

Perspectives on Language and Thought: A Critique

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Abstract

The present paper aims to highlight some of the major perspectives on the ongoing controversy between Language and Thought. It is acknowledged that the relationship between language and thought is deep. Both language and thought require an organization and order for storage and retrieval. Language puts order into thought and thought in turn enables the organization needed by the language. But what comes first: word or thought/idea/concept-cognition or language, and what role does language play in the organization of one's thought or vice versa? Is language itself thought? How accurately does language represent human thought? How accurately does language represent the real world? It is difficult to spell out the relationship between language and thought. All these questions elude an answer and the present paper provides some perspectives to these questions.

1. Introduction

Thought is the basis of all reason. It is non-specialized form of reason that is employed in everyday life for both theoretical and practical purposes, and is implicit in the structure and uses of ordinary languages. The identification of thought with language is the question, which has engaged the interests of philosophers for perhaps two thousand years and in addition of linguists and philosophers for about fifty years. Plato's Cratylus and Theatetus are sometimes quoted as assessing the identity of thought and speech. In the medieval times the Nominalists made somewhat similar assertions, but from a different point of view.

The goal of understanding the relationship between man's language and thought has been given different treatment by the psychologists, philosophers, linguists, anthropologists, critics, and the users of language, e.g., creative writers and translators. Theories trying to solve the problem grouped themselves around two poles: scholars, who treat language as if it were a direct manifestation of the speaker *Weltanschauung*, are known as Sensualists. Among well known sensualists are behaviorists and linguists like Benjamin Lee Whorf,

Edward Sapir, Vygotsky, Bloomfield, Skinner, Watson and many others. There are scholars who hold the idealistic assumption of independence of thought from word. They are represented by Wurzburg School and Bergson. Such scholars who regard language as arbitrary and outer form of thought are known as Spiritualists.(Saporta, 1961).

2. Divergent Perspectives and their Implications

Divergent views of linguists and philosophers are presented for analysis. Most authors are more subtle than these antithetical expositions would indicate. Their positions have been outlined in their most drastic forms, to provide a frame for discussion. A close analysis of the *weltanschauung* and the nominalistic claim reveals that many subsidiary problems are raised by each thesis, and that it is not possible to do a piece of research which would clearly decide for one or the other side.

2.1 Psychological Perspective

Psychologists are of the opinion that thinking is a verbal matter. Verbal thinking uses words, symbols and rules of grammar to structure and connect words and phrases into sentences. Words, their meanings and the rules for joining them together are stored in semantic long term memory. When one thinks verbally, one draws on this store of information. Language, therefore, is an important tool of thought. Because much thinking involves language, the idea arose in psychology that thinking is a kind of 'inner speech or talking to yourself under your breath.'(Morgan, King and Robins, 1956). Thinking, thus, is a form of information processing, which goes on during the period between a stimulus event and a response to it. Both thinking and language go through regular stages of development.(Taylor, I & Taylor, M., 1990), (Falk,1973).

The relation of thought to word is first of all not a thing or a single event but a process; it is a proceeding from thought to word, and conversely, from word to thought. In this process, the relation between thought and language undergoes changes, which might be looked upon as functional development. Thought is not expressed in words but comes into existence through them. Every thought tends to connect something with something else, to establish a relationship between two things, occurrences or events. It is phenomenal and phenomenological. Every thought grows, develops and moves, each fulfill a function and solves a

given problem. The first step in the analysis of the relationship between thoughts and words is the investigation of the different phases, planes and plans through which the thought passes, before it is embodied in words. Both thought and language are expressive and communicative. (Saporta,1961).

Such an investigation reveals, in the first place, two different plans in speech. There is the inner, meaningful, semantic aspect of speech, and there is the external, acoustic, phonic aspect. These two aspects, although forming a true unity, have their own particular laws of movement. The unity of speech is a complex unity, not a homogeneous one.

In inner speech, one finds an entirely separate, independent and autonomous function of speech. It is for the same reason that inner speech is referred to as thinking –in- words. The inner speech also represents a restructure of speech, a transformation of peculiar syntactic and sense structures into other structural forms peculiar to external speech. External speech is inner speech plus sound. Transition from inner to external speech is a complex dynamic process; it is a transformation of predicative and idiomatic speech into syntactic developed speech which is intelligible for others.

