Pratidhwani the Echo
A Peer-Reviewed International Journal of Humanities & Social Science
ISSN: 2278-5264 (Online) 2321-9319 (Print)
Impact Factor: 6.28 (Index Copernicus International)
Volume-XII, Issue-III, April 2024, Page No.193-201
Published by Dept. of Bengali, Karimganj College, Karimganj, Assam, India
Website: http://www.thecho.in

Language Study: A dramatic shift in Chomskyan Perspective

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Abstract:

This study delves into the pivotal role of language in human life, highlighting its complexity and the ongoing quest for comprehension. It initially examines diverse perspectives on language's purpose, ranging from communication-focused to those framing it as central to human cognition, drawing insights from historical figures like Descartes and Darwin. Transitioning to the evolution of linguistic study, it contrasts traditional philosophies with modern structuralist and Chomskyan views, spotlighting Chomsky's influential stance emphasizing language as a medium of expression and thought. Chomsky's theories on language competence and performance elucidate the distinction between structural understanding and pragmatic usage. The abstract concludes by reflecting on linguistics' transformation into a scientific discipline under Chomsky's influence, underlining language's innate role in cognitive development and the significance of comprehending language acquisition in children. Overall, it provides a comprehensive overview of language's multifaceted nature and its profound impact on human experience.

Key Words: Language instinct, Communication, Thought, Structure, Competence, Performance.

Introduction: Human life cannot be imagined without language. It is an inseparable aspect of human species. Though language is a very complex phenomenon, but there is a consistent and sincere endeavor to study language. Understanding language implies a way to understand our thought process and knowing the world.

In this pursuit language is being studied with its crucial aspects and different dimensions. It was thought that the main purpose of language is communication. But it is a debatable issue whether communication is the sole purpose and defining feature of language or not. Many linguists and philosophers stand in different pole to exhibit their opinion. We find Edward Sapir (1884-1939), Wittgenstein (1889-1951), Benjamin L. Whorf (1897-1941) and the many others on the one camp and few like Chomsky on the other.

Here my endeavor is to explore the dramatic shift in language study from Chomskyan perspective. In brief, I sketch the issue in the following way.

Language by itself is a marvelous object of study. It has several dimensions. Philosophers have all looked upon language as a very important phenomenon. In the history of Western Philosophy, 17th century witnessed a paradigm shift in perspective in terms of speculations and researches, not only in science, but also in other branches of study. It provides us with a new foundation with a new perspective. Its main focus was on the nature of human mind or intelligence as well as the human language.

Our 17th century French philosopher Rene Descartes (1596-1650) is first to come up with a very interesting observation about language which later influenced Noam Chomsky. In his *Discourse on Method (1637)* Descartes points out that our use of language is an important aspect of human behavior that demonstrates that our actions are shaped by non-mechanistic principles.

In addition to this, for Descartes, the use of language is species-specific activity which conclusively proves the existence of mind over and above the body. In his own words, Descartes writes:

> "If there is such machines having the organs and outward shape of a monkey or any other irrational animal, we should have no means of knowing that they were not of exactly the same nature as these animals…as even the most dull-witted of men can do."[1]

In order to understand the above passage, we can formulate an argument in the following way:

Minds can use language in a novel way. No physical object can use language in a novel way. Therefore, minds are not physical objects.

For Descartes, it is impossible that a physical object could generate and understand the rich variety of sentences produced by a human being. That task only can be effortlessly handled by human beings. In other words, what Descartes actually seems to mean in the quoted passage is that, it is impossible to construct sufficiently complex machine which may have an appropriate verbal response to the rich variety of sentences to which human beings respond verbally.

The Cartesians tried to show that if the corporeal body is sharpened, clarified and extended to its limits, it is still incapable of explaining the normal use of language as well as the basic properties of thought. Therefore, in Cartesian terms, a second substance whose essence is thought is to be required. This substance is known as mind and it has a **"creative aspect of language use" (in Chomskyan terminology).** Alongside this above view, Descartes further reiterates that the normal use of language cannot be explained by any automaton or animals. Therefore, for Descartes, **language is a species-specific-human possession.**

Chomsky took this clue from Descartes from two respects:

First, it is also for Chomsky that the normal use of language is the creative aspect of human

mind which cannot be explained in terms of any mechanistic principle. Chomsky highlighted the observation that both children and native speakers had the ability to comprehend and generate an unlimited number of sentences.

