

## Language Exploration in the Framework of Existentialism

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### Abstract

Language has always been one of the most influential and important aspects of human life, both as a medium of communication and a tool to shape identity, communicate meaning, and deal with the uncertainties of life. In existentialism, language is used as a tool to question freedom, responsibility, and the essence of the human condition. The researcher investigated constructions related to “existentialism” through an interview with a multilingual student whose experiences illustrate many aspects of the phenomenon. Language in existentialism, examines language as a way for humans to seek meaning in life, express identity, and deal with the absurd. This research utilizes the narrative inquiry method and focuses on the experience of one participant whose narrative details language choices influenced by emotional needs, reflection, and social interaction. The findings illustrate language as a form of self-reflection, emotional activation and liberation. Using a foreign language can create emotional distance and allow for a higher degree of freedom due to less cultural pressure. The reflection of moral responsibility in communication for the effects it causes provides insight into how language influences human mindsets and information processing.

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## Introduction

Language is a fundamental aspect of human life, not only serving as a medium for communication but also as a vehicle for meaning-making, identity formation, and reflective reasoning. Because language is not only a tool for communication but also a means by which individuals negotiate cultural expectations and interpersonal relationships and internalize the symbolic systems through which reality is constructed. In existentialist thinking, language is understood not just as a descriptive mechanism but a constitutive feature of human experience, mediating one's engagements with freedom, authenticity and the absurd. The interpretation of modern philosophy related to the school of existentialism as expressed in the works of Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus continues to inspire current research, particularly in relation to language and self-identity. Sartre's concept, known as “existence precedes essence” (1946), observes how individuals play a role in creating meaning, whether through conscious actions or linguistic expression. Camus (1942), on the other hand, explains that the human condition is at odds with the absurdity of a world devoid of essential meaning. Since its

early development in the Middle Ages and early modern period, existentialist thought has evolved into a broader social and intellectual phenomenon. Recent research has explored the intersection between existentialism, theology, and linguistics. In a study by Heinamaa (2014), the author analyzed how existential consciousness can be intrinsically understood through the manifestation of language between meaning and sense. In a similar context, another study by Ginev (2016) also supports this view by describing language as a descriptive part of the world that plays an active role in the formation of meaning. Another study also supports this in Gendlin (2018) by introducing the concept of “felt sense,” which refers to how existential awareness can occur through the expression of life experiences, described in the language of the individual.

Hence, other studies also highlight the importance of an individual's language in dealing with existential crises and/or rebuilding their identity in uncertain social situations. Narrative construction also enables individuals to deal with their existential anxiety; McKinney (2020) and Ali & Zia (2022) in their research provide evidence that individuals' logical storytelling or narration can be the basis for existential resilience. This finding is in line with general methodological innovations in narrative investigation, which provide crucial insights into the construction of meaning that individuals achieve through storytelling or logical narration. This is also similar to what Clandinin et al. (2016) stated, that narratives are not only a tool to look back to aid memory but also part of an individual's process of reconstructing meaning. In line with Riessman (2015) and Spector-Mersel & Moss (2020), they also explain how personal narratives can represent an existential act by individuals through the negotiation of freedom, individual identity, and personal boundaries in sociocultural contexts. Building on these arguments in applied contexts, Goodson & Gill (2014) write about storytelling as a moral and existential act, especially in transition or crisis settings, holding language's transformative role in existential meaning-making in tension with philanthropic commitments to translating experiences into objective evidence. Despite growing interest in the role of narrative and language in existential contexts, there remains a paucity of research on how language functions as a vehicle for processing existential experiences and reclaiming authenticity. While previous studies have examined the performative dimensions of language, this study investigates how language itself serves as a vessel for articulating and reframing existential struggles.

Accordingly, this paper adopts a narrative inquiry approach to explore how existential meaning is articulated, resisted, and reconfigured through language. This anthropological method provides insight into how language mediates between individual subjectivity and cultural narratives, offering a gateway through which self-narratives become central to the pursuit of existential self-understanding.

