



LANGUAGE AND THOUGHT

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Abstract

This paper will try to analyse the debate on language and thought, where one side is of the view that the language is innate, mainly advocated by Noam Chomsky. The other side is of the opinion that the language is acquired through external sociological influences. The major proponent of this view is Mead who opposes Chomsky's view of language and thought. Taking this trajectory forward this paper will further look into the interrelationships between language and thought based on the two major views of Chomsky and Mead. This paper is interdisciplinary in its approach in the sense that it will traverse the areas of psychology, philosophy, neuroscience and linguistics by taking into account and denying, at the same time, the domain of sociology.

Keywords: *Language, Thought, Chomsky, Mead, Universal Grammar, innate view of language, internal mind, external mind*



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Aim of the Study: This paper intends to analyse the debate between Chomsky and Mead on the issue of language and thought and whether language is innate or acquired.

Introduction:

Wilhelm von Humboldt, that great philosopher of language, has said:

"We are human not because we have language but because we are language."

The interrelationship between Language and thought constitute an important domain in the life of *Homo sapiens*. A lot of work has been carried out in this field in different disciplines. Philosophy, psychology, neuroscience and linguistics are the disciplines, which have made their contribution in the study of language and thought.

Francis Y. Lin, in his article "Chomsky on the 'Ordinary Language' View of Language", defines the 'ordinary language' view of language. Lin says that a number of scholars such as Wittgenstein, Strawson, Dummett, Searle, Putnam, Lewis, Wiggins, and others hold the view that "a language consists of conventions, it is rule-governed, rules are conventionalised, a language is learnt, and there are general learning mechanisms in the brain, and so on." He calls this view the 'ordinary language' view of language.

Lin also presents Chomsky's view of language. According to Chomsky, there is a universal grammar (UG) in a person's mind. Universal Grammar is 'innate, part of his biological

endowment, genetically determined, on a par with elements of his common nature that cause him to grow arms and legs rather than wings' (Chomsky 1988, 4). Here, Chomsky says that there is a "...definite language faculty in the brain, and most of our 'linguistic knowledge is innate'. This linguistic knowledge has 'abstract and unconscious principles'. And a language is not learnt but rather 'acquired'." Lin calls this as the 'innate' view of language.

Albert J. Bergesen, in his work "Chomsky versus Mead" (*Sociological Theory* 22.3 2004 357-70), says that a great internal structure is already there in the mind. Language is considered as part of this innate mental structure by linguistics/cognitive science (Chomsky 1986, 2002). This contrasts with the sociology's conception of the mind where mind is considered as blank sheet of paper ready to be influenced by the external socio-cultural world. Here, language is seen as an exterior cultural formulation that is then 'internalized by sociology' (Mead 1934).

Language and Thought: An Analysis

Defining the interrelationship between thought and language Vygotsky, in his book *Thought and Language* (1961), says that thought and language "develop as two separate or parallel processes" and the interrelationship arises when a lexicon or a unit of the language system, gets connected with a concept, or a unit of the system of thought.

G. H. Mead, in his work "Mind, Self, and Society from the Standpoint of a Social Behaviorist" (1934), says that "language is symbolic interaction—a conversation of gesture where the gestures are symbolic, like words." This view is different from that of the Chomsky where the "mind/language can be used for representing ideas or creating communication, hence symbolic interaction." In Mead's case social interaction creates mind and self-consciousness.

There are more than 7000 languages in the world. The language of one particular linguistic community would obviously be different from that of the other linguistic community. When two people from two different linguistic communities come together, they would not be able to understand each other's language. Their way of understanding and seeing things would be different from each other. For example one community would determine the left and right side through the cardinal directions, i.e. east, west, north and south, as Lera Boroditsky, from UC San Diego, says in her presentation, on February 5th 2014, on Cognitive Science. Even if two people from the same linguistic community come together, their perception of the same thing expressed through the same lexical would be different. It is because of their belief systems that they perceive the same thing differently. That is what Chomsky also says, in his

book *Language and Thought*, by taking the example of water (H₂O) that how it is perceived by a man having the knowledge of chemistry and the other being an illiterate.

Noam Chomsky, in his book *Language and Thought*(1993), criticizes Gottlob Frege for his view on language. According to Frege language is external to a person. Everyone has an ‘imperfect grasp’ of the public language. Frege’s ‘externalism theory on language’ says that the meaning of a word is socially constructed. Chomsky argues that Frege does not take into account that each individual attaches his beliefs with the meaning of a particular word. This makes the perception of an individual concerning that word different from that of another individual. Therefore, the meaning that an individual attaches with the word may differ with that of the meaning of the word for the society. Here we are not talking about two different communities but a single community where in conventional sense it is understood that they understand each other’s language for the relationship between a signifier and a signified is same for all the people in that community. This view problematizes the way Frege understood the concept of language. Now language, according to Chomsky’s view, is not external but internal. It can be said that syntax is a constituent of our ‘bio inheritance’, that is, part of our ‘pre-social mind/brain’-which Noam Chomsky has called as ‘our language faculty’.

