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The 'language' problem

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Abstract

When we talk metaphorically of language as a 'thing' or a 'structure', we are using a 'systematically misleading expression' [Ryle, G., 1951. Systematically Misleading Expressions. In: Flew, A. (Ed.), Essays on Logic and Language (I). Basil Blackwell, Oxford]. The term makes us think of human communication and understanding in ways that make it difficult to approach what actually happens for the persons engaged in communicating. What we are doing when understanding and acting on anything verbal must therefore also be analyzed psychologically. Some of the reasons for this claim and some consequences of it are sketched. Similar notions have been expressed by William James, Otto Jespersen, and Peter Naur.

Keywords: Psychology of language; Language use; Habit; William James; Otto Jespersen

1. Introduction

'Right there! By now we are beginning. When we reach the end of the story we know more than we do now, for it was an evil wizard, one of the worst kind, it was the ''Divil''' (Hans Christian Andersen, *The Snow Queen* transl. JH). We know quite well this 'Divil', for he is the same as our familiar mental laziness. This laziness deters us from engaging with new ideas; they may be too cumbersome. Before I discuss some of our delusions regarding the word 'language', I must concede that they are well-nigh indescribable; because talking about them is in conflict with the whole complex of familiar ideas they belong to. I invite you to try a thought experiment: what if the term *language* were ignored? Granted that it exists and can be found in our dictionaries, what if we nevertheless treated it as signifying a fiction of which

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only the *consequences* are real (like any other self-fulfilling prophecy, cp. Rosenthal and Jacobson, 1968)? Will this be difficult? So I thought, too. But bear with me.

Imagine that our words and the rest of the world are connected in more simple ways than we normally consider; our expectations of and attitudes to words are of approximately the same magnitude of importance for their functioning as what they signify in the world – or their relationships to other words. This involves recognizing a triadic relationship between the words, the world and *ourselves* (in a way envisaged in Bühler (1934) and Ogden and Richards (1923)). It is not only the relationship between words and the world that is important: *we*, too, always play a decisive role for the functioning of words.

How is it that we are bad at teaching Danish to foreigners, or foreign languages to Danes (cp. Andersen et al., 2006)? This question is my starting point. Teaching someone a second language seems a hard job. So where is the problem? Is there some defect in the learners? Or does the defect reside in *what* they are trying to learn? Or are they, perhaps, simply being taught by outdated teaching methods?

The cases I have come across are trivial (referring to pupils being unable to grasp language teaching with a great dose of grammar in it). But I am inclined to think there is more to it. One serious delusion we may entertain about the word *'language'* is the idea that it denotes something definite (Naur, 1995, cp. Harris, 1999). And that it consequently might have anything but a mythical existence (cp. Harris, 1981 and "The Language Myth" Conference, 2000). Where our mother tongue is concerned this delusion is masked, because we are accustomed to that language always being all around us and inside us. We believe that the words said may be studied as something allegedly separated from ourselves. But this is not really so. If neither you, nor I, nor any third person happens to be present, then there *can exist* no verbal phenomenon to be observed at all. It needs a human being to be dissolved out of the mummified existence that is its normal way of "being" on its own. It is not just that we each of us understand the words a little differently, but that we ourselves form the prerequisites that are necessary for any understanding at all to take place. Words understood by no one are not words: they are marks on paper or sound waves. Words do not mean anything *of their own accord:* the meaning is conferred upon them by someone reading or hearing them, and understanding them.

This much has been accepted for hundreds of years; but not all the consequences that can be drawn from it have been drawn. There are difficulties. In order to function intersubjectively, between one individual and another, it seems that the 'language' must be something shared. Yet each individual has a personal version of what this shared something is. How can we live with such contradiction? How do we reconcile verbal phenomena as (i) items whose very existence depends on ours, and (ii) items at the same time being there also for other persons to notice?

My contention is that we cannot resolve this contradiction until we recognize that the word *'language'* itself belongs to the category of what Gilbert Ryle memorably called 'systematically misleading expressions' (Ryle, 1951). It misleads in a way that might be illustrated from the work of hundreds of linguists through the ages, but here I choose an example from Ole Togeby, professor of Danish linguistics at the University of Aarhus:

> [...] a world champion of chess in the 'Schachnovelle' by Stefan Zweig has acquired the rules without being able to formulate them. Actually we all do this with the rules of the language game in a similar way. Rules are to be followed, not to be talked about (Togeby, 1973. Transl. J.H.).