## **Methods**

This study uses narrative research, and to collect data, this study uses a narrative inquiry design. In this study, namely Narrative inquiry as a way to understand and reveal the experience of suffering and the healing process. Narrative is a way to give meaning to experiences that can help someone rebuild their identity. (Frank, 1995). According to (Clandinin and Connelly, 2006), narrative inquiry is one approach to collecting and analyzing stories told by individuals. This process reviews not only what is told but also how the story is told by considering identity, space, and time. (Bruner, 1990) added that narrative as a mode of thought that humans understand the world and as a representation story. This is in line with (Polkinghorne, 1988) who considers narrative inquiry as an approach that involves collecting stories to explore the meaning of human

experience. Through narrative, researchers can see how individuals shape and understand their experiences. The research participants were eighth semester students, Reka (pseudonym). Reka is an outstanding student in the field of Language, as evidenced by several times being a selected writer. Her interest in languages began when she was in elementary school. During her education, she often participated in language competitions. Her English Proficiency Test Score In 2022, she took the TOEFL test and scored 520.

**Table 1**

*Participants' profile*

Pseudonym	Age group	Occupation	Reason for Participating	Interesting Quote
Reka	20-25	Student	Interested in research topic	<p>Original Version:</p> <p>“ Saya merasa, karena ini hidup pertama yang kita lalui, jadi wajar jika ada banyak hal baru yang asing dan mungkin kurang nyaman atau sangat tidak menyenangkan untuk dilalui. Tapi, disaat yang bersamaan fase itu harus kita lalui.”</p> <p>English Version:</p> <p>"I feel, because this is the first life we go through, so it's natural that there are many new things that are foreign and maybe uncomfortable or very unpleasant to go through. But, at the same time, we have to go through that phase."</p>

In the interview guidelines (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009) emphasizes the Interview Guidelines that tend to be more open and flexible, of course the importance of interactive dialogue in narrative interviews. Where it is more advisable for the interview to be conversational rather than interrogative which allows the informant to explore their experiences in depth. Meanwhile (Pilot and Beck, 2017) They suggest that the interview should have a clear flow, starting from the introduction of the informant to reflection on their experiences using language that is easy for the informant to understand. Questions are often designed to explore the subjective understanding of the informant regarding the event so that it focuses more on meaning (Clandinin and Connelly, 2006).

The data collection technique is carried out by means of semi-structured interviews, which combine the flexibility of structured and unstructured interviews. Researchers have guidelines for questions that will be asked by the informant. However, at the same time the researcher still provides space for the interviewee to provide more complex and in-depth answers (Clandinin and Connelly, 2006). The selection of these

participants was based on their experience in competing and exploring language as a means of self-expression, which is relevant to the focus of this research on meaning-making and identity formation through language. Interviews were conducted in a relaxed and in-depth atmosphere, with questions that allowed participants to reflect on their life experiences. The researcher provides space for participants to speak more broadly without being limited by rigid questions. All interviews will be recorded with permission from the participants, and transcripts will be made to ensure accurate data. The interviews last 120 minutes and are conducted once, with the possibility of follow-up interviews if needed to deepen understanding of emerging themes. The proposed qualitative data are analyzed and interpreted in several steps (Creswell, 2012). The researcher will transcribe the recorded interviews to ensure that the data collected can be analyzed appropriately. Each transcript will be read and coded based on key themes. The main themes will be identified to reveal the meanings constructed by the participants regarding their experiences which will be further analyzed. The researcher will then interpret the themes found to relate them to existentialism theory and related philosophical views. The results of the analysis will then be validated by going back to the participants to check the accuracy and appropriateness of the interpretation of their experiences.

## **Results and Discussion**

### **Results**

Existentialism is a branch of philosophy that emphasizes individual freedom, authenticity, and the effort to find the meaning of life through personal experience (Sartre, 1943). In this view, language is not just a means of communication, but also a means to express identity, face the absurdity of life, and build relationships with the world. This article examines how language, as an existential instrument, influences individual lives based on interviews with respondents who have unique experiences in using various languages.

