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A COMMENT ON WITTGENSTEIN'S ACCOUNT OF LANGUAGE LEARNING PROCESS

Wittgenstein's pragmatic account of language is characterized by several important insights that mark a true turning point in contemporary approach to the phenomena of language learning process and verbal communication. These well-known and often quoted insights include: the philosopher's equation of meaning with use, his treatment of language as a game rather than as a calculus (i.e. as a set of explicit rules), his repudiation of the private language idea in favor of a social system shared by all community members and his idea of categorizing linguistic phenomena in accordance with the notion of family resemblance rather than essence. These insights have entailed a major shift in contemporary language studies, since the focus on actual and context dependent speech events occurring in the practice of everyday communication superseded formal, context-free and often purely theoretical constructs.

What also followed from Wittgenstein's approach to language phenomena was a strong emphasis on the social (i.e. 'public') dimension of natural language communication as opposed to mental and subjective (i.e., 'private' and 'idiosyncratic'). Obviously, one can hardly deny that every speech community should be defined on the basis of a certain set of phonological, semantic and syntactic rules shared by all language users in the community. Thus, when learning a *foreign* language, one surely *begins* by acquainting oneself with the general structure of the language. Accordingly, one learns whether the language is based on consonants or on vowels, whether its word order is VSO or SVO, and so on. However, the present paper will argue that focusing exclusively on the social dimension of the language learning process can hardly explain the miracle of acquiring a language that radically differs from one's mother tongue. Conse-

quently, we will argue for the importance of incorporating our cognitive abilities into a language theory, since the process of learning a radically different language is always greatly facilitated by tracking down any similarities. Moreover, we will make a point that if languages that are completely unrelated exhibit the same mechanisms, then it is plausible that the development is not arbitrary, but rather motivated by some universal cognitive processes. Hence, far from denying cultural variation, we will suggest that not the whole of the linguistic structure can be seen as purely conventional and contingent. Let us begin with Wittgenstein's account of the language learning process.

Obviously, the philosopher characterizes the language learning process as social training (1958 §§ 5-6). What is of particular importance is that Wittgenstein, unlike Quine¹, does not equate the process of acquiring one's first language with the process of learning a second one. In his famous critique of Augustine, Wittgenstein points out that the fallacy of Augustine consists precisely in identifying the task of a child with the task of an adult (1958 § 32). The philosopher explains that the fallacy results from failing to notice that no child has an earlier language that helps it in the process of language acquisition. The crucial difference between the task of a child and that of an adult is that the process of learning a second language is always based on one's mother tongue. The effect of it is that an adult is privileged inasmuch as his mother tongue, his cognitive abilities and his knowledge of the world are far more developed than those of a child. Additionally, as no child can ask theoretical questions (1958 § 6), Wittgenstein stresses that it is erroneous to treat a child "as if it already had a language, only not this one" (1958 § 32). Finally, the crucial difference between the task of a child and that of an adult is that the former does not seek to gain theoretical linguistic knowledge, which is always necessary for learning a foreign language. When a child learns a language it seeks practical insight into how to successfully function in a speech community. Thus, the difference resides in that a linguist seeks to know, while a child seeks to act in an appropriate manner.

Let us now return to the question how learning a language that radically differs from one's mother tongue can be possible. If the language learning process is nothing but a social training and if – at the same time – there is a difference between the process of acquiring one's first language and the process of learning a second one, then how could one ever understand, let alone learn, such a radically different language? It is hardly satisfactory to answer that acquiring it is tantamount to internalizing a set of rules accepted by the target community, for if the language is radically different, then so must be its rules that can be neither understood nor learned. There are at least two solutions to the problem. One can simply deny the possibility that two languages could be radically different on the basis of our ability to describe their alleged untranslatability: if they can be somehow described (translated, paraphrased etc.), then they cannot be radically disparate. This line of reasoning has been chosen by Davidson in his essay *On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme*². Nevertheless, one can accept that a language is radically different and at the same time explain our ability to learn it by appealing to universal cognitive mechanisms and fundamental mental processes. This line of reasoning has been chosen by cognitive linguists.

