

INEFFABILITY AS A LINGUISTIC PROBLEM

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Abstract

The paper deals with the problem of ineffability – intuitively felt unsayability of certain mental contents that are mainly concerned with our sensual domain – and tries to transfer this notion from philosophy into the domain of cognitive linguistics. It demonstrates that in both day-to-day communication and, especially, in the language of literature, ineffability is relativized through various strategies – trivialization, deixis, verbal ellipsis, and figurativity – of which the latter is of utmost importance. The recognition of the role of figurative language in the communication of the ineffable opens up new cognitive horizons both for the notion itself and for the verbal art, which is its principal realm.

Keywords: phenomenal consciousness, qualia, phenomeme, figurative language, ineffability

1. Introduction

For centuries, INEFFABILITY was viewed as a purely philosophical problem – somewhat peripheral even to the field itself due to its presumptive ties with the practices of mysticism and various religions (Gáb 2020). However, once cognitive approaches had started to dominate in all major domains of the humanities, interest in the ineffable ran high, as it clearly manifests itself as a mental phenomenon of an exceptional force, especially for the sensory and aesthetic spheres. The actual inclusion of ineffability into scholarly discourse followed the renunciation of the computational paradigm of the human mind in favor of a more holistic picture, in which verbal communication reigns supreme, linguistic meanings are intersubjective, and speech itself is a form of social behavior (Kravchenko 2007). With that in mind, this paper, conceived of as a headnote for a larger and still ongoing study of the new cognitive uses of figurativity, makes an attempt at transferring the notion of ineffability from pure philosophy to (cognitive) linguistics by asserting that rather than being an instance of verbal closure, the ineffable is, in fact, intrinsic to language.

I start with a brief overview of what is essential to the notion of ineffability in a broad sense and of the perspectives that were used to study the phenomenon, with a particular focus on its language-related effects. The account of the types, sources, and main implications of ineffability is followed by a discussion of the relativization effort based on recent advances in cognitive science and communication studies. The aim of the paper is thus to showcase, through carefully selected arguments, that what was long been considered as ineffable is overtly (although not exhaustively, and even less so – directly) communicable through various strategies, of which figurative language is of special prominence and research potential. Some prospects of further study, especially within the frameworks of discourse analysis and cognitive poetics, are also outlined with the aim of articulating certain practical dimensions of the problem.

2. Ineffability: towards the notion

There is a conviction, shared by much of the general public and scholars alike, that our public language is the most appropriate medium for articulate thought – that we appear to think with language, one way or another, hence it should be virtually unfailing in its power to communicate ideas of whatever level of complexity. This sentiment is epitomized in Searle's *principle of expressibility* – “whatever can be meant can be said” – that has since become a foundational maxim for positivist thinking (1969: 19). Although we might have all practical reasons to believe so, there is another widespread intuition of equal force, which contradicts Searle's dictum and holds that the linguistic mode of expression must have its inherent constraints, for every now and then we do encounter instances of verbal failure when putting some of our mental contents into words becomes strangely problematic.

One way to verify this intuition is to consider the relations between language and our sensual domain. On one level, we are endowed with the ability to introspect and meta-cognitively process the sensory contents of our minds (normally, still in the presence of covert speech); but on another, this introspective process often reveals a gap between the impressionistic richness of what is accessible to our “mind's eye” and those routine linguistic structures that we use for day-to-day communication. When one admires the grandeur of a natural landscape, or experiences intense romantic feelings towards someone else of their own species, or simply has a mug of refreshing coffee on a cold winter morning, they might realize that the common verbal labels that we use to refer to the feelings that thus emerge – *amazement, love, or invigoration* – do not do justice to the actual contents of our minds, either at this very instance or retrospectively. Observing this imbalance engenders the insight that our affective states, at least to a degree, are somewhat beyond the linguistic horizon: each time we try to communicate them, we are beset with the sense of their INEFFABILITY – the inability, for one reason or another, of being put into words.