### **Language as Reflection and Self-Affirmation**

One moment, after a stressful day, Reka sat alone in her room. She felt so tired of the various demands of life that came and went. In silence, she often said to herself, The words may sound simple, but for her, it was a form of love that she gave herself.

*"..... On other occasions, sometimes in the face of hardship and the harsh flow of life, it is not uncommon for me to give myself something 'soft' to say to myself. To make me feel a bit understood and not alone,"* Reka said in the interview.

These soft words are Reka's way of easing the anxiety that often comes without permission. In the concept of existentialism, as expressed by Heidegger (1962), humans often experience existential anxiety-the fear of the uncertainty of life. However, instead of drowning in that anxiety, Reka uses language as a tool to create a space of reflection and comfort for herself.

### **Language as Emotional Distance**

One night, Reka sat in the corner of her room looking out the window and thought about writing about her feelings, but every word in Indonesian felt too heavy. She finally opened the notes app on her diary and started scrawling in Korean:

*"..... 나는 괜찮아, 하지만 너무 피곤해." (I'm okay, but I'm very tired.)*

*"Sometimes, if I write or speak in Korean, I feel lighter. It's like there's a distance between me and the feelings I'm feeling," Reka said in the interview.*

*"...I feel that the use of the language is not so burdensome for me, just as I am exposed to the language for hobby reasons, so Korean for me is not as burdensome as if the word with the same meaning is said in Indonesian," he added*

She realized that expressing emotions in a language that is not her mother tongue gives her the space to express her feelings more freely. When writing words in Korean, she feels less immersed in her emotions. There is a distance created between himself and what he is feeling. In the perspective of existentialism, Sartre (1943) mentions that individuals have the freedom to reshape their identity and experience through language. Reka, by choosing Korean in her emotional moments, has created a protective mechanism for herself—a way to deal with feelings without having to directly confront them.

### **Language as a social mask**

When Reka is in the classroom, she speaks in a calmer tone and well-organized sentences. However, in a café with her friends, her words flow more casually, interspersed with laughter and familiar slang.

*"Sometimes I realize that the way I speak changes depending on who I'm talking to. In class, I'm more formal. But with friends, I'm more relaxed," Reka said during an interview.*

This change was not something she consciously planned. However, over time, she realized that language was part of how she fit into her environment. It's like wearing different 'social masks' depending on the situation. Language is part of self-presentation—for Reka, the way one presents oneself to others. By changing the way she speaks, Reka is actually adjusting herself to the social norms that apply in each context. This is not just 'pretending', but part of how humans shape their identities in social interactions.

### **Acceptance of Life's Uncertainty**

On a cloudy morning, Reka sat in front of her bedroom window with a cup of coffee in hand. She opened her journal and started writing. She remembered how writing had helped her through difficult times. When she lost someone important in her life, words became her way of making sense of the loss. She wrote poems, journals, even just short notes to frame her feelings in a more tangible form.

*"...Sometimes I write not because I know what I want to say, but precisely because I want to understand what I'm really feeling and I feel, because this is the first life we're going through, so it's natural that there are many new things that are unfamiliar and may be uncomfortable or very unpleasant to go through. But, at the same time we have to go through that phase...." she said in the interview.*

Writing was not only a place for her to express her thoughts, but also a way for her to dialogue with herself. Sometimes he wrote letters to his younger self, or to his future self-

as if trying to reach out to a wiser side of himself. Humans construct the meaning of their lives through the stories they create about themselves. For Reka, language is not just a means of communication, but also a bridge to self-understanding. Every word she writes is part of a journey to construct who she is, one sentence at a time.

### **Language as a Medium of Thought Patterns**

Reka sat in front of the mirror, watching her own reflection. She realized that each language brings a unique mindset and perspective. When speaking in Indonesian, she felt more intimate and emotional. When using English, she felt more logical and systematic. While in Korean, she finds new ways to express things that she finds difficult to express in other languages.

*".... to the thinking stage, language is enough to influence how I will process information according to the personality of the person's perspective," Reka said in an interview.*

She recalled her feelings when speaking in various situations. In an academic environment, she feels more intellectual and serious. When talking to her family, she was more relaxed and used more emotional language. When speaking in English, she felt more confident, but also as if there was a distance to her true identity.