Inner speech is thought connected with words but in external speech thought is embodied in words. In inner speech words ‘perish and bring forth thought’. (Saporta,1961: 532). Inner speech is, to a great extent, thinking with pure meanings. Inner speech is dynamic process, which moves between two stable poles of thinking-in-words; between thoughts and words. Therefore, to understand its true meanings and place, we must understand the plan of thinking-in-words.

This plan is thought, itself. Every thought tries to connect something with something; it establishes a relation, fulfill a function, solve a problem. Both processes show unity but not identity. It is quite obvious in those cases when thought fails to find its expression in words, does not enter words, as Dostoyevsky as cited in Saporta (1961:533) put it.

Thought and word do not coincide. Thought unlike speech does not consist of separate words. In the mind, thought is there simultaneously, but in speech it has to develop successively. Thoughts fail to coincide not only with words but also with the meanings of words in which they are expressed; yet the way from thoughts to words leads through meaning. In all speech there is always hidden thought; and ‘under text’ direct transition from thought to word is impossible. So there has always been a complaint about the impossibility of expressing

thought. This points to inherent adequacy of language to express thought, sentiment and experience fully.

Meaning and the inner aspects of speech have been so far an unknown and confusing ground for psychology. Relations between thought and word, have always been considered as constant connections established forever, and these relations are changing dynamic relations between processes.

2.2 Behaviourists/Sensualists Perspective

Vygotsky theorized that the deep structures mastered by the child become the basic structure of thinking. He believed that language determines thought development. Language helps thought through both functional and content mechanism. Language is not an amorphous heap of isolated words, but an immense dynamic system in permanent development within which one word depends upon others.(Bhat, 1991), (Harriot,1970).

Fodor also shares the same assumption held by Vygotsky, but in different ways. He asserts that sentences belong, not to the neutral language, but to the innate, universal language of thought; *Mantalese*. According to Fodor, language consists of an innate lexicon and an innate set of combinational rules that help in the production of the completed sentence, and is held in common by all human beings and perhaps by all the creatures sharing the basic features of the same psychology. Thus, for Fodor, language faculty consists of three sub-systems. Besides its production and comprehension system, there is also a *linguistic reference system* that would have the function of manipulating sentences and inferring other sentences from them, and so on. It may be that this system may be left intact, when both comprehension and production system are destroyed. Language thus governs and directs thoughts.(Carruthers, 1996).

Whorf supported very strongly the belief that thought is dependent upon language. His theory called 'Whorf Hypothesis' states that all higher thinking is dependent upon language, and thought is determined by language. A rich and broad lexicon results in superior cognitive development. If language determines thought (linguistic determinism), then the word must be experienced differently by different speakers.(Lyons, 1981). In Whorf's view specialized concepts such as science and philosophy are dependent on language, and these specialized forms of thought are the

secondary reflexes of the more basic phenomenon, namely, that language influences habitual everyday thought. He explained that this habitual thought world 'is the microcosm that each man carries about within himself, by which he measures and understands what he can of the macrocosm'.(Lucy, 1992: 45), (Coseriu, 1973)

2.3 Mentalists/Cognitivists Perspective

Max Muller, Wittgenstein, Locke, Chomsky, and Piaget hold an entirely different view on the same issue of the relationship of language and thought. Max Muller in his book entitled *The Science of Thought* holds: 'No reason without language: no language without reason'. On page thirty of the first volume, he heads a paragraph 'language and thought inseparable' and this paragraph deals with the question of 'conceptual thinking'.

Why then should it be thought humiliating that we cannot think without words, we do not mean by thought mere suffering of sensations, or willing of action, nor do we mean by words mere sounds. We mean by language, what the Greeks called logos, word or meaning in one, or rather, something of which word and meaning are only two sides-----cogitatus sed verba cogitatus. (Humphrey, 1963:244).

