Language in the Modern World

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This is yet another of those old and odd books I find in my library having no idea how it got there. Simeon Potter was a professor of linguistic at Liverpool and was born in 1898, according to the soft cover of the Pelican edition, but I have no idea when he died. There is nothing on him on Wikipedia and when googled only his books appear, apart from an excerpt in some biographical writing of David Crystal indicating his death occurring at the end of the seventies.

The aim of the book is to give for the general and curious reader an introduction to modern scientific linguistics, and he proceeds to present it in a systematic way. It starts with a short introductory chapter giving a brief overview, then follows a chapter taking the trouble to convince the reader that there is no connection whatsoever between language and race or nationality. The succeeding chapter is devoted to language as communication according to the chapter title, it is about sounds and how they are made. You learn a few interesting tidbits of facts, such as that you spend slightly more time breathing in than you do breathing out, but of course when you talk, you normally need to exhale, thus if you have much to say in a brief amount of time you may find yourself out of breath. You learn about phonemes, the smallest unit of sound, but the discrete classification of phonemes as equivalence classes of continuously varying sounds, differ from language to language. E.g. the k-sounds in 'keep cool and calm' are all different, because sounds change slightly depending on neighboring sounds, but as a Native English speaker you do neither notice nor care as you cannot substitute one k-sound for another and thereby change the meaning of a word, but in Arabic you can. Thus those different k-sounds make up the so called allophones of the English k-phoneme, while in Arabic the different k-sounds will be distributed among different k-phonemes, and no longer be allophones of the same phoneme. This makes it difficult for an English speaker to pronounce Arabic k's because they vary in ways English speakers are unaware of. Thus e.g. the 'k' in *kateb* (clerk) are different from the 'k' in *qara* (to read), which makes for confusion when it comes to transliterations, just think of *Quran* and *Koran*. The number and distribution of phonemes vary from language to language, English and Russian both have around 45 phonemes, although their positions differ a lot in 'sound-geography', while there are only twenty or so in some Polynesian dialects, and up to 75 in some dialects spoken in Caucasia. Another example is Polish with its two l's (one with a slash - ł) which distinguish *laka* (cane) from *łaka* (grace) but both occur in English but in different contexts, depending on whether before a vowel or before a consonant alternatively at the end of a word; so they cannot be substituted for each other in the same context. Such concrete information is always fascinating to partake of. It is of course remarkable that we as speakers can perform such complicated feats of articulation without even being conscious of it, let alone know how we ever acquired such skills. Once we become conscious of it we lose the flow and start to stammer, and in particular when we try and articulate in a language which we are unused to, and hence pay

particular attention as how to pronounce properly, we find ourselves stuttering. But the production of sound is just one part of communication, interpreting them in real time is a challenge by itself. In fact we only catch part of what is being said, the rest we interpolate because we already know to a large extent what is being said, but sometimes when it comes to names and telephone numbers confusion is legion. This is why, I think, comprehension of a foreign tongue, say as it appears in a movie or on the stage, goes quite abruptly from understanding next to nothing to understanding almost everything. As an aside, just as the mouth along with the vocal chords and the tongue was not designed for speech, but hijacked for that purpose in the evolutionary process, the ear initially served as an organ to maintain bodily equilibrium, something it still does, it later became co-opted for hearing. Yet examples of fascinating facts to know, just as supposedly the tonal range in speech is wider than in song.

Then a chapter on sounds and symbols, moving to a very different aspect of linguistics. The main thing to keep in mind that normally there is no connection between sounds and what they symbolize (with a few quasi-exceptions such as onomatopoetic words, which anyway differ between languages). The author also claims that man is the only animal which use symbols, and hereby we differ significantly from animals. This claim is controversial at many levels, I would say, there are claims that the apes can at least master protosymbols, although such claims tend to be made out from a certain measure of sensationalism and should always be taken with more than a grain of salt. However, they point to a more interesting question as to whether animals (pace Descartes) can think or not and to which we will return. To further emphasize the conventional and fortuitous connection between sounds and meanings one may think of the phenomenon of homophones of which there abounds in both English and French. The meaning of sound are never done in isolation but in context and thus there seldom arises any difficulties. This points to another important structure of languages, namely, I think, their top down character which is obscured by the grammatical structure imposed on their study. Grammar is not intrinsic to language only to its study. Grammar essentially means an analysis of language into atomic constituencies and to their subsequent synthesis. This is not how languages are learned naturally, and it is instructive to contemplate how machine translations have become much more efficient when not based on any structural analysis but on simple statistical patterns, this may not be what humans do, as there is not enough human cognitive capacity to feed on big data, but something similar comes into play when we develop an ear for what is acceptable or not, the normative features of grammars not being fine-grained enough to give guidance. As to the analysis of language into irreducible parts, the morpheme is the smallest meaningful unit of sound, this is fair enough, but are there such things as words really? Or are those just conventions characterized by being separated by blank spaces? Collingwood claims that they are indeed conventions, that entire idiomatic expressions should be treated a word, i.e. part of the vocabulary. In speech, words blend into each other with no actual physical separation, and this is particularly noteworthy in French where mute endings become audible when attached to the next word. The author tends to be in sympathy with Collingwood but spends the chapter discussing how words are formed and made, and of course discussing different types of words. It is noteworthy that some types of words, such as proper names and terminology can rather easily be transferred

from one language to another, but the way they are inflected must adhere to the intrinsic structure of the receiving language. Similarly structural words are much more resistant to transference being far deeper embedded in the language[1].