The idea that the human language has its own boundaries, that not all aspects of reality and of lived experience can be conveyed through words has always been a part of philosophy – as a self-evident truth, a polemical claim, or a metaphor (Janowitz 2018). Augustine, Schopenhauer, Adorno, Nietzsche, Kant – almost all great philosophers before the second half of the 20th century touched upon the question of ineffable experiences, be they aesthetic, religious, or mystical, but made no attempt at the systematic analysis of ineffability, most probably due to the persistent tradition of brushing off the marginal, of not attaching significance to things unsaid, unwritten, or unobserved. Nevertheless, after the so-called “linguistic turn” had stirred up things, ineffability became a legitimate object of analysis, in many ways through the effort of Wittgenstein, the closing thesis of whose “*Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*” runs as: “Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one should be silent” (2014: 89). In line with an outdated, but still widespread interpretation, what the philosopher asserts is that opinions on certain subjects – namely, metaphysics, ontology, ethics, and aesthetics that are devoid of empirically tested contents – cannot be formulated non-controversially by means of natural language, hence, talking of them is meaningless. A more comprehensive analysis of the claim reveals, however, that Wittgenstein did not nullify these as truths or objects of knowledge: rather, he considered them inexpressible, something of which we are bound to be silent (Nordmann 2005).

Fictional writing, where ineffability figures prominently, is another trusted source of evidence. In his essay “*Cybernetics and Ghosts*”, Calvino puts it bluntly: “The struggle of literature is in fact to escape from the confines of language; it stretches out from the utmost limit of what can be said; what stirs literature is the call and attraction of what is not in the dictionary” (1986: 16). Thus, the protagonist of Poe's short story “*Ms. Found in a Bottle*” remarks at some point: “A feeling, for which I have no name, has taken possession of my soul – a sensation which will admit of no analysis, to which the lessons of by-gone times are inadequate, and for which I fear the futurity itself will offer me no key” (2003: 57). The visual artist O'Keeffe, on a different note, admits the futility of words for her own work, since “the meaning of a word to me is not as exact as the meaning of a color. Colors and shapes make a more definite statement than words” (quoted by Arbib 2014: 201).

At the end of the day, all this can lead one to think that our language is not an adequate medium for the communication of sensory contents altogether, since, as Langer once observed, it only “names certain vaguely and crudely conceived states, but fails miserably in any attempt to convey the ever-moving patterns, the ambivalence and intricacies of inner experience, the interplay of feelings with thoughts and impressions” (1942: 100). Our day-to-day communication seems to support this assumption: it will suffice to think of how often we either prefer to stay silent or resort to obscure openings like “Words cannot express...”, similarly to Poe’s fictional character. If this intuition of ineffability is valid, the next questions are: *what* is exactly ineffable, *why* is it so, and *how* do we handle this complication in reality if we need the message to somehow come through?

3. The *what* and *why* of the ineffable

The oldest known distinction with regards to ineffability that was already prominent in early medieval philosophy is the one between ineffable *objects* and ineffable *properties* (Hofweber 2016: 15–20). The former have long been the cornerstone of religious discourse; thus, to Moses’s question what its name is, God replies: “I am who I am”, signaling its own ineffability. Ineffable entities thus understood would include, among others, the Dao of the classical Chinese philosophy, the Logos of the Ancient Greeks, the One of the neo-Platonics, and the Absolut of Hegel. They are ineffable by virtue of our inability to produce true assertions on their account since suitable predicates are nowhere to be found – in metaphysics, such objects are also termed as “bare particulars”, that is, entities devoid of nature and properties. Ineffable *properties* are close in meaning: although the logic of language guides us to the use of predicates in relation to objects, if the latter lack representational structures, ineffability necessarily arises. Such are the properties of God: “good”, “benevolent”, “eternal”, or “gracious” are used for simplification and are predicated on our mind’s anthropomorphic tendencies.

