ANDRZEJ PAWELEC
Jagiellonian University in Kraków
andrzej.pawelec@uj.edu.pl

"A HUMAN FACE" OF COGNITIVE LINGUISTICS

Abstract

In this article, I want to put forward the following argument: Cognitive Linguistics – after a long hegemony of Chomskyan formalist linguistics – has offered models of language as "motivated" by general and prior cognitive abilities; as such it has been able to provide representations of a much wider range of linguistic phenomena (both grammatical and lexical); however, the "human face" of Cognitive Linguistics is that of a generic human being rather than that of actual people: members of particular social communities in which languages develop through "figuration" and "articulation".

1. Introduction

It seems advisable to state at the beginning that the following assessment of the shift in linguistics from Chomsky's formalist approach to Lakoff's cognitive approach is a personal take written from the point of view of a former "fellow traveller". As a student, I was duly impressed by the publication in Polish (1988) of Lakoff and Johnson's manifesto of Cognitive Linguistics (CL). In the next two decades, I was privileged to see at close quarters how CL was expertly popularised by Tabakowska (1995, 2001, 2004) and applied by her with unequalled insight to Translation Studies (Tabakowska 1991, 1993, 2013). I was sufficiently enthusiastic about the potential of this approach to write a cognitivist manifesto of my own (Pawelec 1999) and embark on a detailed presentation of "Lakoff's circle" as well as a critique of their contributions to linguistics and other fields (Pawelec 2005, 2006a). Subsequently, I recanted my cognitivist credo in the journal which hosted my previous apology (Pawelec 2006b) and offered a final critique of Lakoff in a publication commemorating the 30th anniversary of *Metaphors we live by* (Pawelec 2009a/2014).

If I mention my cognitivist itinerary, it is in the hope that my case may have a more general significance. My background is that of a social philosopher investigating the importance of social practices – primarily, linguistic ones – in the development of humanity. Since the early 90s, I have been influenced the most by the work of Charles Taylor (culminating in Taylor 2016) and through him by the phenomenological-hermeneutic tradition (Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Gadamer, Ricoeur). If one wanted to summarize this tradition in one sentence, a good choice would be Gadamer's claim (2004: 470): "Being that can be understood is language", which underlines the universality of language as the medium of understanding – as the very condition of having a world one can make sense of.

The necessary mediation of language (or better, "languaging", see section 2) in the development of human understanding leads to the problem of origins and the role of metaphor. In the Romantic tradition, explored by Taylor, this role was famously expressed by Shelley in his *A defense of poetry*:

> language is vitally metaphorical; that is, it marks the before unapprehended relations of things and perpetuates their apprehension until words, which represent them, become, through time, signs for portions or classes of thought instead of pictures of integral thoughts: and then, if no new poets should arise to create afresh the associations which have been thus disorganised, language will be dead to all the nobler purposes of human intercourse (after Richards 1965: 90–91).

Richards (1965: 92) endorses Shelley's account and concludes that metaphor is not merely a linguistic ornament but "the omnipresent principle of language". All who share this attitude, like myself, would easily warm up to Lakoff and Johnson's (1980: 228) belief in metaphor's centrality and their goal to offer an account of "imaginative rationality": "an account of how understanding uses the primary resources of the imagination via metaphor and how it is possible to give experience new meaning and to create new realities". Their idea that metaphor is like a new "sense" would be even more resonant:

> It is as though the ability to comprehend experience through metaphor were a sense, like seeing or touching or hearing, with metaphors providing the only ways to perceive and experience much of the world. Metaphor is as much a part of our functioning as our sense of touch, and as precious (Lakoff, Johnson 1980: 239).

In the following, I propose first to elucidate some intuitions informing the "Romantic view" of language as constitutive of humanity. This account will serve then as a background to assess the shortcomings of the cognitive view of language ("mentalism").

2. Language as constitutive

This section's title is borrowed from Taylor (2016) and follows his account. In the subtitle of his latest book Taylor promises to describe "the full shape of the human

linguistic capacity". Such an ambitious promise is clearly directed against alternative accounts of language – primarily, as "encoding and communicating information" (Taylor 2016: ix) – which Taylor calls "enframing" and views as partial and stifling. Taylor's task at hand is part of his more general mission to retrieve the sources of the human condition which have been lost from view mostly as a result of the modern scientific revolution (disenchantment of nature) and its ideologies (naturalism, reductionism, scientism). Taylor's project is thus congruent with the phenomenological-hermeneutical agenda of "bracketing" the constituted, ready-made world in order to reveal our (otherwise hidden from view) constituting, world-shaping involvements.