Cognitive linguistics proposes a revision of the innate-versus-learned controversy. It is postulated that some of our faculties are inborn, while other are socially acquired. Our language

¹W.V.O. Quine, *Word and Object*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1960.

²D. Davidson, *Inquires into Truth and Interpretation*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1984.

communication and language learning processes can best be understood as an interface between the biological and the social. Thus, in some aspects of human communication, the biological (or 'the innate') level will be crucial (e.g. articulation, audition, comprehension, inference abilities, learning skills etc.), whereas in others the cultural (the 'socially constructed') one will be vital (e.g. values, specific semantic, syntactic and phonological rules, social roles etc.). Hence, it seems reasonable to assume that inasmuch as the biological and the social clearly influence each other, it is best not to favor one over the other, lest either the universal or the culture specific aspects of language communication be neglected.

As the Hamito-Semitic group is genetically and typologically unrelated to the Indo-European group, an example from the Arabic language should shed some light on the importance of incorporating the cognitive dimension into any language learning and communication theory. In Arabic, there is no verb 'to have'. Consequently, possessive relations are coded by various prepositions, such as for example the preposition 'inda ('near, by, with, on'). In the phrase: 'inda al-bayt' the preposition designates the relation of proximity so that the whole phrase translates into English as 'near the house' or 'at the house'. The phrase 'inda ahmad^a bayt^{un}', designates however the relation of possession, for while the phrase literally means 'near Ahmad house', it translates into English as 'Ahmad has a house'.

On hearing that there is no verb 'to have' in Arabic, one may at first wonder if the 'exotic' language can tackle the problem of signifying possession at all and subsequently be truly disappointed to find out how it does. It is the disappointment that should concern us most, for it clearly shows that understanding comes here spontaneously and automatically, even though the structure of Arabic is radically different from that of the Indo-European languages. The cognitive mechanism is obviously quite natural: Arabic metaphorically projects the physical relation of spatial proximity onto the abstract domain of possession. It precisely is here that our cognitive abilities come into the picture: we can understand and learn the Arabic possessive constructions, since we too can metaphorically project the physical relation of spatial proximity onto the abstract domain of possession.

At the same time, we wish to side with Lakoff³, who cautions that our ability to understand and learn a radically different language should not be hastily taken as an argument that the language cannot be radically different. Davidson throws the baby out with the bath, as he reduces the problem to translatability of the languages: if they can be translated (or paraphrased), then they cannot be radically different. Cognitive linguistics offers a more promising approach to the issue of language radical incompatibility. One of the most important tenets in cognitive linguistics has it that many cross-linguistically common metaphors are based on fundamental human experience and universally understandable ways of interpreting the world. That is why we have no problems with understanding that Arabic has developed a system of conventionalized metaphors that portrays possession in terms of physical proximity, even though the conventions of our language are quite different. That is also why it seems advisable to assume that in the process of learning a foreign language we activate certain universal conceptual abilities that no social training can substitute for.

³G. Lakoff, *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things: What Categories Reveal About the Mind*, Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 1987

The cognitive avenue is naturally closed down for an anti-mentalist. Wittgenstein rejects the idea that understanding a language could be something as obscure and unverifiable as a mental state (e.g. 1958 § 154). Wittgenstein accentuates the social dimension of training into communication. Whenever the philosopher makes a seemingly universalist declaration, such as when he speaks (1958 § 206) of ‘common behavior of mankind’ as a frame of reference for interpreting a foreign language, he appears to have in mind a particular cultural community at a given historical moment rather than the whole of biological mankind. This can be attested by his cryptic comments on the significance of ‘very general facts of nature’ (1958 II:XII). Wittgenstein observes that studying natural sciences would be advisable only if nature could be shown to underlie the formation of our concepts. He seems to suggest, however, that facts of nature do not motivate grammar, for if one imagined alternative facts of nature than one could understand the formation of alternative concepts.