The very possibility of ineffable objects and properties has been repeatedly found logically inconsistent; moreover, supernatural entities as such ceased to be in the focus of philosophical analysis centuries ago. In more recent works on the subject, for instance in extensive research by Jonas, it is certain types of *experiences* that are ineffable (2017). Of these, the following are of major relevance: sensual (where mystical ideation is a subclass), aesthetic, and abstract – related to various complex ideas of, for instance, “infinity” and the like (Zwicky 2012: 198). Aesthetic and sensual ineffability are, in their turn, intricately related – if not collapsible into one – and are of major importance, for abstract ineffability takes us back to the inherently paradoxical discourse of ineffable objects and properties. On account of the former, Langer once remarked that

every work of art expresses, more or less purely, more or less subtly, not feelings and emotions which the artist has, but feelings and emotions which the artist knows [...] Such knowledge is not expressible in ordinary discourse [...]. Verbal statement [...] is almost useless for conveying knowledge about the precise character of our affective life (1942: 91).

A practical way of treating ineffable content is based on the distinction between its being *propositional* and *non-propositional*: while the former can be verbalized as a matter of course – since it represents facts – the latter represents what is thinkable, but is unsayable for the lack of a propositional structure. A paradigmatic example of non-propositional content is color with its infinite array of shades:

Imagine a colour spectrum for varieties of red: we might have a concept for ‘vermillion’ and ‘scarlet’, maybe also for ‘carmine’ and ‘crimson’, but definitely not for every single one of the infinitely many kinds of red (Jonas 2017: 6).

This content can also be conceptualized as some kind of knowledge, more precisely, as *knowledge-how*, or procedural knowledge, as opposed to *knowledge-what*, or propositional knowledge. While

the latter can be conceived of as a set of propositions (the history of Ancient Greece, quantum mechanics, etc.), the former (swimming, riding a bike, etc.) is a skill that cannot be exhausted verbally (Lewis 1990).

This distinction certainly brings us much closer to the cognitive sense of ineffability as a signal of disparity between non-verbal thought and language, while the taxonomy developed by Liang, another prominent researcher of the subject, makes it even more apparent. Specifically, he differentiates between the following ineffabilities (2011: 31–32).

1. **Lexicogrammatical ineffability** means the impossibility of verbalizing a certain concept in a given language through a lexeme or a grammatical structure. The most obvious case in point is the mismatch between the names of color shades in different languages, but there are certainly more to this: the English *sibling* that has to be treated as either *one's brother* or *one's sister* in most other languages, the Portuguese *saudade*, the Spanish *duende*, and the German *Waldeinsamkeit*, which stands for the feeling of loneliness while walking in a forest, to mention just a few.

2. **Pragmatic ineffability**, which arises when producing linguistic utterances on a given occasion turns out to be “infelicitous” for the speaker. Most of the examples can be found in Austin’s “How to do things with words”: if one is not vested with a special authority, they cannot declare two people spouses, name a ship, or proclaim a war on another country (1975). This type of ineffability, following loosely the terminology of Austin, is “unperformability”, that is, the inability to perform a desired action by uttering an existing verbal formula.

3. **Cognitive ineffability** is related to the speaker’s inability to epistemically entertain a thought due to their cognitive limitations. If even the smartest of our pets, primates included, cannot conceptualize the world’s economic crisis, or the fundamentals of quantum physics, why, when it comes to language-enabled humans, should we not likewise assume that we are “cognitively closed” from various aspects of reality, for instance, from the “hard problem of consciousness”, as the famous piece by McGinn suggests (2004)?

4. **Pathological ineffability** means a speaker’s inability to produce certain utterances due to a physical damage to the brain area. In this sense, the widely known case of aphasia is the prime example, as subjects suffering from this disorder cannot produce and adequately process either metaphors or metonymies, or both.

5. **Logico-syntactic ineffability** arises when speakers have to face the logical illegitimacy of what they intend to say. Some of the famous examples would include the Heideggerian maxim that “Nothing nothings” (2001: 78), Chomsky’s “Colorless green ideas sleep furiously” (1979: 100) and the names of disciplines from Eco’s “academy of unnecessary sciences”: Aztecs’ horse-breeding, silent film phonetics, contemporary Sumerian literature, etc. (1986: 32). This sort of ineffability may be re-formulated as an attempt to use legitimate words in illegitimate combinations, which creates a paradox – most often, a paradox of self-referentiality.

Liang refers to these five varieties of ineffability as *pseudo* or *disguised*, since all of them are transient and context-dependent: lexico-grammatical would vary from one linguistic community to another; pragmatic and pathological are rectified by a change in the speaker’s social or health status; logico-syntactic can, as most other paradoxes, be resolved by weakening the premises; and cognitive is either indefensible or may wither away with time, at least in some aspects, as technology progresses. Liang, however, goes on to mention another type of ineffability, which is *genuine* on his approach and is termed “phenomenal”, as this is the ineffability of the so-called phenomenal content, or of the subjective sensory content of our minds – bodily sensations and psychological emotions or moods (2011: 33). What needs to be stressed here – and what is the principal reason for maintaining the intuition of such content being ineffable – is its subjectivity, i.e. its being

inaccessible to other minds. Indeed, in contrast with facts of reality that can be verified, at least in theory, whatever we know of the sensual mental content of others would be based on their behavior, of which verbal reports are an important sub-class. This ineffability cannot be ruled out, for it relies on the impossibility to be someone else and to fully appropriate someone else's feelings and sensations – such thought experiments are repeatedly shown to be logically inconsistent (see, for instance, Márton–Tózsér 2016) – what we refer to as our “self” remains closed from the third-person perspective. Many researchers adopt a similar view on what genuine ineffability is: thus, Magee (1998: 97) suggests that none of individual sensory experiences can be adequately put into words, but constitute a kind of “orchestral music”, while Kravchenko (2007: 657) observes that the meaning of such linguistic signs “cannot be described completely and exhaustively”. Despite this, such content still figures prominently in day-to-day communication, arts, and specialized domains like medicine, hence attempts at placing it in a practical context are more or less conceivable.

4. Ineffability relativized

What is most striking here, and what poses the major problem, both philosophically and linguistically, is the realization that no matter how subtle and ineffable various sensual, aesthetic and other experiences might seem on the surface, they nevertheless always remain reportable: that is, something can always be said on their account. They can be described to a certain detail and in a correct sequence, which, however, does not bridge the intuitively apparent gap in, or eliminate the feeling of inexhaustiveness of, such descriptions. This leads us to the idea that this perceived ineffability comes in degrees; thus, the idea of difference between *weakly* and *strongly* ineffable things.

Kukla (2005: 23) defines weak ineffability as something for which there is “no sentence [...] in one or more of the languages which some human beings actually speak, or have spoken, or will speak”. This is what Liang refers to as the lexico-grammatical ineffability, which is reminiscent of Whorf's notorious “linguistic relativity” claim, whereby facts of the world that are based on the Western “Aristotelian” logic are inexpressible in, for instance, the languages of native Americans (1956: 212). The conclusions that Whorf draws from this premise have been discussed elsewhere and were mostly found dubious for the reason that being inexpressible does not mean being unthinkable. Moreover, if weak ineffability thus conceived is premised on the lack of symbols, it must be superable by way of inventing new symbols or creating a meta-language, in which such elements are present. Gäb (2020: 1831) gives the following formal definition of weak ineffability: “What is weakly ineffable is ineffable in terms of a theory of meaning: a given language L does not contain any expression that (according to the semantic rules of L) designates what is to be expressed.” By contrast, what is *strongly* ineffable precludes us from creating a sign that would carry the meaning which we need to express: strongly ineffable ideas, on this view, are those that cannot be communicated in any possible way and are equivalent to Liang's “cognitive” ineffability discussed above.