Secondly, according to both Descartes and Chomsky the use and acquisition of language is a species-specific activity. The animals or automaton neither can posses mind (Descartes) nor they can able to understand the rich variety of sentences (Descartes and Chomsky).

In contrast, we should acknowledge the view of Charles Darwin (1809-1882)-the famous British naturalist who articulated the conception of language as a kind of instinct in 1871 and considered some theoretical preliminaries which lay out his theory of language evolution.

The theory of language evolution involves mainly three stages:

1) The first stage consists of the general increase in intelligence and complex mental abilities.
2) The second stage involves sexually selected attainment of the species capacity for complex vocal control, e.g. singing.
3) In the third stage, meaning is added to the songs. The semantic aspect operates at this level. This semantic factor is one of the key determinants in facilitating the increase in intelligence.

Theoretically, Darwin makes several important observations, such as:

1) He differentiates between the language faculty or the biological ability that allows individuals to acquire language, and specific languages such as Latin or English. Darwin refers the language faculty "as an instinctive tendency to acquire an art." It is shared by all the members of human species.

> In order to understand the term instinct Darwin writes, "I will not attempt any definition of instinct. It would be easy to show that several distinct mental actions are commonly embraced by this term; but everyone understands what is meant, when it is said that instinct impels the cuckoo to migrate her eggs in other bird's nests... But I could show that none of these characters of instinct are universa."[2]

Darwin effectively sidesteps the unfruitful discourse around the nature/nurture issue, which has absorbed a significant amount of scholarly effort, by noting that language is not a genuine instinct, as it requires learning. However, his worldview is entirely contemporary in its essence. He possessed knowledge about the unique characteristics of the human vocal tract, but he contends that the ability of humans to use language should be attributed to the brain rather than the peripheral vocal tract. According to him, articulated speech is a special feature of human species, but this mere power of articulation is also common in animal communication system, for instance, parrots can talk. Darwin states that humans have an immense power of connecting definite sounds with definite ideas. For him, the capacity depends on the development of the mental

faculties.

Finally in his theoretical observation, Darwin draws analogy between birdsongs and infant babbling. He inferred his notion of language as 'an instinctive tendency to speak' from the 'babble of our young children'.

2) It is to be noted that for Darwin unlike Descartes language is not species specific. His several perspectives and observations are thoroughly modern and influential.

Now in order to study language of 20th century and its influence on Chomsky, we should acknowledge the difference between modern philosophy of language and traditional philosophy of language. The analytic philosophers study language not in order to formulate scientific hypothesis about it, but rather because they believe that such a study is an invaluable tool to help them to achieve their primary goal of setting philosophical questions. Some traditional philosophers like Descartes took some clue from language to facilitate their philosophical endeavor, but mostly they were interested in system building on the basis of sure and certain foundations. At that time, metaphysics occupied a central position. In this respect, 19th century linguistics can be labeled as 'Historicism'. It is a movement or earlier period of linguistic thought. The Neo-grammarians (They are a group of scholars, based at the University of Leipzig in the late 19th century, who were largely responsible for formulating the principles and methods of historical linguistics that have since governed most work in the subject) are the followers of such movements. They consider that the only kind of explanation valid in linguistics is the kind of explanation which a historian might give. The languages have been a subject to a variety of internal and external causal forces. Historicism is one of the movements against which Structuralism reacted and in relation to which it may be defined. Structuralism emerged throughout the latter half of the 20th century and subsequently gained significant influence in various academic disciplines. The subject matter revolved around the examination of language, culture, and society. It is a significant intellectual movement that is based in France. Ferdinand de Saussure's (1857-1905) contributions to linguistics are often regarded as the foundation of structuralism. Structuralist perspectives share the belief that the interrelations between phenomena of human life are necessary for understanding them. These relationships form a framework, and despite regional differences in the visible aspects, there are consistent principles of intangible structure. American Structuralism had similar ideas coming from a different source. It (American Structuralism) was founded upon the empirical tradition, and its task was to organize the masses of linguistic data. Philosophers were more interested in discovering the structure of the world via structure of language and this overpowered their desire for system building. In this context, there are two pre-eminent figures (Leonard Bloomfield and Noam Chomsky) who hold structuralism for decades.