The creative "work" of metaphor – invoked by Shelley – is discussed by Taylor first under the rubric "the figuring dimension of language". This felicitous expression (conveniently related in English to "figures of speech" and "figurative language", the gestaltist "figure/ground" opposition, and also, perhaps, to "figuring out" puzzles or riddles) generally means 'giving shape to entities'. The role of figurative language is here limited to figuring (shaping) one thing in terms of another, "framing" it as something else. Thus, one could call "mouse" a computer device similar in function to "trackball" (a pedestrian label, merely pointing out the function). The new, imaginative name frames the device in a particular way (on the basis of a rather remote similarity) and brings with it (without actually spelling out) possible suggestions (e.g. the device is a 'homely thing'). Such "meaning extensions" are ubiquitous in language because there is a social need to name new entities (*inopiae causa*) and, perhaps even more, to provide them with expressive labels (hence a staggering number of imaginative synonyms for existentially important things). Additionally, framing (whether linguistic, or pictorial) is exploited for rhetorical purposes in propaganda, commercials and similar ventures.

This way of "figuring" our world is certainly not just "ornamental" but it is a far cry from Shelley's belief in the creative power of metaphor. What Shelley and other Romantics have in mind is the power to "apprehend" something – to make it generally accessible – for the first time. In such cases the entity in question is not accessible independently (like the computer device mentioned before) but is merely felt in an unspecified way and gets into focus as a result of apt naming (*le mot juste*). This reconfiguration of experience – analogous perhaps to a gestalt switch which allows one to see the background as a figure in its own right – is called by Taylor "articulation". An example is provided by Ricoeur (1967) in his discussion of the symbolism of evil: first as 'defilement' (external contamination), then as 'sin' (erring of some kind) and finally as 'guilt' (an internal burden weighing on one's conscience). We can immediately appreciate that these terms refer to very different ways of experiencing evil. What remains unclear is the historical passage from one stage to another which must have involved much more than acts of (re)naming. The process of articulation as investigated by Ricoeur involves not only symbols, which "give rise to thought" (Ricoeur 1967: 347–357), but also, and necessarily so, stories (myths) depicting paradigmatic situations and scenarios which reconfigure everyday experience, provide "templates through which people can understand

their life" (Taylor 2016: 292). Narratives, according to Taylor, are irreplaceable in this role because they portray "defining moments" and "transitions", thus offering insight which cannot be paraphrazed, reduced to a "take-home lesson". Good stories make tangible – for the first time – the complexity of human condition in a particular situation. Something similar may be said about poetic articulations of individual experience, while philosophical articulations aspire to universal significance (cf. Pawelec 2009b). We can now see better perhaps why the neologism "languaging" is apt to describe the active power of language to fix and extend the contours of our common worlds as opposed to the "enframing" view of language interpreted as a tool to express ideas or concepts.

To round off this all-too-brief presentation I want to return to Shelley's statement about the "poetic origins" of language. It is perhaps easier to see now why he believes that without new poets "language will be dead to all the nobler purposes of human intercourse" (Shelley 2004 [online]). This is because existing articulations "sink in", they are taken for granted as given, as what is habitually believed and done (Heidegger's notion of *Das Man*, 1962: par. 27) and as a result they are deprived of the originary force they exerted as spiritual discoveries (defining moments and transitions in Taylor's account). As for Shelley's belief that language was a poetic invention, a creative work of genius, it seems rather dubious. There are many evolutionary scenarios of language genesis on offer. Despite their differences they make it abundantly clear that human individuality is an outcome of language, hence it cannot be assumed as its foundation. The necessary prerequisite of languaging is an ability of early humans to act "in unison" (Jordania 2006, 2011), to keep together in time (McNeill 1995), synchronizing their movements and voices (Mulloch, Trevarthen 2009). This conclusion is congruent with developmental evidence, as formulated by Vygotsky (1978: 57):

> Every function in the child's cultural development appears twice: first, on the social level, and later, on the individual level; first, between people (interpsychological) and then inside the child (intrapsychological). This applies equally to voluntary attention, to logical memory, and to the formation of concepts. All the higher functions originate as actual relationships between individuals.

3. The cognitivist agenda?

The developmental evidence offered by Vygotsky and Trevarthen (among others) is especially significant because it is directly opposed to the assumption shared by first (Chomsky) and second (Lakoff) generation Cognitive Science, namely that language is primarily a mental program ("competence") which is verbally expressed only subsequently ("performance"). The difference between them concerns the shape of this entity: whether it is a language module operating the innate system of "universal grammar" (Chomsky), or a general cognitive system of acquired (pre)conceptual structures and operations on them (Lakoff).

Out of the two, Chomsky's mentalism may seem not only more incredible, but also redundant. After all, his theory of language is formalist, attempting in its various avatars (generative grammar, principles and parametres model, minimalist program) to offer a satisfactory description of linguistic forms (primarily, syntax) as an autonomous system. Thus, any external rationale for the existence of this system is not strictly necessary. However, as explained by Harman (2004) to students and colleagues who "sometimes seem puzzled about mentalistic assumptions in Chomskean [sic] linguistics" it made sense for Chomsky to espouse the following "mentalistic speculation about language learning" in the early 60s, in the wake of his scathing review of Skinner's *Verbal behavior*:

> Suppose that the constraints needed for English grammar are not learned. Suppose that they are somehow innate in a child's language faculty. Then, since the child is capable of acquiring any language depending on its environment, the same constraints should be found in the grammar of any language and should be part of universal grammar. This hypothesis predicts that the study of English grammar can tell us things about French, or Japanese, or Turkish grammar, an empirical prediction (Harman 2004: online).