If we accept these premises, then the ineffability of sensory content that interests us here is certainly weak: undergoing a sensory or an aesthetic experience enables one to produce certain thoughts. But is it the lack of words that precludes us from communicating these experiences? The same question is, again, prominent in the later works of Wittgenstein – thus, in his “Philosophical investigations” he observes:

Describe the aroma of coffee. Why can't it be done? Do we lack the words? And for what are words lacking? – But whence comes the idea that such a description must after all be possible? Have you ever felt the lack of such a description? Have you tried to describe the aroma and not succeeded? (2001: 610)

If there is something beyond the mere lack of words that prevents the aroma of coffee from being described conclusively, this problem has to be approached within a different paradigm: the paradigm of *non-exhaustiveness* of such potential descriptions, as none of them would fully capture the intrinsic nature of the content in question. As noted above, there is no talk of an exhaustive vocabulary for color shades, since the color spectrum is a continuum with only speculative boundaries

between what is perceived as its constituents. Our sensory sphere at large is contingent on the same complication: although we might invent as many names for individual mental states, we will never be able to have them all named, and all attempts at compiling exhaustive taxonomies of the type are inherently misguided. While everyday language (and, even more so, the sophisticated medical jargon with its “anhedonia”, “euthymia”, “cachexia”, and a plethora of other terms) does technically discern between *anger* and *rage*, *sadness* and *anguish*, *excitement* and *happiness*, emotional experiences of the sort are still lived as continuums of transient feelings: there cannot be universally accepted criteria for defining at which point exactly *anger* becomes *rage*, *sadness* turns into *anguish*, and *excitement* grows into *happiness*, except for the speaker’s inclination to pick up a specific word. But if the lack of words, and the possible remedies based on this idea, are thus out of the picture, then how does weakly – or relatively – ineffable content of the sort remain expressible?

First of all, once language is theorized about as a social practice rather than an exclusively cognitive phenomenon, it reveals a tendency to destabilize boundaries: polysemy, figurativeness, legitimization of error, relevance of silence, and various other “analogue” capacities of language harness it for the complexity and subtlety of human experience. This is the main reason why the strong ineffability thesis needs to be relativized: although systematic attempts of the sort are scarce, many researchers have at least mentioned the theoretical and practical possibility of such relativization – similarly to Dennett, who admits that the conceptual isolation between perception and language notwithstanding, “what it feels like to see Paris by moonlight in May can be adequately conveyed in a few thousand words (an empirical estimate based on the variable success of actual attempts by novelists)” (2005: 115). If the focus thus shifts from formal concerns to the question of *how* the corresponding communicative intent is fulfilled, this relativization effort becomes more transparent, especially when it comes to the sensual domain, since “the nature of a feeling may be conveyed in two ways: by being characterized or by being aroused” (Pugmire 1998: 102). This makes the apparent lack of affective predicates and the inability to retrieve the propositional content of our feelings superable in practice: the rest of the paper will focus on how this “arousal” is realized.

5. Ineffability overcome

It should be mentioned, at least in passing, that the ineffability in question can certainly be overcome by extra-linguistic means, of which silence, gestures, and facial mimics are the most salient. Numerous studies reveal (see, for instance, Bucci et al. 2016) that, when asked to verbally elaborate on their emotional states, most speakers first undergo the stage of arousal, that is, of resorting to gestures and facial mimics combined with or followed shortly by reporting their inability to fulfill the task immediately due to the lack of words (373). Silence is perfectly able to convey meanings in various contexts: it does not necessarily flag an inability to say or a denial to communicate. Many cultures have proverbs in the vein of the English “silence gives consent”, or “no wisdom like silence”, which can be interpreted in numerous ways, but may as well testify to the meaningfulness of silence as a path to overcoming ineffability. In general, being silent, or, in a wider sense, prioritizing other channels of communication over speech (for instance, visuals or music) is one of the most common ways of dealing with the mental states that the *sublime* puts in motion (beauty of nature, love, etc.).