Thus, *le signe linguistique* seems to Wittgenstein just as *arbitraire* as it is for de Saussure.⁴ Wittgenstein is not concerned with natural science, because he considers linguistic conventions to be purely historical and contingent. As de Saussure⁵ maintains that ‘le principe de l’arbitraire du signe (...) domine toute la linguistique de la langue’, so Wittgenstein contrasts ‘very general facts of nature’ with the arbitrary, conventional and contingent language phenomena. The emphasis on the arbitrary, contingent and conventional nature of the linguistic sign is supposed to underpin its social aspect, so as to guarantee some verification possibilities. That is precisely why the founder of structuralism rejects ‘le point de vue du psychologue, qui étudie le mécanisme du signe chez l’individu’, since his method ‘ne conduit pas au delà de l’exécution individuelle et n’atteint pas le signe, qui est social par nature’⁶. It is evident that both de Saussure and Wittgenstein are primarily concerned with the social dimension of language communication, for this safeguards intersubjectivity against unbridled methodological chaos, which inevitably breaks loose, when the meaning of a word is equated with the subject’s mental state.

Notwithstanding all this, we wish to argue that excessive emphasis of the social dimension of language learning and communication results in grossly distorted account of these phenomena, since language learners and communication participants are presented as uncreative automata that do nothing but passively duplicate the linguistic conventions of their society. Wittgenstein replaces all psychological views of understanding as some sort of mental process with a more pragmatically oriented view of it as ability. Still, the ability to use a word does not rule the possibility of misunderstanding, for every language user happens at times to use a word whose meaning is more or less obscure to them. Every language user, and a foreign language learner in particular, every now and again gropes for a language expression: his understanding of it may be partial or quite idiosyncratic (‘private’) and yet he may be using it all the time. Could it be that Wittgenstein’s rejection of all mentalist views of understanding in favor of a social account of it leads to the idea of language as a code, where all activity and creativity of interlocutors becomes obliterated? Language communication, language learning and – as previously observed – foreign language learning in particular – are far more creative than that. Should the idea of family resemblance not apply to the very activity of understanding as well, for it seems that Wittgen-

⁴F. de Saussure, *Cours de linguistique générale*, Payot, Paris, 1967.

⁵Ibidem, p. 100.

⁶Ibidem, p. 34.

stein's view of understanding presupposes the existence of clear-cut cases only rather than scalar ones. However warranted, the promotion of social constructionism in communication should not be tantamount to a careless disregard for the cognitive dimension of communication, for this may result in trivialization of the whole complexity of language learning and communication processes, where interlocutors are reduced to mindless machines that unreflexively abide by the existing social conventions.

Now, we shall look more closely into a phenomenon which clearly demonstrates that not all linguistic conventions are purely contingent and that *le signe linguistique* is hardly as *arbitraire* as it has been proclaimed. Cognitive linguistics makes use of Peirce's idea that not all types of signs are arbitrary, since some of them are motivated by the special function they perform. Peirce's indices, whose linguistic equivalent is anaphora, are analogical to linguistic gestures, as their function is to steer the addressee's attention. Cognitive analyses of anaphora show that nature can underlie the formation of certain concepts. We will also see that imagining alternative facts of nature that could give rise to formation of alternative concepts is not always pragmatic. What is important for our understanding of the language learning and communication processes is that facts of nature can and often do motivate grammar. Consequently, in the light of the fact that it is hardly the whole of the linguistic structure that is purely conventional and arbitrary, the importance of incorporating our cognitive abilities into a language theory will become clear.

Bühler⁷ was one of the first to point out the correlation between demonstratives and a deictic pointing gesture. Two important points need to be made here. Firstly, as deictic pointing occurs in all cultures it seems reasonable to assume that demonstratives are universal. Secondly, as demonstratives are used not only exophorically but also endophorically, it is plausible that certain ways in which demonstratives structure the discourse will also be universal. We shall illustrate this with the phenomenon of anaphoric coreference. The cognitive approach to anaphoric coreference is founded on the premise that in order to identify the referent of an anaphora we need to have an access to it. The approach has been prepared and worked out by, among others, Chafe⁸, Givón⁹, Ariel¹⁰ and van Hoek¹¹. What all those accounts have in common is that they treat lin-

⁷K. Bühler, *Sprachtheorie*, Fischer, Jena 1934.