Wittgenstein in *The Tractatus: The Limits of Language*, speaks about matters of religion, logic, morality and beauty, and the relation of language to the reality as 'those which shows itself and about which nothing can be said', and this shows the limitations of the language. The logical structure of a sentence *shows* itself, and this in turn, *shows* one something about the world. *What it shows*, Wittgenstein says that one cannot say anything about it. One can point out to certain elements in behavior which are designated as religious, but one cannot point to the religiousness of these elements. He acknowledges Russell's merit that 'the apparent logical form of the proposition need not to be its real form'. He maintains that nothing can be said of the world as a whole, since to think about the totality would be to think of it as limited by something that is excluded from it. Thus he believed that language has no place in mystical matters. That is because mystical matters are 'experiential states of being, becoming and belonging'- beyond linguistic expression. (Cell, 1971), (Black,1962).

Above all, the process of generalization or concept formation illustrates the general relationship of language to thinking. Generalization and thinking is possible without verbalization, but verbalization improves and refines the process. It also confines, limits and freezes it. (Azam, 2004)

The above mentioned assumptions regarding the relationship of language and thought held by Whorf, Sapir, Vygotsky and many others can be contradicted, refuted and objected to on the various theoretical, scientific, and philosophical grounds. All philosophers like Aristotle, Plato, Descartes, Kant and Locke disagreed on such issues as the nature of thought and the origin of ideas. However, they all agreed on the existence of mind and thought and its influence on behavior. The following points may thus be presented for the justification of the independence of thought and language, keeping in mind that thought is essentially experiential, both innate experience and experience internalized.

2.4 Rational Perspective

Recent research proves that speech production or other behavior cannot be the basis of thought, because speech understanding precedes speech production in normal children. For example, a one year old child may be able to understand a sentence like 'put the banana on the table', yet may be at one word stage of speech production. That clearly manifests that children are able to construct and utter sentences and sounds only after they gain an understanding of language items.

Moreover, persons who are congenitally mute or have congenital spastic paralysis and are otherwise normal, acquire a normal understanding of speech, even when they cannot produce it, or produce it laboriously and faultily.

Above all, speaking and thinking are two simultaneously processes. This is evident in the situation where a person talks to someone, but thinks of something else at the same time.

The notion held by different philosophers that 'to think or reason without the language is an illusion', is also objectionable, because there are many deaf children who do not acquire language until the age of five years and have a congenital hearing loss of over 90 decibels. Firth provides the research data, which proves that such children actively participate in all activities and behave as intelligently and rationally as do hearing children, however deaf children's language knowledge is generally far below than that of a hearing person.(Steinberg, 1982: 107).

If one accepts the assumption that language system forms thought, then the multilingual person would have more than one thought. Such a person will not have a coherent, intelligent personality, because different guiding ideas would be involved in different languages, and such persons would have difficulty in using the knowledge gained through one language when operating in other languages, since thought is supposed to be language specific and not universal, according to some theorists. But no such evidence of malfunctioning has been offered in support of the theory.

Moreover animals do not have language but behave intelligently and creatively, responding to the physical world as normal human beings do, for example chimpanzees, whales, elephants and dogs. This indicates that thought and perception have some other basis other than language.

Another dominant notion is that one's knowledge of vocabulary or syntax influences one's perception and understanding of nature. This cannot be justified on the rational grounds. For example, Kay and McBride in a large cross culture examination found no differences in the perception of color for different language speakers. They concluded that '.....rather than language determines perception, it is perception that determines language'. (Steinberg, 1982: 107). This can also be proved by the fact that English speaking people due to lack of vocabulary in English, describe the physical condition of the variety of snow by creating such phrases: powder snow, wet snow, etc. After considering his and other research, Lenneberg concluded that: "Cognitive processes are largely independent from peculiarities of any natural language, and in fact cognition can develop to a certain extent in the absence of any language". (Steinberg, 1982: 107).

Vocabulary or syntax cannot influence perception, because one can believe something quite different from what language literally specifies, and the use of language form may not change an underlying thought. Still, such variations in thought and perception rely on language for appreciating or expressing the difference.

If the language system forms or guides thoughts in the way one perceives nature, then the multilingual must be said to have as many different conceptual-perceptual systems of the physical world as he or she has languages at one's command possibly.

