grammars, an unavoidable result of political selections. For Italians whose intrinsic grammars diverge from standard Italian, this normative grammar represents an externally imposed choice. Moreover, when those who adopt normative grammar leave their local communities, they often propagate this grammar among those around them (Buey, 2015).

Furthermore, Gramsci emphasized the close relationship between language issues and real political matters. He argued that learning a language is not merely about engaging in literary or rhetorical studies; it also involves disseminating critical methods of new culture, creating consistency and coherence in culture, and reaching the heights of advanced world thought. He pointed out that language is not merely a system of signifiers; it embodies a comprehensive set of ideas carrying specific worldviews. However, much like the fragmentary nature of common sense, the worldview expressed in language can also be disorganized and incoherent.

Italy’s linguistic landscape is notably complex. Since the fall of the Roman Empire, countless dialects have emerged, leading to significant localism and national conflicts. “某个只讲方言或者对于标准语言不甚了了的人，必定对世界具有一种或多或少受到限制的、地域性的直觉。比之于支配世界历史的主要思潮，这种直觉陈腐而不合时宜。他的利益是狭隘的或多或少是团体或经济主义的，而不是普遍的。Someone who speaks only a dialect or has a limited understanding of the standard language is bound to have a somewhat restricted and regional intuition about the world... Their interests are often narrow and group-oriented or economic rather than universal (Gramsci, 2000, p233).” Thus, establishing a unified national language becomes both necessary and urgent, as it serves as the premise for unifying the people’s will and thoughts. In other words, to elevate the fragmented and often conflicting worldviews into a unified ideology, it is essential to replace local dialects with a national standard language. Gramsci opposed using administrative coercion to promote a single language, arguing instead that the people should spontaneously adhere to certain linguistic standards. This notion ties into Gramsci’s theory of intellectuals; he suggested that we should not define intellectuals based on the distinction between mental and manual labor, but seek the essence of intellectuals within the overall social relations. In his view, a detachment from the masses defines “traditional intellectuals,” while those who consciously maintain contact with the people and undertake organizing and educational roles are categorized as “organic intellectuals.” “The ‘spontaneous’ recognition given by the masses to the overall direction imposed on social life by the ruling group is exercised culturally through organic intellectuals”. Therefore, intellectuals must take on the task of establishing a unified national language, and one important avenue for this is educating the masses in “normative grammar”.

The recognition and support of the ruled classes have become internalized in their linguistic habits and life principles according to Gramsci. On the communicative level, due to the permeation of language and culture, civil society firmly grasps the perspective of the ruled classes toward the struggle between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie through various channels and means. To change their subordinated position, the proletariat must utilize their culture and unique language to occupy civil society and seize cultural hegemony. This perspective underscores the importance of language,

culture, and ideology in the political and social arenas, as well as how these channels can facilitate social transformation and shifts in power.

3.4. Philosophy

Gramsci critiqued the Western rationalist trends that advocate for science and reason, arguing that the negative effects of science and rationality have led to a severe conflict between the human and material worlds (Bertozzo, 2023). He believed that the root cause of this conflict lies in the inherent nature of humanity and the absence of a philosophical focus on the humanistic world. Unlike traditional philosophical inquiries that consider material or spiritual entities external to humanity, Gramsci's philosophical study emphasizes human nature and the humanistic realm. He opposed the use of economic and natural scientific methods as rational tools of philosophy, advocating instead for a return to the tradition of rhetorical studies in Italy, positioning language as the rational instrument for exploring human nature. Through linguistic analysis, Gramsci sought to reexamine the relationship between human nature and the humanistic world, aiming to forge a philosophical path that transcends conventional science and rationality. This philosophical perspective challenges traditional modes of thinking and steers philosophical thought in a new direction.