The sixth chapter deals with the shaping of sentences and is, not surprisingly, focused on syntax, i.e. how words fit together. However, when speaking a language of which you have a command, you spend as little time thinking of the syntactic synthesis as you do on the articulation of sounds. Quite possible, I suspect, you have some ready made templates in which you may do various substitutions as well as structural modifications. In fact the quickest way in which to achieve some kind of fluency in a foreign tongue is to learn a couple of such templates, or phrases, by heart, and thus spare yourself the trouble to build them up consciously from scratch. Admittedly sentence structures could be quite involved, but the principle is simple, namely the build up of the sentence by encapsulated clauses. It is those you actually keep in mind when speaking, as they carry the meanings of what you want to say[2], suitably qualified, and the production of those clauses is automatic. And once again we may appreciate the fluidity of notions such as sentence, clauses and words. Now, there are of course subtle questions of word order, in general highly inflected languages being more flexible, while those which are more isolating, such as Chinese and English, the significance of a word depends on its position, that information is not packaged with it.

Then follows two chapters on Indo-European and non-Indo-European language, with historical background and geographic description together with some comparisons. Then there is a chapter on the practical study of languages, where indeed it is pointed out that the sentence is the unit of speech, and that during the Second World War intensive language courses where designed for quick mastery. The emphasis was not on detached declinations and conjugations but drills on clauses and sentences on the basis of 'graded structures'. And this may also be the way children pick up their Native tongues, although this is of course speculation. I also suspect that this may have been the motivation of the so called 'nature method' popular in the 60's. But basically, what is needed is a total submersion in the language giving your expressive needs no outlet than the ambient tongue. This is of course almost a tautological statement, language study is not an intellectual activity, although it is of course treated as such in any academic context. How many children have not struggled with Latin and how many of them acquired any active use of it? Montaigne, supposedly, was brought up with Latin as a Native language by his father, who was not a Native speaker of it. No doubt he became a fluid reader and a competent writer, but did he not write his famous essays in French, just as French was the language of choice for Descartes.

A chapter on comparative linguistics mainly focuses on the differences between German and French, how the Germans enjoy great freedom in making compounds, while this is almost banned in French, and how they need to make verbal paraphrases instead. It seems that affinities between languages is demonstrated by their vocabularies, in fact there

[1] It has been noted that the importation of Scandinavian pronouns into English is rather remarkable.

[2] this seems to indicate that thinking is more basic than language, that the meaning comes first and the verbal expression afterwards, but as just without counting your sense of numbers would be very limited, language extends the reality of what you find meaningful

are even laws with scientific pretensions laying down how sounds changes, I am of course referring to Grimm's law, among Germanic languages, and its various generalizations, but the author also brings up similar laws formulated by the mathematician Grassmann. The historical reconstruction of various languages is based on word affinities, but many interesting features seem to hop up in relatively unrelated languages. In Swedish you make the distinction between 'he took his hat' and 'he took his own hat' by means of a pronoun, while in English the two meanings are often confused when you cannot derive it from the context. Russian also has that extra pronoun and it probably exists in many other languages. Another example is the definite form which usually is a separate word put in front, while in Scandinavian languages as well as in Romanian it is placed as a suffix. Sanskrit is the ultimate language for compounds, but many Indo-European languages no longer recognize this feature.

The two concluding chapters are disappointing though, they deal with fundamental philosophical questions concerning language, such as its relation to thought and its role in society. The author is good at concrete linguistic examples but philosophy is not his forte. What is the nature of thinking and how important is language for it? If animals have no internal language in what sense can we think of them as thinking entities with a self-consciousness? Animals, such as dogs with whom you have something of a relationship obviously display emotions with which you have little difficulty identifying with. The truly fascinating thing with language is that at the same time it is very private it is also very much collective. The notion of a truly private language does not really exist, so if Jung's notion of a collective unconsciousness has any reality beyond the rhetorical, it surely is language. Without language social life would be impossible. If now language is essential to thought, thinking cannot be done in isolation from other people, at least it cannot be developed without social contacts. According to the biologist Maynard-Smith and his co-author, language is the last major innovation of evolution, making a group of people into a super-organism, communication between them being absolutely essential for its very existence. How do we know that other people exist, that there are other minds? Logically we cannot prove it, but emotionally we feel it must be true, our linguistic bond to other people being stronger than logic. Language is indeed a collective effort and no one individually has control over it. True, individuals may make suggestions, but they can never enforce them, what catches on depends on the whims of the collective. No wonder that the notion of an ethnic identity more than anything is based on a shared language. We are more ready to accept those who sound like us but maybe not look like us, than the other way around. As private individuals we fear blindness more than deafness, because we feel that it is by sight we command and take part of the world; but when it comes down to it, deafness is supposedly harder to bear than blindness, as it makes us socially isolated. We cannot share visual beauty in the same direct way as we can share a language, and thereby hearing is essential. To read is not the same as listening, the written word does not touch us as deeply as the spoken. Of course many of us prefer the former because of its efficiency and we are greedy, but in the process we lose something. Socrates supposedly regretted the invention of the script as it made us independent of the oral tradition and the necessity to learn things by heart, What is more satisfying in the end: to have read many texts, of which we have forgotten the most, or to know one or two texts very intimately?

We were never evolved to read and write, yet of course many of us feel that the attraction to do so is irresistible. Is that the beginning of the end? No, Potter stays on the ground and refuses to soar into clouds, and much to his charm. Know your limitations!

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