Leonard Bloomfield (1887-1949) not only studied language and language acquisition, but endeavored to make linguistics autonomous and scientific. In this pursuit, he was prepared to restrict the scope of language to the study of syntax; because he believed that

the elements apart from the syntax could not be treated with sufficient precision and regiour.

According to Bloomfield, there is no fundamental difference between human and animal communication, for both are formed out of training and habit. This training and habit situations are observable. His belief was based on the behaviorist school of psychology, according to which only that mental process which is manifest in behavior can be scientifically observed and become the valid scientific conclusion. For Chomsky, Bloomfield's theory is a pure mechanistic explanation and does not take into account the creativity and variability of language.

On the other hand**,** in language study, specialists like philosophers and linguists as well as ordinary common man believe that language and communication are intimately connected. There exists a minimum of 5000 currently spoken languages globally, with 140 of them being utilized by a population of one million or greater. Question might arise that is there any convenient set of symbols for the communication of our thought?

According to the famous American linguist Benjamin L. Whorf (1897-1941), the answer is 'no'. He argued that higher levels of thinking require particular language and the particular language can shape the ways of thinking of the users of language about things.

In this regard, we may think of the famous philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951). He believes that language is a means of expressing thoughts, particularly in the way we establish and define our communities. Without a clear comprehension of language, it is impossible to determine if we possess mutual understandings, expectations, agreements, and similar concepts. According to Wittgenstein, understanding language has become the criterion for defining what it means to be a person. According to Wittgenstein, all our behavior is potentially informative which may be also used for the communication.

Moreover, as per Wittgenstein's perspective, although we could still engage in communication even without language, our ability to impact and influence one another would be severely limited. Consequently, we would be unable to construct infrastructure such as roads or develop machinery to enhance our quality of life. To engage in these activities, a high level of linguistic proficiency is necessary. Do we truly comprehend the concept of existence in the absence of language? This suggests a distinct lack of continuity between individuals who have achieved proficiency in language and those who appear to have not.

Another prominent player in this regard is the esteemed German linguist Edward Spair (1884-1939), who views language as a cultural artifact and regards linguistics as a valuable avenue for scientific examination of society. Sapir views language as exclusively a human phenomenon that is not instinctual. The system is comprised of traditional sound symbols that are produced intentionally. Therefore, from his definition of language, animal communication system as well as any sort of human articulation which is not symbolic or voluntary is excluded. A speech element can serve as a representation of

either a specific idea or the connections among ideas. For instance, when we see the term "house," we may envision a specific archetype consisting of four walls made of stone, a wooden door, windows made of glass, and a roof covered in tiles. However, we do not associate this mental image with any specific house we have previously encountered. The reason why "house" is considered a symbol is because it represents a particular concept. The structure comprises essential elements, namely walls and a roof, designed to accommodate human habitation. As Sapir writes, "The world of our experiences must be enormously simplified and generalized before it is possible to make a symbolic inventory of all our experiences of things and relations and this inventory is imperative before we can convey ideas."[3]

So far, according to Sapir, language conceptualizes our world and provides us for the categories we think in.

The aforesaid discussion therefore stresses on the communicative aspect of language. Now, in this context, Philosophy has witnessed a dramatic shift in language study from Chomskyan perspective. Chomsky is the preeminent linguist of the latter half of the 20th century, a time when structuralism emerged and gained significant influence in academic disciplines. The focus was on the examination of language, culture, and society. It is a broad intellectual movement that is primarily based in France. Ferdinand de Saussure's contributions to linguistics are often regarded as the foundation of structuralism. The fundamental characteristic of the structuralist perspective is the conviction that the various aspects of human existence can only be comprehended by examining their interconnectedness. These relationships form a framework, and despite regional differences in the observable features, there are consistent principles governing the underlying abstract structure. It brought our focus to the realization that structures are not only compilations of elements. American structuralism shared comparable concepts originating from a distinct origin. It was founded upon the empirical tradition, and set itself the task of giving an organized account of masses of linguistic data. At that time, philosophers were most interested in discovering the structure of the world via structure of language and this overpowered their desire for system building. Our present concern is Noam Chomsky (1928...)- the famous American linguist who holds structuralism for decades.