But when it comes to the purely linguistic mode of “effing” the sensual content, a few communicative strategies may be outlined, of which **trivialization** is most prominent in day-to-day communication. It will comprise the following 3 tactics: 1) **naming** one’s mental states via established terms, especially as the vocabularies of today’s literary languages offer a plethora of options; 2) using **generic predicates** to add a qualitative dimension to such contents, as in, for instance, “to feel weird, good, bad”, etc.; and, finally, 3) **mentioning (and thus construing) the experience** itself instead of the mental state that it causes to emerge, as in, for instance, in “You know what it feels like to fly in a shaky plane, don’t you?”.

These represent a commonsensical approach to the communication of what is subjective as long as the communicating parties rely on the HUMAN ENDOWMENT, i.e. the largely shared nature of our phenomenology. Despite their apparent triviality and lack of detail, these tactics are still capable of producing a sensible communicative effect; and if a particular name or predicate is out of immediate reach for one reason or another, we might expect our interlocutors to have a grasp of the associated phenomenology, that is, we should assume that what it feels like to “be caught into a pouring rain” or to “have a toothache” does not call for a detailed explanation.

Another strategy, extensively mentioned in the philosophy of mind, is to overturn the ineffability thesis as such through a purely logical argument. As a matter of fact, most analytical accounts of sensual mental contents treat them as conceptual, only that the concepts that we employ to make sense of what we feel (or, more precisely, of “what it feels like”) are either demonstrative, or indexical, or quotational in nature, which means that they can be communicated through a **deictic reference**. DEIXIS is the use of concepts whose semantics is fixed, but whose denoted meaning varies depending on the specific context (personal and demonstrative pronouns, words like *today* and *now*, etc.) (Perry 1979). This means that elliptical utterances of the type “I have *this* feeling” convey phenomenal properties without actually naming them, which dispels the ineffability problem, at least in the technical sense. Of course, more often than not, deixis would be combined with one or two trivialization strategies, as in, for instance, “I have *this* [...] feeling of/when [...]”.

Of course, both deictic and trivial statements discussed above remain informative only when the experiences themselves are shared, but they have limited practicability when this is not the case – when, for instance, they are too personal or deviant, when they transcend the boundaries of everyday life (being in a different sensory environment, taking unusual drugs, etc.). When this occurs, another strategy is often employed, known as the use of **qualifying statements** that make ineffability explicit and allow the speaker to paradoxically say much about things without actually naming them (Branham 1980: 13). This type of communication figures prominently in both fictional writing and day-to-day communication as exemplified above by the statements of the type “I just can’t tell you...”, “words cannot convey...”, or “this feeling has no name”. All of these strategies are widespread and mostly efficient; however, there is another roadmap as well, which deserves a separate section.

6. Figurative language

On close inspection, the question remains how ineffability is overcome when the following two premises co-occur: 1) the phenomenology in question is not shared, and 2) the subtlety of a description is of importance, i.e. when neither of the options listed above – trivialization, deixis, and verbal ellipsis – fulfills our communicative intent. To answer this, we need to return to those concepts that help us form phenomenal thoughts – known as “phenomenal concepts” for that matter (Balog 2009). Since they do not have a propositional content, they can only be connoted to or communicated through “terms of associated external properties, or [...] associated causal roles” (Chalmers 1996: 20). This observation by Chalmers is readily compatible with Kukla’s idea why strong ineffability does not in fact occur in natural languages (2005: 12): unlike artificial idioms of the Tarskian type, where limitations with regards to what can be expressed are inevitable, our public language is equipped with *non-literal modes of expression* enabling us to communicate non-propositional truths (with no strict borders between the literal and the non-literal, which increases the nuance). In fact, these two comments point in the exact same direction: while Chalmers mentions the possibility of communicating sensual contents based on what we associate them with (for instance, from our immediate surroundings), Kukla sees no place for the ineffable in practice, since there is always a possibility of saying things non-literally. Combined, these premises allow us to conclude that ineffability is most effectively overcome through the use of **figurative language**: even if something seems unexplainable by generating propositional content on a systematic level, it can be expressed through an analogy, which is the basis of figurativity.