*"What I say wouldn't sound 'ridiculous' in that language because that's the country I'm from..." he adds.*

Heidegger (1927) argues that language is not just a means of communication, but a way for humans to 'be' in the world. By learning a new language, Reka not only gained linguistic skills, but also discovered a new dimension to her identity. Language has become a mirror that helps her see who she is - and who she can become. This struggle is not just about language, but about how she sees herself. He realizes that no one way of speaking is more "authentic" than another-all are part of him. Sartre (1943) in his existentialism argues that human existence is always in the process of becoming. Identity is not something fixed, but something we create through our choices and actions. In Reka's case, language is not only a means of communication, but also the way she continues to shape and discover her authentic self.

### **Social Norms in Language**

Reka remembers her childhood when she was often scolded for speaking in a "disrespectful" manner. She grew up with strict rules about how one "should" speak. When she entered university, she heard the different ways people spoke about themselves - with confidence, with clarity, with conviction. Over time, however, she began to question those rules. She discovered that language was not just a means of communication, but also a space for freedom. She could choose the words that best reflected her, not just what others deemed "right".

*"...if discussing with older people I will use Javanese, I will tend to limit myself in expressing what I think because I think it will feel impolite," Reka said in an interview.*

*“.....every word I choose carries a responsibility. They can heal, or they can hurt,” she added.*

She sees that each life experience changes the way she uses language. In the past, she spoke more in her local language. Now, she uses Indonesian and English more often to adapt to her environment. Even the way she writes text messages has changed - from being short and full of abbreviations to being more organized and expressive. We can see that a person's identity can be formed through inconsistent or constantly changing narratives. In this case, Reka not only experienced changes in the way he spoke, but also in the way he viewed himself. This shows that language is not only a means of communication.

## **Discussion**

In a world filled with challenges and uncertainty, every human being will try to face life as a form of survival. This can certainly be seen in one of the statements made by a volunteer source who recounted how he was able to comfort himself with words when life seemed unfair to him. The writing he created with these chosen words was able to occupy a space in his life regardless of the reality he was facing. This is certainly in line with Heidegger's existentialism, in which an individual's anxiety in life can be a catalyst for deeper reflection on their existence. As Heidegger (1962) said in “Being and Time,” the anxiety that exists in individuals related to the outside world can also open up a deeper understanding of who we are, especially when faced with the limitations of life. In this case, we can certainly understand why the volunteer source muttered to himself through language, because he was trying to understand the confusion he saw around him. Of course, this is in line with Heidegger's philosophy that human existence emerges through a relationship with a universe filled with uncertainty. As shown in the interview, the use of language in the form of repetitive phrases can be considered a key strategy for individuals in overcoming confusion and uncertainty through simple notes. This is basically in line with Sartre's (1943) perspective as stated in his book “Being and Nothingness,” in which Sartre's view emphasizes that individuals can always be free to decide and act according to their desires even when in situations full of uncertainty. The results of the interviews show that the repetition of common phrases in the conversations conducted by the informants indicates that there is a desire on their part to instill confidence. We can conclude that language is one aspect that can be used to help individuals avoid the situations they are facing. On the other hand, it can be found that some of the wonders of foreign languages, as seen in the interview results above, namely Korean, have their own role, namely that the interviewee is able to express the emotions they are feeling deeply without feeling awkward or constrained, as when using their mother tongue. As emphasized by Heidegger (1962), “language is the house of being.” In this case, language not only reflects the world around us but also shapes our understanding of that world. In this sense, it can be concluded that a foreign language can become a bridge or a kind of neutral territory that allows individuals to speak in a way that is less uncomfortable than using their native language, which may be burdened by cultural baggage or emotional memories associated with their native language.

Individual interests in choosing language are also reflected in how individuals use words in English when expressing hope. The English used by the informant is neutral without losing the meaning he wants to convey. The informant feels quite open when expressing what he is feeling using English, which certainly allows for a pleasant sense of

optimism for the informant. Language was always already there with us, as (Gadamer,1960) would describe in *Truth and Method*, it was not only a way to communicate but a way of conveying both a private and a social meaning. 40 Within the framework of existentialism, this use of language denotes a search for authenticity in the experience of feeling, since it allows the subject to evade categorization and semantic programming by external factors and use whatever language is best suited to the description of their internal reality.

