

Other Minds and Stories

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Introduction

Something very intriguing about the use of language is the fact that thoughts in the speaker's mind are converted into a sequence of symbols and the sequence of symbols received by the receiver's sense organs are converted back into thoughts. Although this phenomenon may be hard to understand, it is presumably not a mystery. Sufficient research into the neurophysiology of language should uncover the mechanisms that underlie these processes of encoding and decoding. However, here I will try to give a social-psychological description of the nature of this relationship and offer a criticism of an influential contemporary approach, mentalism (Berwick and Chomsky, 2016) to understanding language and mind.

In this paper, I would like to ask how these systems relate to communication. In the context of communication, it is important for a listener to get a rough idea of what the speaker has in mind. The direction I take will be along the following lines. Firstly, I will provide a description for this essential component of linguistic communication, namely explicate what I mean by understanding other minds. Then I will discuss the idea of narratives to show how propositional thought is less explanatory than narratives in understanding the act of communication. I will illustrate this point

through a brief examination of a highly effective work of fiction (Achebe, 1995), which may also be read as a work of translation. I will further suggest that the requirement of formalism—so essential to “internalist” approaches—poses a problem when we try to build up a picture of language and thought. This will be followed by a conclusion which includes a brief look at how this view of the relationship between language and thought bears on language teaching.

Understanding Other Minds

The theoretical approach of generative grammar proposed and developed by Noam Chomsky and his followers over the last sixty years makes certain assumptions regarding the connection between language and thought. A major assumption underlying this approach is that language is a property of the human mind and hence, it is a window into thought. This relationship between language and an individual human being's thought makes this mode of inquiry an internalist one. Further, as part of this internalist inquiry, formal descriptions need to be provided for the structures of linguistic units such as phrases and sentences.

According to recent formulations of generative grammar, a single operation is sufficient for building the syntactic

structure of human language. This operation is called “Merge”. “Merge” is defined as the operation that “takes any two syntactic elements and combines them into a new, larger hierarchically structured expression” (Berwick & Chomsky, 2016, p. 10). Basic formal semantics posits that the meaning of linguistic expressions gets formed incrementally as the syntactic structure gets built up, a principle known as compositionality. The unit of meaning corresponding to a sentence is a proposition, whose truth-value can be determined. This picture is more or less compatible with the philosophy underlying generative grammar, according to which linguistic structures correspond to units of thought. The correspondence between language and thought implies that the basic syntactic operation of “merge” is ultimately a property of thought. However, a major shortcoming of this view of linguistic meaning based on such a formal and internalist approach is that it is agnostic about how one person understands another's thoughts in the context of communication. There has to be something above and beyond compositionality that contributes to meaning, and beyond the factors having to do with a shared context; this has to do with understanding what the speaker has in mind.

For language to work in contexts of communication, it is important for the participants to have common meanings for linguistic expressions. This arises, according to Chomsky and Berwick (2016), from “shared cognoscitive powers” that lets human beings form common “mental constructs”, “presuppositions”, and so on (p. 86). Imagine a simple communicative

context consisting of two individuals X and Y. When X uses an expression not known to Y, then Y has to either guess its meaning from the context, or find out from X or look up a dictionary. In any case, for communication to happen, it is important for Y to have a working sense of what X has in mind.

In other words, the idea of “shared cognoscitive powers” is not very clear. If the cognitive content (mental constructs, propositions, etc.) associated with a word is a purely individual matter, how is it that two or more individuals come to share the same content with respect to a word? David Bleich (1988), offers an answer to this question when he takes a detailed look at the idea that language is fundamentally social. When two individuals are involved in an act of communication, according to Bleich, they acknowledge that they matter to each other and have a responsibility to understand and to be intelligible to each other (p. 67). If social relationship is inseparable from linguistic communication, having a shared cognitive content for an expression would be a simple consequence.

However, studies in pragmatics have made it clear that there is more to meaning than compositionality or the parallelism between syntax and semantics. Beyond pragmatic principles such as implicatures, I would like to propose that there is a narrative component to meaning. This does not obviate the idea that propositions are units of thought and as a result, are integral to how we understand language. Instead, it supplements that view by focusing on Bleich's point that meaning-making is a reciprocal and dynamic activity based on social relationships (Bleich, 1988). Thus,

meaning arises out of narratives shared by participants in a conversation. I will illustrate this point with the help of parables and myths shared by a community, as depicted in a work of fiction.

Narratives and Thought

There are many interesting examples of non-propositional thought in Chinua Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart* (1958), which was written in English and which deals with what happened to the land, culture and livelihood of the *Igbo* community in Nigeria just before and during the early days of western colonization. An important component of the characters' communication are the stories known by most members of the community and explanations of truths about life. Interestingly, many of the stories involve animals. Such stories and explanations are important to the way in which members of the community think about and understand their world. Translating such thoughts to propositions might be missing an important point about how human beings think. This can be exemplified using two examples.