Another significant argument put forward by theorists can be summarized in the words of Sapir:

language is the guide to social reality ---- it conditions our thinking about the social problems and processes--- it is quite an illusion to imagine that one adjusts to reality essentially without the use of language and language is merely an incidental means of solving specific problems of communication or reflection.(Lucy, 1992: 22).

All such arguments are subject to serious objections, because if language influences or determines one's world view, then one should expect greater uniformity in thoughts and political, religious, and philosophical ideologies, since only one language system is involved. But this is not the case in the real world. On the other hand, there are countries that have different languages, yet share similar social, religious, scientific and political view, for example Communist, Capitalist and Buddhist.

It is observed that the society may change its worldview, even though its language remains relatively unchanged. In the last less than a hundred years, China has changed from feudalism to capitalism to communism, yet the language has changed little in terms of its syntax or basic grammar. This does not serve the inter relation ship and inter dependence of thought and Language. In fact, when thought is dominant, language use is made subservient to it- and vice versa. That is the danger in using a foreign language slavishly, or even imitatively, without mastering it.

If a language system guides one's thinking with respect to the worldview, then it would not have been possible for any language to express different worldviews. Yet the Bible of ancient Hebrew people and the communist manifesto of European and the Holy Quran have been translated into most of the world's languages. If there is lack of exact correspondence in the translations between different languages, it is not an indication of any difference in thought but only it differs in the way ideas have been assigned to the words and structures of languages.

Many theorists and linguists maintain that the thought of the speaker can be inferred solely on the basis of surface structure analysis of the syntax, but this hardly is a valid assumption, because languages are complex and different than the surface structure makes them to appear. Pick in his monograph *Agrammatism* as cited in Humphery (1963) also gives evidence against the identification of thought and language. For example, in language the predicate comes after the subject,

in thought, they come together. Language may be illogical but the thought behind it may be logical. So it is very right to assume that language performs its functions only imperfectly and it is an imperfect instrument. The simple implication is that the higher psychological processes in whatever terms defined, are more than language responses. Thought and language, though inter related, the former is pre dominant enough to determine the latter, so as to develop the best or the most apt expression.

Another faulty assumption made by Whorf, Vygotsky and others is that the sound form of the word itself provides some meaning of the word. But the reality, except for the minor case of Onomatopoeia, where the relationship between a word and its meaning is conventional, all the words and their meanings cannot be apprehended from the sound sequence. Moreover, the words one use are often less than the thought, and one thinks the thought without its proper words. In certain cases of Aphasics the expression is not incommensurate with the thought. In such cases, the language function may be disturbed, but the mind as a whole remains undisturbed, and only specific physical processes are interrupted or rendered difficult.

Thus, the ultimate source of all meaning is based on nonlinguistic experiences of the world or mind. This view is also in consonance with what Chomsky proposes in 'Faculty of Mind Theory' that different groups of ideas are innate in mind; language ideas, mathematical ideas and logical ideas, function and develop independent of one another. (Steinberg, 1982: 110) ,(Cooper,1973).

In the light of the above detailed discussion, it can be safely concluded, that language, speech or behaviour is not the basis of thought, and that the language system per se does not provide the specifics of ones view of nature or culture- which are the result of experience and observation. The discussion also shows that the language can not represent the real world.

'O, if only without words souls would understand each other'.

Although knowing a language does not affect the nature of thought with respect to its basic categories, systems and operations, there are important cases where the use of language could be said to affect the content and direction of particular thought(Steinberg, 1982). These particular important instances are:

First language may be used to provide new ideas. For example Freud's psychoanalytical doctrine is unique in terms of ideas it represents, it is not unique from the point of view of language. No new syntax and only a small number of vocabulary items were introduced. Thus, knowing a language itself does not influence the thought, the use of that language indeed, affects the content and direction of a particular thought.

Second, language may be used to bring about a change in beliefs and values. For example, as a result of reading the Communist Manifesto, one's values, beliefs and the worldview could be radically changed. This is also true of other ideological literature and sacred texts. However, it should be recognized that what occurred were mainly changes in the truth and attractiveness value, which were assigned to propositions. This is the essence of persuasion through language.