On the contrary, there is a hint of the existentialist attitude that life is uncertain and challenging, so the statement suggests that life is a mixture of new things that are unfamiliar (not always pleasant things). As time went on, Albert Camus wanted to understand human life; in "*The Myth of Sisyphus (1942)*" he gives us the idea that while absurdity fill life, it was the task of every man to give their life meaning. From the interview results above, we can say that even though these individuals feel uncomfortable and their lives are in difficult or confusing situations, they get through it and are able to do so well, of course in their own way, namely through language. This aligns with the value of optimism in existentialism, which holds that uncertainty and life's challenges are faced with resilience through acceptance of life, as well as a sense of awareness regarding who the individual is. By using careful reflection and language, individuals can certainly create space for themselves to guide the direction of their lives. We can summarize that the key to creating meaning in life, as described by Sartre (1943), is that individuals must be aware of their freedom and sense of responsibility to choose their path, in this context, language. This states that language in the context of existentialism can be seen not only as a means of communication but also as a form of reflection, self-concept formation, and giving meaning to events filled with ambiguity. The use of various languages also observes how the self relates to the surrounding world. Language can create a more flexible relationship between humans and their environment, and enable the use of foreign languages—in this context, English and Korean—as a bridge to free oneself from the emotional burdens that exist within the individual. This is in line with Heidegger's basic idea that language allows individuals as humans to build their own world and maximize their potential. Another view, from Sartre, also emphasizes that individuals who realize they have many choices in how to respond to the situations they are facing, and who use language as their choice in dealing with these situations, demonstrate that they are capable of creating their own essence.

The two contests in this study, namely Language and Existentialism (Miller, 2003), state in their research that also supports this view, showing that language is one of the crucial means in shaping an individual's view of existence. The study also states that language enables people to understand their identity through their own perspectives as well as externally. This certainly means that language can act as a guide that helps individuals navigate the meaning of experiences that are often filled with uncertainty. In addition, individuals can also understand that all phases of life, both difficult and challenging, are part of the existential path that they must go through in an effort to explore a life full of uncertainty. This view also emphasizes the need to be able to face an impartial truth in life and accept ambiguity. This proves that even when facing challenges, humans still have the freedom to make decisions about how they live their lives. With this awareness, individuals can become skilled and capable of gathering the courage to experience every moment of their lives. The results of the reflections provided by the informants in this interview show that language as a means of communication can be a tool in bridging the journey, especially in the search for meaning in life. In addition,

language, when viewed from an existentialist perspective, can serve as a means of discovering one's identity, emotions, and coping with the uncertainties of life.

### Conclusion

This study analyzed how language plays a role in the formation of existential meaning. Specifically, it looked at how language can shape an individual's personal history, enabling them to overcome existential crises that occur within themselves. The results of this study show that language is a basic tool for creating meaning for individuals and can help individuals resolve complex difficult situations. The study shows that humans can shape their experiences and build their life goals through self-narratives, which ultimately form interrelated identities and meanings. This research also observes the extent to which language structure and semantics can shape patterns of expression in understanding existential challenges. However, there are still several limitations that can be developed. This research is still highly dependent on the results of qualitative analysis, which allows for interpretative understanding by other researchers, as well as cultural differences in the formation of existential meaning, including linguistic and ontological perspectives that focus on self-narratives. This study also opens up opportunities for further exploration. This is because individuals from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds provide great opportunities to construct self-narratives in different ways. Future research could further expand these findings through cross-cultural comparisons and explore how language impacts the making of existential meaning in different linguistic environments. The interplay of psychology, philosophy and linguistics could also contribute to a richer understanding of the relationship between language perception and construction of the existential experience. Investigations into these dimensions, framed in terms of how they relate to the human search for meaning, may augment our understanding of the intrinsic connection between language.

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