Written Response II

(Unit 1 Brief 2: Methods of Cataloguing)

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"Yet, though language can spread them before us, it can do so only in an unthinkable space" (Foucault, 1989, p. xviii).

In the preface of *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, Foucault discusses the limitations of human language in defining and classifying things. By re-cataloguing part of this text, I hope to explore how language destabilizes the order we rely on, challenging our ability to fully understand it as well as our logical frameworks.

After reading the absurd classification list quoted from Borges's passage, I realized that the uneasiness it brought me stemmed from the juxtaposition of ideas or things that logically could not coexist. Language places disparate things into the same abstract grouping, causing the logic we usually use to comprehend and organize knowledge to collapse. This "unthinkable space" confuses us. Therefore, in the first experiment, I tried to amplify this "unthinkable" quality by re-cataloguing the text in a 'meaningless' way. I extracted all the descriptive words and nouns from the text and then randomly recombined them to generate more absurd combinations. This might reveal the limitations of language in defining things: while it can infinitely create juxtapositions in the unthinkable space, its assemblage lacks coherence and cannot fully represent the logic or relationships between things, thus failing to enter the abstract 'imaginable' space.

In the space that traditional knowledge cannot easily grasp or control, people seem always to "find" a way, attempting to classify things in a way they consider "logical", to place different things under one roof to preserve the logical continuity. This reflects a pursuit of "control". However, "What transgresses the boundaries of all imagination, of all possible thought, is simply that alphabetical series (a, b, c, d) which links each of those categories to all the others" (Foucault, 1989, p. xvii).
This implies a kind of absurd or meaningless imposition of order, and even if we use the most 'neutral' linguistic system (the alphabet), it still cannot hide the fact that there is no logical connection between these things. Treating things as classified categories simply because they share the same alphabetical order is an assumption of coherence and structure that we impose on the world, and this is where the fragility of language lies.

Therefore, in the second experiment, I broke down the text and rearranged sentences alphabetically by their first letter. Of course, this new text lacks coherence: the only order is that of the alphabet, which seems to align most closely with human cognitive logic. The absurdity of this method is due to the fact that the alphabetical order itself has no meaningful or logical relationship. "The alphabet is a construct of fragmented bits and parts which have no semantic meaning in themselves, and which must be strung together in a line, bead-like, and in a prescribed order" (McLuhan, 2001, p. 44). People use meaningless fragments to categorize things that cannot be understood through coherent thought, which may reflect the limitations of human language in classification.

I believe Foucault's exploration of Borges's absurd list was intended to prompt us to critically understand the order imposed by language and the logic we usually rely on to understand the world. Language both shapes and limits our classification of knowledge, but perhaps we should not be so

attached to the groupings and orders within classification systems, as things are ultimately in a state of endless flux.

Reference

Foucault, M. (1989) *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. London: Routledge.

McLuhan, M. (2001) *The Medium Is the Message: An Inventory of Effects*. Berkeley: Gingko Press.