

# LANGUAGE THROUGH THE LENS OF HERACLITUS'S LOGOS

NATASHA WILTZ

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## ABSTRACT

This paper deals with Heraclitus's understanding of Logos and how his work can help us understand various components of language: why language exists, how communication and understanding (of that communication) occurs, and how translation is possible. In addition, it addresses the misconceptions that arise when language is not understood in terms of Heraclitus's Logos.

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Heraclitus is a Greek philosopher who lived in the 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C. Perhaps one of his most important contributions to philosophy is his insistence on the existence of the One and the Many. The One being *Logos*, which unites the entirety of reality and the Many being all diverse things that commonly share in the Logos, yet have unique identities. He portrays this idea most explicitly in the following fragment: "Things taken together are whole and not whole, <something which is> being brought together brought apart, in tune and out of tune, out of all things there comes a unity, and out of a unity all things."<sup>1</sup> This paper will attempt to understand Heraclitus's thought by applying his philosophical claims to a universally accessible example, language. Through this approach, it will be concluded that for Heraclitus the most important knowledge is the understanding of the Logos, because by perpetually uniting everything the Logos allows each thing to have an identity, opposites, and the experience of change and harmony.

Logos, for Heraclitus, is the rational order that underlies nature. Since Logos is the objective, eternal, and uniting principle of nature, Heraclitus posits that it is of utmost importance for man to discover and understand it. However, man's lack of reasoning, misuse of sense perception and perpetual contact with the Logos obscures man's ability to discover and understand its existence. For Heraclitus, people too often understand solely what is most obvious

and derived from the senses yet is of the least importance. The Logos, though, which is most important to learn, is “hidden” in nature because one cannot sense the Logos; rather, one must discover and understand the Logos through reason. Since in a constant relation with Logos, man often finds it difficult to identify it as the cause and uniting factor of change, identity, opposites, and harmony. This is also true of the role of rational thought in language. Rational thought is something that all men are in constant contact with, yet what is most obviously perceived is not rational thought itself, but the means through which it is communicated: language. Failing to understand rational thought as the cause of language can lead man to believe a variety of falsehoods. For example, a person may believe that since there is no language that is the same in sound, structure, or culture, then there must not be any common rational thought. Heraclitus’s fragment refutes that erroneous reasoning by arguing that man should not understand the existence of a multiplicity of languages as evidence for a lack of common rational thought; instead, one should understand that languages have their own identity, are utilized for communication, and can be translated into one another solely due to the fact that rational thought commonly underlies them all. In order to evaluate how Heraclitus aids man in this understanding, it is proper to break this fragment into parts, first analyzing each part separately and then interpreting the fragment as a whole.

When Heraclitus says that “things taken together are whole and not whole,” he is stating that it is due to an underlying Logos that a thing has an identity independent of other things.<sup>2</sup> If Logos in nature is the common rational order underlying all things, then Logos in man is the universal capacity of rational thought. If Logos is rational thought, then language is the device by which rational thought is communicated in a rational pattern. All language is part of rational thought, for language depends on rational thought for its existence. However, a particular language is a whole in itself in the sense that it has a unique rational pattern and identity that is distinguishable from all other languages. Language being whole presupposes being a part. What Heraclitus seems to state here then is that all things depend on Logos for their existence. In the same way that language is whole and distinct because it is first a *part* of rational thought, all things are whole and

have a distinct identity because first they are a part of Logos.

Heraclitus's next statement, that "<something which is> being brought together and brought apart" expresses that things can be united, separated, or changed only because there is an unchanging Logos.<sup>3</sup> In regard to language, rational thought is what allows for translation. Let us say that there is a piece of work in German that will be translated to English. The Logos of the piece is the rational thought that the author meant to communicate in the rational pattern of the German language. Now, when translating this piece, one must separate the rational thought of the piece from the rational pattern (German) that communicated it. Then, one must unite the rational thought with another rational pattern (English). Although one has changed the identity of the piece by changing its language, the rational thought remains unchanged. In fact, the reason why one can separate and unite language to rational thought is precisely because rational thought is universal and unchanging. Thus, when Heraclitus makes this claim he is stating that it is because there is an unchanging and common Logos within nature that things can be brought together and brought apart.

Heraclitus states that things can be "in tune and out of tune," or have harmony, only due to an underlying Logos.<sup>4</sup> When communicating, individuals generally require for the conversation to be in a language that both parties can understand and speak. The listener of the conversation is considered to be "in tune" as long as he understands the rational thought that the other is attempting to communicate by means of a mutually known rational pattern. In this case, the transfer of rational thought from one unique individual to another unique individual has taken place smoothly, almost as if there were a connection. However, when the listener does not speak the language that is being spoken to him, he does not understand the rational pattern and thus cannot abstract the rational thought communicated to him. He is out of tune because there is no connection via rational pattern (language). The two do not give up and determine that they will never understand each other. On the contrary, they proceed to find a third party that can understand both languages and translate between them. Every time that one does this (seek a translator), one is acknowledging the existence of a Logos common to all that can be discovered and

understood as long as one is in the same “tune,” or language. In this part of the fragment then, Heraclitus seems to be making the point that it is only because of a Logos that things can be in tune with or connect with similar things. It is only because of the underlying Logos that all of nature can be related, and often it is during the times that things are “out of tune,” like in the case of two people being unable to communicate, that the Logos becomes apparent.

The last part of the fragment, which states that “out of all things there comes a unity, and out of a unity all things” provides the reason for why Logos is the cause of identity, opposites, change, and harmony: Logos is unity.<sup>5</sup> In other words, it is precisely the unity of all things that allows for identity, opposites, change, and harmony to exist. It is because there is first rational thought in man that language can arise and claim an identity unique from other languages. Moreover, it is only because rational thought is common to all that communication itself can occur both with those who speak the same language and those who do not. In short, unity (universality) in rational thought is the cause of language itself and its diversity. Heraclitus is then claiming that because there is a uniting, underlying Logos, diversity exists, and it is when one *abstracts* the unity from the immense diversity, that one can discover the Logos.

In this short fragment, Heraclitus has described Logos as the rational order in which all things must have a part in order to exist, to establish a unique identity distinguishable from all other things, to change, or to be in or out of tune with other things. Logos, therefore, is of monumental importance for man to understand; however, discovering the Logos is difficult, because in addition to being “hidden,” the senses indicate that all there is in reality is a diversity of things. One can never perceive two of the same person, tree, or cloud, because all things are unique and are constantly changing. Also the senses do not perceive order itself, rather the effect of it, which can be misleading. Likewise, one never encounters a language that is exactly the same as one’s own nor does one perceive rational thought itself; instead, one perceives the variety of ways it is communicated. The senses tell one that there is absolutely no unity among all the changing reality and the unique languages that one perceives. Yet, that is what Heraclitus disproves in this fragment. He explains how all the changes and diversity one

perceives are possible only because of an underlying Logos. It is because there is a common rational thought that language itself exists, that communication takes place, and that translation occurs. Therefore, it is only when one understands the Logos in the way that Heraclitus has indicated that one can claim to understand what language truly is, or for that matter, all of what *reality* is.

## NOTES

1. Richard D. McKirahan ed., *Philosophy Before Socrates: An Introduction with Texts and Commentary* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2010), DK 22 B10.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid.