Linguistics

A Very Short Introduction

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What can you expect on a very short introduction to linguistics? A whetting of appetite? To show that language is more than meets the eye? Or to give a more or less standard survey of what linguistic is all about? The book attempts to do all three and even with the ambition of going into some detail on some issues. This should be laudable. How well does it succeed?

First there is the question of language. We all have an insiders view, and hence we have some difficulty in observing language from a detached external perspective. In fact, what characterizes human language is its ability to speak about itself. It is to so speak, closed under taking meta, unlike formal languages, which the short text (wisely?) does not touch upon at all. This makes language into a philosophical problem, and in fact much of modern analytic philosophy is to a large extent centered around human language and its hidden subtleties. The next (once again wisely?) does not touch upon the philosophical issues, but it does point out the subtleties involved in ordinary speech and my implication that a very small part of a given language is actually codified into rules. For the Native speaker, as opposed to the one that acquires it as an additional skill, language precedes grammar. As we all know when we have achieve a certain mastery of a language, what matters is not to much grammar as the 'ear'. If something 'sounds good' it is bound to be grammatically correct, as far as the latter has any specified meaning. Poetry is of course the medium in which the rules of grammar are allowed to be flaunted, yet whose ultimate justification lies in 'sounding good'.

Language seems to be a uniquely human possession, and no other species seems to have anything that is close to it[1]. There are of course even among the lowly bees some sophisticated system of communication, but should it qualify as language anymore than commuter language that allows communication with a machine? Other primates have a wide repertoire of 'calls', but even that is hardly language, as it does not really allow itself to endless combinations. One notable feature of language is its propensity to feed on itself and combine diverse elements into structures with emerging features not present in any of its components. The whole is larger than the sum of its parts, to take on the holist's battle-cry.

Language is of course social, and as such much of it is exploited to nothing more than inanities. The small-talk of close friends serve no other purposes than mutual grooming

[1] Our continuity with other animals are more and more being stressed, and that gap which in former times was taken fro granted between man and beast seems more and more narrow and artificial, except for language. This might be the 'spiritual' element which makes this gap 'unbridgeable'. Biologists speak about the three major revolutions in evolution - multi-cellular life, sexual propagation and language.

does among great Apes. But it is also individual as a vehicle for thought. In far as thought is independent of language or not is a tricky philosophical obsession, which the text mentions briefly but does not enter into. Being social it is about communication. But communication is only possible where there really is from the onset a large set of shared assumptions. In fact in order for speech to be intelligible at all, there must be a shared view of the essentials to be communicated, i.e. the meaning of the message must be clear before. Thus in communication we pay much less attention to the words than to the meaning. The meaning being conveyed not only by verbal utterances but by gestures, tones of voice, and what is usually vaguely referred to as the general context. Thus there is a huge difference between spoken and written language. The former is intrinsic to man, people acquire language instinctively and automatically and have been doing so perhaps for a 100'000 years if not more. In other words we learn to talk just as we learn to walk. The written codification of language is a much later cultural invention, and still today only mastered by a minority of humans. However, the written form of language makes for many unsupported propositions, such as the dominant feature of the word as a basic building block. Do we really pay attention for individual words when we listen to someone? We probably do if we are not that familiar with the language, and which is a source for our problems. In fact in speech there are no divisions between words, they all merge with another, and indeed in ancient Greek and Latin texts there are no spaces between words, they all go together. To the reading eye this is confusing, but if you read aloud the meaning will come to you. Words we think of the smallest units of speech that carry meaning. But this is an afterthought. Even individual sounds are merged together, their precise pronounciation depending in in which sound context they appear. None of that we pay any attention to when we converse in a familiar idiom. Our instinctive way of understanding and producing speech is very different from the way we process written texts. I would not be surprised if the two processes involve very different brain functions.

Now the decoding of language into written text is very crude. And in fact there are many ways of making this encoding. The hieroglyphs of the Chinese (and the ancient Egyptians) is one way, which we now consider primitive and outmoded, although it is in many ways masterly, in particular when done consistently is also language independent. Chinese characters do not so much convey words as concepts, the reading of which are dependent upon the context. Of course concepts can combine to make other concepts, in ways that are both arbitrary convention as well as caused by congenial thought patterns[2] The other way is the more familair, namely the phonetic one, in which phonems are identified and given letters[3]. The problem is that there are more sounds than letters. Modern linguists have tried to remedy this in the obvious way by devising a phonetic alphabet of international acceptance, with one sign for every sound, and adding stresses. Still sounds vary more or less continually, not only from speaker to speaker, but also over time for a single speaker and, as we have already noted, differently depending on the position of the sound in a soundstream, preceding sounds not only influencing succeeding one, but in their turns being influenced in an anticipatory manner by what will follow. In

[2] Once I saw in a bookstore in Shanghai the Chinese characters for water and mountain respectively and instinctively realized that they must together mean landscape.