Pilkington gives a convincing illustration of how figurative language helps convey states of affairs in the sensual domain beyond just stating facts and labeling concepts (Pilkington 2001: 5–6). Thus, he observes that there are many words in English to denote various types of walking: *march*, *mince*, *hobble*, *tread*, *pacer*, *strut*, *toddle*, *lurch*, etc. However, when other types of movement need to be described, for instance, the movement of the head, the choice becomes extremely limited: except for, perhaps, *nod*, there are no specific verbs that would easily come to mind. What happens when we need to describe the way a kangaroo's head moves when eating grass? Australian poet Robert Gray resolves this complication in his poem "A Kangaroo" with the following result: "That hungry face / Moves on grass / The way an artist's pencil / Retouches / Shadows." What deserves a special notice here is that the poem adds a phenomenal perspective to the description: the clear implication of the analogy used by the author is that it "felt like this" to him, while there remain other, virtually infinite ways of conveying the original message. Hence, the use of figurative language – at least in this and in similar contexts – works bidirectionally: not only does it allow to implement the subjective dimension verbally but it also supplements the message with one, even if not originally intended.

Interestingly enough, this also engenders the weak sense of ineffability of not only the mental states in question, but of figurative communication as such: poetic language is notorious for being hard to translate or paraphrase. As Zwicky (2012: 205) notes: "it is made of language, but in an odd and peculiar way: it consists of words, but only and exactly these words, in precisely this arrangement. Its meaning is uncapturable – in its original tongue – by any other use of language". This observation is especially relevant to the present discussion, since it is assumed by many that the communication of non-lexicalized concepts (that is, of the ineffable) is what poetry and literature in general are meant to do, beyond and in addition to all the other goals that they pursue. Literary critic M. Rosenthal resonates with this opinion by considering poets – the ones who resort to figurative language more often than people of other trades – as those able to respond to and communicate bodily and mental experiences for which the common language proves to be an inadequate means of expression (1974: ix-x). Ineffable is the supreme subject of poetry, that is why it relies on the use of figurative language so heavily. Seeking new verbal formulae and breaking the boundaries of our everyday language is what the search for poetic meaning amounts to. Although most of fiction, for its part, communicates ideas and narrates events, some of its genres can be close to poetry in this regard, not to mention the fact that fictional texts make systematic use of poetic language.

Figurativity means the use of various tools and techniques, but since indirect expression is its pivotal practice, its main asset is metaphor, upon which most of verbal symbolism is built. No wonder metaphor received so much attention in the last decades – mainly as a conceptual phenomenon – for being an inalienable characteristic of our thinking process. This has since become known as the Conceptual Metaphor theory first sketched by Lakoff and Johnson in 1980 in their book "Metaphors We Live By", followed by a barrage of books and essays on the subject by numerous other authors. But what is of utmost importance in the context of the ineffability problem is the understanding of metaphor as a fusion of several concepts into a new one which produces a new experience. The preliminary conclusion here is, hence, that those mental contents that we commonsensically treat as ineffable are, in fact, communicable in a public language, and that analogy-based figurative language must be viewed as the core of this communication, not something additional to it.

7. Conclusion

The aim of this paper is to come as close as possible to concisely answering Franke's following question:

Is the unsayable beyond language altogether, as mystics often fervently maintain? Does this make it simply non-linguistic? Or is it the other of language and therefore inextricable from language [...]? Or is it without relation to language [...]? Or is it language itself [...]? (2004: 77)