⁸W.L. Chafe, *Givenness, contrastiveness, definiteness, subjects, topics and point of view*, in: Li Charles N. (Ed.), *Subject and Topic*. Academic Press, New York, 1976, pp. 25-55; idem (Ed.), *The Pear Stories: Cognitive, Cultural, and Linguistic Aspects of Narrative Production*. Ablex, Norwood, NJ, 1980; idem, *Cognitive constraints on information flow*, in: Tomlin R.I (Ed.), *Coherence and Grounding in Discourse. Typological Studies in Language*, Vol. XI, Benjamins, Amsterdam, 1987 pp. 21-51; idem, *Grammatical Subjects in Speaking and Writing*, in: *Text* 11, 1991, pp. 45-72; idem, *Discourse, Consciousness, and Time: The Flow and Displacement of Conscious Experience in Speaking and Writing*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1994.

⁹T. Givón, *Topic Continuity in Discourse: An Introduction*; idem, *The Grammar of Referential Coreference as Mental Processing Instructions*, in: *Technical Report* 89-7, Eugene: University of Oregon, 1989.

¹⁰M. Ariel, 1988, *Referring and Accessibility*, "Journal of Linguistics" 24, pp. 65-87; idem, *Accessing Noun Phrase Antecedents*, Routledge, New York, 1990.

¹¹K. van Hoek, *Conceptual Reference Points: A Cognitive Grammar Account of Pronominal Anaphora Constraints*, "Language" 71, 1995, pp. 310-340; idem, *Anaphora and Conceptual Structure*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago/London, 1997.

guistic phenomena as affording a window into the cognitive mechanisms of identifying nominal referents, which is absolutely crucial for language communication.

Thus, Chafe has characterized the distinction between given and new information in terms of activation and accessibility, on the assumption that the distinction could only make sense if cognitive processing and consciousness were included into the language theory. In a similar vein, Givón treated grammatical construction as instructions for mental processing, which prompt the interlocutors to establish appropriate relations between the discourse chunks. Both scholars assumed that just as natural language communication is dependent on directing the interlocutors' attention in a particular manner, so is discourse interpretation dependent on keeping track of reference. Having adopted Chafe's and Givón's ideas Ariel characterized the distinction between full noun phrases and pronouns in terms of their accessibility. Thus, noun phrases indicate low accessibility (they appear when the referent cannot be easily recovered from the context), whereas pronouns indicate high accessibility (they appear when the referent can be easily recovered from the context). The idea that accessibility is prominence within the consciousness of a language user has been further developed by van Hoek in her examination of anaphora constraints.

Van Hoek has worked out her account of restrictions on anaphora on the basis of Cognitive Grammar Theory laid down by Langacker.¹² In Langacker's reference point model one entity (the reference point) is used to recall (make mental contact with) another (the target). Langacker assumes that since no entity can be located on its own, the target is the entity that the subject seeks to identify and the reference point is a salient object that makes the identification possible. Drawing on Langacker's model, van Hoek considers certain nominals to perform the function of conceptual reference points. If a speaker portrays a situation or an entity by using a full nominal form, then the form becomes a prominent concept that serves as the reference point for the remainder of the discourse. When referring to the same situation or entity, the speaker does not use a full nominal form (which has already been established as the reference point), but a pronoun, which only draws the addressee's attention to it. The general idea is that every nominal phrase provides access for its corresponding pronoun. Consider the following sentences:

- 1) Muhammad beats his wife.
yaḍribu muḥammad^{un} zawġatahu.
- 2) *He beats Muhammad's wife.
**huwa yaḍribu zawġata muḥammadⁿ.*

In this particular case, it is the linear order that sets up the reference point. In sentence 1) the nominal ('Muhammad') is the reference point as it precedes the pronoun ('his'). It is the linear order that provides the reference point which enables us to interpret what the reference of the pronoun is. Sentence 2) is unacceptable (under the co-referential reading), since we cannot refer the pronoun 'his' to the nominal ('Muhammad'). Thus, the interpretation of the pronoun