Gramsci explored the relationship between everyday life and the construction of worldviews, elucidating both the critical and non-critical influences of language on philosophy. Individuals form their worldviews within the contexts of language, everyday knowledge, and popular religion, encompassing both compliant and accepted views as well as critical and creative worldviews. Gramsci asserted that "everyone is a philosopher", contending that philosophy is not a specialized intellectual pursuit engaged in solely by professional philosophers; rather, it is an inherent "spontaneous philosophy" that is manifested in language, "common sense", folklore, and other cultural forms of thought. His viewpoint underscores the intimate relationship between language and philosophy, positing that philosophy is embedded within language itself, rather than being merely a collection of vocabulary. Gramsci noted that this philosophy exists not only within language but also in everyday knowledge, common sense, and popular religion, forming a set of folk beliefs, viewpoints, lifestyles, and modes of action for individuals. These ideas highlight the philosophical dimension present in human beings within their cultural contexts, emphasizing the close connection between individuals and society, as well as the crucial role that language and culture play in shaping an individual's worldview.

Moreover, Gramsci pointed out that people's worldviews should not merely adhere to the acceptance of language, everyday knowledge, and religion; instead, they ought to critically disseminate new cultures, transforming them into the foundation for practical activities and serving as elements for collective coordination and action, as well as for the spiritual and moral structures of individuals. He stressed the importance of creativity and criticality in thought and the active participation in historical processes, which are essential for establishing one's own critical and systematic worldview. These viewpoints further emphasize the importance of the individual in shaping their worldview within linguistic and cultural contexts while highlighting the role of critical thinking in creative endeavors.

3.5. Culture

Further to the discussion in section 3.4, Gramsci argued, if language remains on the philosophical level, it tends to be dispersed and unsystematic (Jeice and Padmanabhan, 2024), as "there is no general philosophy; there are only various philosophies or worldviews (Gramsci, 2000, p 235)". To elevate this dispersed will to a "collective will", it is essential to transition linguistic expressions at the philosophical level (dialects) to those at the cultural level (a unified national language). Philosophy signifies particularity, while culture embodies universality. Gramsci acknowledged the significance of culture early in his work. In his text "Socialism and Culture", he opposed the positivist view that regards culture merely as an encyclopedic repository of knowledge. Instead, he believed that culture is the self-awareness through which individuals recognize their historical value and role; however, it does not emerge spontaneously but requires a certain stage of socio-historical development to mature. While Gramsci's thoughts during his imprisonment were evidently more mature and systematic than in his earlier writings, his views on culture remained unchanged. He later provided a clearer definition of culture as "the moral, lifestyle, and principles guiding individual and social action," characterized as "a thorough, unified, and widely shared 'conception of life and humanity' throughout the nation. Thus, culture signifies a deep-level unity among people in terms of thought and consciousness. As previous discussed, language to some extent, signifies coherence and consistency; in this sense, it is also an embodiment of culture. Consequently, he prioritized the language problems in his cultural studies: "I feel that if language is understood as

an element of culture, and thus of general history, a key manifestation of the 'nationality' and 'popularity' of the intellectuals, this study is not pointless and merely erudite. 1991, P 169-170." Historical actions can only be completed by the 'collective person'; for a 'cultural-social' unity to be achieved, it must be premised on the heterogeneous objectives and diverse, decentralized wills being united by a common purpose grounded in an equal worldview... Hence, the question of language, which involves collectively achieving a unified cultural 'climate', becomes profoundly significant.

4. Conclusion

Within the framework of Gramsci's thought, language emerges as a dynamic and living entity—an integral aspect of human experience that shapes and reflects societal structures. Our findings indicate that Gramsci's ideas on language extend beyond traditional confines of grammar and semantics, positioning language as a medium through which cultural and political identities are formed and contested. His theory of meaning, with its emphasis on the contextual and historical dimensions of linguistic expression, provides valuable insights into how individuals and communities negotiate their experiences and assert their agency.

The implications of Gramsci's linguistic philosophical views extend far beyond his time, offering new perspectives for contemporary discussions on the role of language in society. His work prompts deeper consideration of how language influences not only individual consciousness but also collective social movements and cultural practices. By engaging critically with Gramsci's theories, scholars, practitioners, and activists can better understand the ways in

which language serves as both a tool for liberation and a site of struggle. Ultimately, Gramsci's linguistic philosophy invites us to rethink our approach to language as a vibrant force in shaping the human experience, challenging us to recognize and harness the power of language in the pursuit of social justice and cultural transformation.

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