In other words, the perceived inadequacy of behaviouristic explanations of language acquisition ("the poverty of the stimulus") convinced Chomsky to postulate an innate language faculty which would underwrite generalizations of his model. There are at least two problems with this move. First, the rejection of empiricist scenarios of language acquisition (linguistic utterances viewed as stimuli) does not lead to linguistic nativism as the fall-back position. There is a whole range of options between the mind treated as "tabula rasa" and the mind innately equipped with a language module. Second, the "poverty of the stimulus" argument wrongly reduces linguistic utterances to stimuli (Deacon 1997: 84–92) and misses crucial elements of the social situation which make language acquisition possible, cf. Taylor (2016: 52ff) on the ontogenesis of language. In short, I view Chomsky's recourse to mentalism as a very successful rhetorical move: it has given his formalist work on English syntax a universalist look and as a result provided a powerful impetus to similar research on other languages.

Mutatis mutandis, the same could be concluded about Lakoff and Johnson's mentalism despite their all-out attack on Chomsky:

> There is no Chomskyan person, for whom language is pure syntax, pure form insulated from and independent of all meaning, context, perception, emotion, memory, attention, action, and the dynamic nature of communication. Moreover, human language is not a totally genetic innovation. Rather, central aspects of language arise evolutionarily from sensory, motor, and other neural systems that are present in 'lower' animals (Lakoff, Johnson 1999: 6).

As I pointed out in my assessment of their critique, which – on the face of it – looks eminently sensible (Pawelec 2007), Lakoff and Johnson misconstrue Chomsky's position since they disregard the division of labour between "competence" and "performance". Chomsky himself would be the first to admit that there is no "Chomskyan

person" since his theory deals with an idealized construct called "I-Language" (internal one) as opposed to "E-Language" (external one) and it is only the latter which involves "meaning, context, perception" and so on. As for the phylogenesis of language, Lakoff and Johnson's description is in my view not sufficiently removed from Chomsky's account as it does not involve a socially embodied account of language genesis (cf. Donald 1991; Taylor 2016).

The same goes for Lakoff and Johnson's account of the "work" of metaphor, as expressed in an early passage which, to the best of my knowledge, has never been developed: "A portion of the conceptual network of battle partially characterizes the concept of an argument, and *the language follows suit*" (Lakoff and Johnson 1980: 7, my emphasis). Language seems quite inert in this account: it merely provides labels for the outcomes of independent, prior and cryptic cognitive processes. There is no visible effort in the publications of "Lakoff's circle" to provide social contexts which would help us understand how metaphors are born and "die" (in English), or rather "fall asleep" and "wake up" (Müller 2008). What they offer is a model of a range of linguistic phenomena (primarily, collocations and idioms) which has been extended (to cover nonce words) by Fauconnier and Turner (2002) in their theory of "blending". Such models are useful as they can show with some clarity the outcomes of "figuration" in language; the work of linguistic figuration is, however, obscured by mentalistic rhetoric.

To justify (and properly qualify) this claim would take volumes (cf. Pawelec 2005, 2009c for two limited attempts). In a nutshell, however, the task of understanding language requires a broader perspective, encompassing its unbreakable bonds with "thought and reality" (to allude to the title of Whorf 1956). It is, of course, natural and necessary for science to abstract from the background in order to delimit a field of investigation. Such a move was famously made by the father of modern linguistics who proposed to explain language as a synchronic system of signs (*langue*), in opposition to the vagaries of actual linguistic utterances (*parole*) and diachronic change (Saussure 1959). In my view, the cognitivist agenda is a development of Saussure's structuralism. Chomsky reformulated semiotic *langue* (a particular system of arbitrary linguistic signs) as a mental *competence* (the idealized universal mental capacity underlying language production). In both cases, the proposed area of investigation is autonomous, separated from *parole/performance*. As a result of Chomsky's move, the underlying reality of language is no longer viewed as a symbolic system of oppositions but rather as a formalized set of rules. Despite their claims to the contrary, Lakoff and Johnson's approach is a version of Chomsky's mentalism: language is an unconscious conceptual mechanism generating semantically interpretable output (cf. Pawelec 2005: 154–7). Even if their semantic mentalism, as opposed to the formalist variant, takes into account much of the psychological and social background necessary for the interpretation of linguistic units, it enlists this background as ready-made (the result of universal cognitive processes and particular cognitive models), rather than as constituted by social interaction in human history. Consequently, the evolutionary and cultural processes constitutive of "language, thought and (human) reality" are partly lost from view.

4. Conclusions

The shortcomings of CL, especially in the version developed in "Lakoff's circle", have been repeatedly pointed out (for instance, McLure 1993; Leezenberg 2001; Krzeszowski 2002; Rakova 2002; Haser 2005; Snaevarr 2009). My aim here was not to add (yet again) to this literature but to point out that figuration in language – so extensively researched by CL – is essentially social. The "human face" of linguistics is the face of languaging communities.

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