[3] Or as in the old Greek script Linear B, there are signs for each type of syllable

fact we are able to identify an individual speaker because of the very nature of his or her voice. Yet even the extended phonetic alphabet is unable to fully convey the subtleties of spoken language, involving a much higher degree of information than is possible by coded sequences of manageable length.

Languages are different, and indeed it is notoriously difficult to identify languages, in particular to make the distinction between a dialect of a language and a sister language. When this is done, the criteria are often more political than linguistic[4] . Thus it is hard to make an estimate of how many languages there are, but a standard figure that is often brandished is about five thousand of which at least half are in the immediate danger of expiration.

Now one of the most intriguing aspect of linguistics, or at least the one that is most easily appreciable, is the interrelatedness of languages, and the possibility of ordering them into an evolutionary tree. The basic idea is that just like species emerge by divergence of sub-species , languages multiply by splitting about. This is an analogy and cannot be pushed as far as the biological phenomenon, which ultimately is based on the basic parent-offspring relation working on the individual level. Languages occur as social entities with no individual components. They are so to speak objective and external from the point of view of the individual speaker, but subjective and internal from the perspective of social groups. A very exciting idea is that all languages have a common ancestor, and in a statistical way similar to the molecular studies of the DNA, one should be able not only to date individual branchings, but also get an idea of when human language was born, and even to some extent reconstruct such an 'Ur-language'. But of course even if linguistics is a science, it is not an exact one, and the larger ambitions may for ever be beyond reach.

Many naive ideas of languages are of course rampant, such that to each word there is an underlying concept, and in particular that exact translations should be possible between different languages. Such a krypto-Platonic conception is of course very off the mark. Different languages fashion the world differently. Even such basic concepts as say a 'horse' means slightly different things even in closely related languages such as German and English. In particular a common word may have many sub-sidiary satellites so to speak, the number of which will vary from language to language. More interesting is the question to what extent a language shapes your thinking. In Indo-European languages singular and plural are important categories, while in some others, this is not so much of an issue. In Germanic language we pay a lot of attention to when in time a certain action happened (notoriously making a difference between 'he has had' and 'he had had') while there are languages which dispense with such distinctions but instead make a point whether someone reports something directly having seen it with his own eyes, or only second-hand or maybe only assumed something from evidence. As the author points out, in languages such as English, you have a headache in grammatically the same way as you have a hat on your head. In other languages this foolish analogy is made impossible. One intriguing

[4] Swedish and Norwegian differ less between each other than do individual dialects within each of the language. But of course both languages have formal codifications, dictionaries and literature. So even if they are closer to each other than say the German spoken by Austrians and Germans of the north, they are nevertheless considered as separate languages, although speakers of both have no problem understanding each other without any preliminary study.

language does away with all relative space markers, such as 'in front of' and 'behind' and use objective ones. It is reported that such people have a much better understanding of their location, would they be handled blind-folded, than other speakers. This would be a very intriguing case for language influencing thought. Normally though, subtleties in one language which is hardwired in it can usually be conveyed in other languages by some circumspection. It does however have implications on the possibility of translating poetry.

Chomsky has proposed the controversial and subjective idea that language is hard-wired in the human brain, and that explains why children pick up languages so quickly and effortlessly during a short period in their infancy. Furthermore your mother tongue does not at all seem genetically imprinted, any child regardless of race can learn to speak any other language flawlessly as long as it is confronted with it during its window of language acquisition. This has further presented the idea of a universal grammar, the particulars of which are defined by cultural imprinting. So far there has been no explicit tie made between language acquisition and neurological pathways, but that of course does not mean that there are none, simply that the problem may be far too difficult to us. Furthermore, and maybe more damning, no persuasive model for a Universal grammar has been put forward, except for possibly tantalizing fragments. This problem seems more tractable yet hard enough to prevent failure of success to translate into rejection.

Finally I talked about depth of detail. This is afforded the study of the variety of phonems depending on context, even delving into the case of the eight vowels of Turkish. This makes for somewhat tedious reading although the hidden message is well taken, and has already been discussed briefly above.

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