¹²R.W.Langacker, *Foundations of Cognitive Grammar*, vol. I: *Theoretical Prerequisites*, Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1987; idem, *Foundations of Cognitive Grammar*, vol. II: *Descriptive Application*, Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1991a; idem, *Concept, Image and Symbol. The Cognitive Basis of Grammar*, Berlin/New York, Mouton de Gruyter, 1991b; idem, *Reference point constructions*, "Cognitive Linguistics" 4 (1), 1993, pp. 1-38; idem, *Grammar and Conceptualization*, Berlin/New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 1999; idem, *Concept, Image and Symbol*, Berlin/New York, Mouton de Gruyter, 2002.

is blocked. The nominal 'Muhammad' holds the opening position in the linear sequence of expressions and for that reason it is a reference point that initiates the Information Flow process and enables the addressee to establish mental contact with everything that follows it. In our example, 'Muhammad' can function as a reference point, since it is introduced to the addressee's consciousness first. Apart from the linear word order, van Hoek considers also other important factors that greatly contribute to a nominal's becoming a reference point (such as prominence and conceptual connectivity), but due to the necessary limitations of our paper we cannot discuss them in full detail.

Suffice it to say that van Hoek has made a good case for her thesis that every grammar conventionalizes the patterns of reference point selection, so that the speaker and the addressee are not forced to introduce and identify reference point over and over again. What is important in Van Hoek's account of anaphora constraints is that it is carried out in semantic and pragmatic terms: nouns are differentiated from pronouns on the basis of the assumption that different nominals must differently portray their referents and, therefore, indicate different degrees of accessibility. As van Hoek shows that nouns and pronouns differ with regard to their construal of the scene, she incorporates discourse and context information into of the meaning of nominals.

Last but not least, van Hoek's analysis of restrictions on anaphora prompts us to consider the issue of possible universality of certain cognitive mechanisms. Naturally, such considerations must be corroborated by research conducted on a much larger scale and even then such considerations should always be regarded as tentative and subject to revision. Nonetheless, for the time being it appears that ascribing universality to such phenomena as the importance of the linear order for the selection of reference points can be quite useful in the process of learning a foreign language. If the language is radically different from one's mother tongue then the existence of universal cognitive mechanisms may facilitate the acquisition process. Needless to say, different languages will employ very different conventions, however it seems quite safe to assume with van Hoek that pronouns will universally indicate higher accessibility than full nominal phrases.

It is a matter of our decision whether we concentrate on potentially universal grammatical phenomena (and their corresponding cognitive mechanisms) or on culture-specific conventions (and their corresponding incompatibilities). Nevertheless, the process of learning a radically different language is always greatly facilitated by tracking down any similarities. These similarities cause certain aspects of the target language to be understood and learned almost automatically. Having acquired this common ground, we can proceed to studying all those contingent conventions that regulate the word order, semantics etc. It goes without saying that a concern for the universal dimensions of natural language communication should never be tantamount to negating cultural variation. However if languages that are completely unrelated exhibit the same mechanisms, than it is plausible and useful to assume that the development is not arbitrary, but rather motivated by some universal cognitive processes.

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A Comment on Wittgenstein's Account of Language Learning Process

ABSTRACT. The paper confronts the account of language learning process that emerges from the works of Wittgenstein with a more cognitively oriented one. It shows that an exclusive focus on the social dimension of language learning process cannot explain the miracle of acquiring a language that radically differs from one's mother tongue. Thus, the article aims to make a case for the effectiveness of incorporating our cogni-

tive capacities into a language theory by highlighting two important issues. Firstly, the process of learning a radically different language is significantly facilitated by tracking down any commonalities and, secondly, if genetically unrelated languages exhibit the same mechanisms, then the development appears rather to be motivated than arbitrary. Both issues point to the usefulness of heeding general cognitive mechanisms which are responsible for the commonalities and the similar development.