The first one is a description of stories that Nwoye, one of the children in the novel, hears from his parents:

So Okonkwo encouraged the boys to sit with him in his obi, and he told them stories of the land—masculine stories of violence and bloodshed. Nwoye knew that it was right to be masculine and to be violent, but somehow he still preferred the stories that his mother used to tell, and which she no doubt still told to her younger children—stories of the tortoise and his wily

ways, and of the bird eneke-nti-oba who challenged the whole world to a wrestling contest and was finally thrown by the cat. He remembered the story she often told of the quarrel between Earth and Sky long ago, and how Sky withheld rain for seven years, until crops withered and the dead could not be buried because the hoes broke on the stony Earth. At last Vulture was sent to plead with Sky, and to soften his heart with a song of the suffering of the sons of men. Whenever Nwoye's mother sang this song he felt carried away to the distant scene in the sky where Vulture, Earth's emissary, sang for mercy. At last Sky was moved to pity, and he gave to Vulture rain wrapped in leaves of coco-yam. But as he flew home his long talon pierced the leaves and the rain fell as it had never fallen before. And so heavily did it rain on Vulture that he did not return to deliver his message but flew to a distant land, from where he had espied a fire. And when he got there he found it was a man making a sacrifice. He warmed himself in the fire and ate the entrails. (p. 17)

Notice that the story told by Nwoye's mother shows deep emotional content and a world view that shows close connections between human and non-human nature. Stories like this suggest that thoughts relate to imaginative accounts and descriptions that help people understand the world around them. I would agree with the view that language is a window into thought, but

I disagree with the view that meaning is computed by determining truth-values of propositions, which seems to me to be a result of a formalistic requirement. The interesting fact is that the members of a community share thoughts that result from the common stories and myths that formed their world view.

The second story has to do with convincing the main character, who is ordered to move to his mother's land for a few years as a punishment for a crime he had committed. The excerpt given here is the advice given by a male elder of his mother's family:

Why is Okonkwo with us today? This is not his clan. We are only his mother's kinsmen. He does not belong here. He is an exile, condemned for seven years to live in a strange land. And so he is bowed with grief. But there is just one question I would like to ask him. Can you tell me, Okonkwo, why it is that one of the commonest names we give our children is Nneka, or "Mother is Supreme?" We all know that a man is the head of the family and his wives do his bidding. A child belongs to its father and his family and not to its mother and her family. A man belongs to his fatherland and not to his motherland. And yet we say Nneka –'Mother is Supreme.' Why is that? (p.44)

These two passages, about the relationship between human and non-human nature on the one hand and human relationships on

the other, respectively show that the members of the community share narratives that form an important part of their thinking. Notice that anybody can understand how these shared narratives within a community contribute to the way they think. So it is important to attend to the fact that the point of these examples is not to suggest linguistic relativism, according to which features of particular languages shape the way the world is viewed and understood (Whorf, 1956, p.213). However, I do want to indicate that the conception of thoughts as propositions with truth-values might arise from a very specific world view based on verification of linguistic statements.

Apart from the fact that literature is also a type of communication, there is another reason why literary texts are ideal for illustrating a view of language which gives emphasis on narratives. A process similar to the encoding and decoding described at the outset seems to be at work when we, as readers, are deeply affected by literature. Readers often remark how deeply they are moved by certain works of fiction and poetry. Formally, this emotional-aesthetic effect must have a component that works by compositionality, for the desired effect is produced by the combination of linguistic units. (An interesting discussion of the aesthetic effect of literary work occurs in Pollock (2010)). The similarity in the nature of this effect to meaning stretches beyond compositionality to understanding the author's mind, which includes the affective devices the author has used.

Translation

The act of translation is not a mere act of translating words and following the grammatical rules of the target language. Unless the translator has a sense of the culture and myths of the source language, the translation will be inadequate. Given that Chinua Achebe is an *Igbo* speaker who chose to write in English, it is possible to imagine *Things Fall Apart* as a work of translation. The author's deep understanding of the source language and culture would explain the power of the novel. Although not narrated in the language of the region in which the novel is set and in which the conversations in the novel could plausibly have taken place, the novel is successful in communicating the shared stories that are unique to that culture and offer entertainment and wisdom to its members. The effective transmission of culturally specific stories in *Things Fall Apart* illustrates an aspect of translation that goes beyond the mechanical acts of finding roughly equivalent words in the target language and applying the grammatical rules. I wish to point out that the idea of a deep cultural sensibility is applicable to normal linguistic communication just as it is to the domain of translation.

Conclusion

The key idea in this paper that dealt with a spectrum of concepts such as grammar, meaning, truth-values, fiction and translation was the importance of narratives with respect to the mapping between language and thought. This is a fact that is not sufficiently appreciated by linguists of an internalist orientation. Taking a step

further, one might suggest that the reason why fiction is an effective tool for language teaching is a result of this. Further, narratives take on a special prominence because of the fact that human beings use language as a mediator between the outer world and the inner domain of ideas. A special focus on narratives with respect to language helps us understand the ways in which we relate to the world, as illustrated by the passages from *Things Fall Apart*.

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