To address this, the first assumption that needs to be dispelled is that the problematics of ineffability lie in the purely metaphysical register. In fact, the notion of ineffability is widely used in the philosophy of mind and language as it has a testable cognitive dimension and figures prominently in discussions of conceptual vs. non-conceptual content, propositional vs. non-propositional knowledge, phenomenal ideation, and an array of other topics. On the other hand, the intuition of reaching “the limits of language” is a paradigmatic fact of life: our ineffable thoughts are not peripheral or insignificant, but are related to some of the most meaningful experiences that we undergo – for instance, to religious beliefs, being in love, or contemplating works of art. At first sight, and according to the long-standing tradition, ineffability is seen as a sign of a “clash” between reality itself (or the way it is mentally construed) and what we can truly say about it: although we seem to be able to produce relatively accurate descriptions thereof, there is always a “shadow” area, where linguistic descriptions will fail to convey the way the reality is, at least as given in our senses (Hofweber 2016: 2). Ineffability cannot be discarded in aesthetic applications of the public language either, for instance, in literature – it would not be an overstatement to even suggest that ineffable is one the prime matter of art as such. But there is much more to the phenomenon of ineffability, once it is relativized (weakened) and shown to be intrinsic to language, to be its basic convention right from the start: in a well-known sense, all objects are ineffable, since the words of our language only *denote* them, but do not genuinely *convey* them:

in its use of general terms, such as “tree” and “squirrel,” language operates in the realms of resemblance or commonness. It relies for its operation on the application of a general term to many particular objects that are held to be subsumed under the concept that corresponds to that term (Ho 2015: 70).

Language is an instrument of communication rather than a means of giving bonafide descriptions of the world, hence, it would be a logical error to ascribe the problematic status to a system’s foundational aspect. Once we are equipped with the understanding of weak, or relative, ineffability that is contingent on the mismatch between the infinite continuums of sensory data and the limitations of language which can be overcome thanks to its astonishing flexibility, ineffability is easily reinstated into the domain of linguistics. It is no longer a verbal failure: it is an urge to convey meanings by way of arousing feelings in interlocutors instead of stating facts, since what appears ineffable is subjective, unverifiable, or phenomenal, to use the well-established philosophical terminology.

If communication is meant to arouse feelings, verbal arts may be said to aim at establishing the identification of a message recipient with the protagonists of narratives. Such identification is achieved, primarily, through referencing the ineffable via various strategies, of which figurative language is of special prominence as opposed to the use of the existing nomenclature of emotional and sensory states, which only invokes a third-person perspective, an observer’s stance that is better suited for scientific descriptions and other non-fictional discourses. Taming this ineffability can thus be seen as a path to a more intimate involvement with what is normally inaccessible: the mind of the Other. It has been widely accepted in the post-Gricean pragmatics of communication that such “mind-reading”, i.e. grasping and felicitously interpreting the speaker’s meaning, lies at the core of mutual understanding as such (Watzlawick et al. 2014). But it is only in literature – a laboratory of devising new and reiterating the existing tools of communicating the unsayable – where the experience of shared phenomenology is of unmatched aesthetic and redemptive value. In this view, the problematics of the ineffable should figure prominently across the field of literary and pragmatic studies, since, as Pilkington notes:

‘Poetic concepts’ and ‘poetic thoughts’ [...] are difficult and relatively ineffable for a special reason: they encourage extensive encyclopaedic exploration and elaborate concept construction that involves the evocation of intense and subtle qualitative states. Such qualitative states cannot be described satisfactorily: they are non-lexicallisable. But insofar as they are effable, they evoke/arouse rather than simply characterise/describe an experience. Any attempt at a full discussion of poetic effects and poetic

thoughts must discuss the evocation of qualitative states, and to this extent must reach out beyond pragmatic theorising (2001: 9).

Thus, recognizing the role of figurativity in the relativization of what is often viewed as ineffable deconstructs the artificial boundary between conventional and figurative language, which, in its turn and in line with the main assumption of cognitive poetics, helps better understand why verbal art is not peripheric to human cognition in general. This introductory – and perforce sketchy – analysis aims at setting in motion a relatively novel program for the investigation of ineffability from the linguistic perspective and at further integrating the verbal art into the agenda of cognitive sciences.

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