We attach the meaning of a word with a tangible object outside in the world. The perspectives and the intentions, i.e. the beliefs form the meaning of a word in one’s mind. A word having the same meaning for two people can be seen differently according to their beliefs. Chomsky believes that the perspectival element is necessary for the meanings of words and not just the external reference to the objects for the meanings of the words. That is to say that a belief of a person concerning the meaning of a word is more important than the external reference. This approach frees the meaning from the societal structures, which define its meaning.

In Chomsky’s views, ‘generativity’ is essential to language and thought. An individual has the capacity to generate infinite number of responses to the exterior stimulus or causes. An individual’s beliefs also play a great role in this infinite generative capacity. Beliefs give perspectives to the objects or the external references. Mr. Sweet, in his work *Language and Thought*, says that “Language is based not on things as we know or think them to be, but as they seem to us.”

It can be said that one should not support either view, Fregian or Chomskian view, in its extremity. Rather a balanced approach would be more plausible. That is to say that both the personal belief and the socially constructed meaning of a word, for an external reference, can

be seen as defining that meaning. If looked at this view from a psychological point of view it can be said that the beliefs are consciously or unconsciously framed by the outside world, via knowledge, circumstances etc. Also, if only the internal aspect is looked at then there would be loss of harmony and confusion in the society on lexical grounds. Chomsky is right in his view of arguing about the internal aspect of the lexical. But he should not be oblivious of the view that a man is a social being. There should be a balance between Chomsky's private sphere of meaning and Fregean public sphere of meaning. They are complementary to each other and should not be looked in exclusion of one from the other. Therefore, it can be said that Chomsky's complete rejection of Fregean externalism is not a plausible one. He should take into account both the views instead of just looking at the aspect of language from one angle.

According to Chomsky, as stated in the review of "Noam Chomsky *Language and Thought*", by Philip Carr, the faculty of language includes a broad area of cognitive systems. Its major parts are an "I-language (internal/internalised-language), a set of performance systems (input/output systems, subsuming perceptual systems), and two interface levels {PF (Phonetic Form) and LF (Logical Form)} which constitute instructions to performance systems." In Chomsky's view, the I-language is:

"a generative procedure that determines an infinite class of linguistic expressions, each a collection of instructions for performance systems. Particular signs, in the Fregean sense, are manifestations of linguistic expressions (spoken, written, signed, whatever); speech acts are manifestations of linguistic expressions in a broader sense."

In the light of internal-mind, linguistic expressions are instructions to performance systems. Linguistic expression, when seen as instructions, mean internal or mental phenomenon. Whereas, in the case of external-mind, linguistic expressions can be seen as speech acts, external behaviours, gestures, etc.

According to Chomsky the relation between the internal language of the mind and the observable speech act is that of external manifestation of the internal language. Linguistic information is stored in the mind, and through signs it, becomes external. It may be in the form of gestures, behaviours, and sound and other ways of externalisation. Philip Carr, in his review of "Noam Chomsky *Language and Thought*", perceives this relationship between internalisation and externalisation as undermining of the radical internalism. Philip Carr says:

"It is arguable that, to sustain a genuinely radical internalism, Chomsky needs a different conception of the relation between, on the one hand, the radically internal linguistic knowledge (divorced from mental behaviour and sensory perception) which

constitutes UG (Universal Grammar) and, on the other hand, externally observable acoustic events.”

Carr, it seems, is arguing for taking an extreme stand in order to maintain the radical linguistic internalism. However, his view seems too radical. The relation between the internal linguistic knowledge, which includes the innate knowledge of Universal Grammar and external speech acts are complementary to each other. The existence of one without the other is incomplete in the case of human beings. The internal linguistics contained the stored information. The storage is only possible via the sensory organs or the senses. Internal linguistics also has the innate knowledge, i.e. Universal Grammar, which is distinct from the stored knowledge. However, Chomsky always maintains a strict distinction between the internal linguistic conception and external observable behaviour. Chomsky sees the relation between the two as a relation of externalisation. Carr proposes that Chomsky should mould and evolve his perceptions in order to see the internal linguistics as divorced from the I-language system of the internal-mind, where the knowledge and the instructions for the performance system is stored via the sensory organs. Carr thinks that the stored knowledge dilutes this concept of radical internalisation of linguistics. The connection with the sensory organs questions its austerity, according to Carr. He even argues for calling the I-language system as perceptual system because of its relation with the senses.