Third, language may be used to assist memory and preserve ideas. Part of the language system is actually part of the thought system, for the meaning and the semantics of the language system are those ideas that are part of the content of thought. Thought and language system are joined together through meanings and ideas.

Recent theoretical and scientific findings regarding the relationship of thought and language have been discussed here, in order to rectify some established notions. Besides this, there is a philosophical aspect of the issue, as well, which can be said to be the real basis and answer to the baffling question of the exact relationship of thought and language.

2.5 Philosophical Perspective

This hinges around the concept of creativity. Man does not create ideas. He only assembles them. The sole and supreme creator is Allah. Man is only a mini-creator in the image of Allah- who is the 'Khaliq', while he/she is the mere 'Takhleeque'. If words issued from an origin other than God, from one's native land, one's country or man's efforts, for example, they would be born and die with it. Thus one would be deceived and tricked into illusion. One can concede that if language does not come from man, then it must come from God. According to the scriptures, Allah taught Adam the name of things: Language. Indeed Phonemes- the source of language are instinctual. For God created language, as He created man, and man can do nothing more with a language than to order or direct it. He can only bestow on it his faith,

accord it his confidence, endeavoring by all spiritual and moral means at his disposal not to violate it. And thus it might be said, that in this very law of human thought is contained the proof of the existence of God.

The conscious human mind and language spring from the common elemental foundation of the universal spirit. Therefore, language, properly speaking, cannot be taught, although the words may be. It can be evoked and man can nourish the conditions and leave it to its own unfolding. Pascal also believed that humanity could not seek language if it had not already found it. This truth is portrayed in children, who may be said never to learn a language, since one can only learn which does not belong to one.

Language, through its phonic conventions can determine, the multilateral nature and value of truth; “those certainties in which we place our trust, is the primordial light, the *lumen supernaturale* like justice, truth, falsehood and honesty etc, and which radiates from the eternal source”.(Rycenga & Schwartz, 1963:341). Language conveys the truths by shaping an idea in diverse symbols, expressing in diverse ways its implications, and recondite meanings, varying with the maturity and capacity of the mind which receives them and is rendered conscious by them. Thus, Language is the repository of the perennial human values that have inspired humankind down the ages.

By virtue of language, human energy is preserved. Yet man is a creature who acts. The meaning and purpose of language, metaphysics and science are contained within the orbit of this universe of action. The enlargement of the framework of language is due to the enlargement of new ideas for the mind’s maturity.

The progressive, ever changing aspect of language shows the relative character of language. Language, like all things in time and space, is subject to the vicissitudes of history and consciousness. ‘Though it may fade and change, or though new words, new sounds complex, the primordial source, the procreative matrix may usurp it, which gave birth, subsist mutably in all its implications’. If languages change and progress, it is because man raises all veils and reveal other mysteries and new laws manifest themselves in the infinite, as well as boundless regions of mans mind. (Rycenga & Schwartz, 1963: 347).

3. Conclusion

Language cannot be grasped in all its sacredness, meaning and power. Language transmits those commandments and truths, which assure the presence of those universal principles, that are also the fixed points in the life of the mind and in the history. It may again be said that people do not create language. For people are only moved by the *desire to express their* feelings and thoughts, using the vocal chords, one evokes through sound the words, each of which has an autonomous existence by virtue of its *belonging* to language. Language exists *ab eeterno*, immutable in its transcendent purity and revealing itself from time in the historical existence of mankind.

Finally, it can be said that it is by virtue of the procreative power of Language which grasps, shapes and transforms, that man is human-humanized. For nothing really human can be so without meaning, whether the meaning be uttered or silent. It is the law of language to try to create, or reflect the world, and it is, therefore, futile to search for the origin of language, as it is to search for the origin of reason. Both are born with man; both are part of his essential, ontological reality. Language, with all its power and influence is the word of Allah; it possess the voice and sound of Divine mystery. The truth is clearly mentioned in the Quran in Chapter 21, Sura Room, verse 22:

And among His signs is the creation of Heavens and the earth, and the differences of your languages and colour. Verily, in that are indeed signs for men of sound knowledge.

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