The external acoustic behaviour depends on the internal linguistics for its occurrence as the external behaviour takes instructions from the internal mind for its performance systems. Carr sees linguistic expressions in two ways. First as mind-internal, they are seen as instructions to performance systems. Secondly he sees linguistic expressions as mind-external, where the performance is seen as a linguistic expression, instead of externalisation of instructions of internal-mind. In other words, he says that signs are manifestations of linguistic expressions, on the one hand. And, on the other hand, signs are linguistics expressions, in themselves. That is, signs are not the manifestations of linguistic expressions but they themselves are linguistic expressions. It can be argued that Carr's conception of performance, as a linguistic expression (in itself) is wrong and misinterpretation of this phenomenon. If there would be no instruction from the internal-mind then how can there be external behaviour. Carr's argument distorts the very basic scientific and biological belief that the mind, i.e. the internal-mind, controls the body and its external performance. The internal thought leads to actions, be it behavioural, acoustic, or any other. Before the action takes place outside in the form of behaviour, it is articulated inside the mind, either consciously or unconsciously. Our bodily reflex movements are the explicit examples of this

concept. Alex Kozulin, in the introduction of Vygotsky's translated book *Language and Thought*, says, "Vygotsky argued that while reflexes provide the foundation of behaviour, we could learn nothing from them about the "construction" erected on this foundation-, which means that neither the category of consciousness nor that of the unconsciousness can be ignored."It is obvious here the importance Vygotsky attaches with conscious and unconscious mind is vital for understanding the external behaviour.It is obvious that the conscious and the unconscious mind are the parts of the internal-mind. Reflexes are the manifestations of the internal-mind. As we know that according to Vygotsky, there is relation between our reflex movement and the conscious mind, which was also the topic for his thesis. Therefore, to say that the external manifestation is the linguistic expression in itself would be not a plausible statement to make. Hence, it proves the point that the linguistic expression is mind-internal as instructions to performance systems. Even John B. Carroll, in his work *Language and Thought*, advocates for the dependence of language on thought by saying, "a word can have meaning only to the extent that the concept to which it refers has been formed".

The inputs that we take through our sensory organs are stored in our internal-mind. These inputs are externalised through the psychological tools, in Vygotsky's sense.Vygotsky, in *Language and Thought*, defines the psychological tools as "gestures, language and sign systems, mnemonic techniques and decision-making systems."Vygotsky's initial concept of higher mental function focused on the transformation of natural functions into cultural functions under the influence of psychological tools. It can be said that these psychological tools are used to manifest the internal-mind linguistic expressions. Therefore the gestures and external behaviours, acoustic utterances are not linguistic expressions. But they are the psychological tools to manifest the internal-mind linguistic expressions.

There are two domains of the language faculty. One is the innermost aspect, which contains the innate knowledge where Universal Grammar (UG) exists. This part does not have to do anything with the senses. The other is the I-language where the instructions are there for the performance system. The instructions are formed in the lexicon of the I-language.Carr questions the existence of 'austere' conception of an I-language, when it contains the instructions to the speech organs. He says that the linguistic expressions are part of the perceptual system rather than that of the I-language. Chomsky only claims the purity of the innermost part. Carr forgets that man is not only a being but also a social being. He has to encounter the other beings, which will lead to the collection of the information through the senses that will form the instructions. Carr distinguishes the perceptual system from the linguistic expression in the internal-mind. Only the innermost part is austere. The cognitive

system in the internal-mind contains lexicon, which has formed its beliefs associated with the external objects. Chomsky never says that it is not perceptual. Rather he argues for the existence of beliefs and hence the perceptual system. It is not possible for a person not to form beliefs for things. Chomsky only argues for the purity or austerity of the innermost part of the internal-mind and not of the purity of the I-language, containing the linguistic expressions. Carr's questioning seems abrupt as he only takes the unidimensional view. He does not take into account that the linguistic expressions' instruction for the articulators have come from the senses. Its very formation and existence has happened because of the senses or sensory organs.

It can be concluded that linguistic expressions are not external manifestations. That is to say linguistic expressions are not speech acts, external behaviours, gestures, etc. Rather linguistic expressions are instructions to performance systems. Linguistic expression, when seen as instructions, mean internal or mental phenomenon. This paper supports Noam Chomsky's views that linguistic expressions are instructions to performance systems and the externalisation is the manifestation of linguistic expression.

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