Now, thinkers like him exhibit the view that communication is not the defining feature of language. His notion of language merely encompasses its structural aspect. In order to get clearer about Chomskyan position regarding this issue, let us see his view on language. He defines language as: "I will consider language to be a set of (finite or infinite) of sentences, each finite in length and constructed out of a finite set of elements."[4]

An intriguing aspect of this statement is the notion that a language is defined as a collection of all linguistic creations that can be formed based on specific principles. A more suitable perspective, which is also more natural, is that a language comprises all the units and rules that constitute the underlying system of its products. From the standpoint of language users, one may suggest a definition that is more psychologically oriented. It

states that the language of a speaker or listener is their understanding of the rules and principles that control how sentences are formed and understood. Knowledge is the cognitive ability that allows the speaker-listener to generate and recognize grammatically correct sentences. Additionally, the individual possesses the capacity to generate and understand an unlimited range of spoken expressions, conversations, and written materials that conform to the fundamental framework of norms. In other words, according to Chomsky, the most striking feature of language is the creativity of the native speakers. The speaker's ability to formulate infinite number of sentences from finite means is the most intriguing feature of language. A native speaker can understand a new sentence not encountered before, in addition to this, s/he can response to a familiar stimulus in a completely novel way.

Conversely, Chomsky directed our attention on two essential aspects of language. Essentially, each sentence spoken by an individual is a unique arrangement of words that has never been used before in the entire history of the universe. Hence, a language cannot just be a collection of predetermined reactions. The brain possesses a formula or program that enables it to construct an infinite number of sentences with a limited vocabulary. The program in question could perhaps be referred to as a cognitive linguistic model. Another essential feature is that toddlers acquire these grammars swiftly and spontaneously, without any explicit training, and are able to comprehend and interpret new sentence structures that they have never encountered previously. Therefore, he argued that children must be equipped with a Universal Grammar which accounts for the formation of the grammar of a particular language from the unorganized corpus and other sentences heard from parents and other members of the speech community. There are also some fundamental concepts such as competence, performance in order to express his view on the relation between language and communication.

According to Chomsky, competence is native speaker's knowledge of her/his language, the mastery of the system of rules. On the other hand, performance is the production of sentences in real life situations. So, a speaker's knowledge of the language is her/his competence, and the expression of competence in actual life situation is her/his linguistic performance.

Now, Chomsky's notion of competence has sometimes been attacked for failing to account how language is used. But he accepts that language is used purposefully. For Chomsky: "Surely there are significant connection between structure and function; this is not and never be in doubt."[5]

Chomsky further claims that through the knowledge of the structure of language one may know how to use it. In his later writings, he defines grammatical competence as "By 'grammatical competence' I mean the cognitive state that encompasses all those aspects of form and meaning and their relation, including underlying structures that enter into that relation which are properly assigned to the specific subsystem of the human mind that relates representation of form and meaning."[6]

The description of grammatical competence explains how the speaker knows that:

1) 'Why are you making such noise?' is a possible sentence of English and 1a. 'Why you are making such a noise?' Is not.

Chomsky has also introduced that term pragmatic competence and shows its difference from grammatical competence. Pragmatic competence is the knowledge of how language is related to the situation in which it is used. It may be possible to have grammatical competence without pragmatic competence. Pragmatic competence is characterized by certain system of constitutive rules represented in the mind. For example, a policeman may know the syntax of traffic signals (red and green lights and their sequence etc.) without having the knowledge of how to use them to direct traffic.

So far, knowledge of language use is different from knowledge itself. In other words, pragmatic competence is not linguistic competence. His acceptance of the notion of pragmatic competence does not mean that for him communication is the sole purpose of language. He writes: "Language can be used to transmit information but it also serves many other purposes: to establish relations among people, to express or clarify thought, for creative mental activity, to gain understanding and so on. In my opinion, there is no reason to accord privileged status to one or the other of these modes. Force to choose, I would say something quite classical and rather empty: language serves essentially for the expression."[7]

So far, Chomsky claims that "Language is not properly regarded as a system of communication. It is a system of expressing thought."[8]

Conclusion: In conclusion, we may say that, Chomskyan thesis has the specialty to give linguistics "the prestige of a real science." Most of the works and researches adhere closely to the scientific method. On the other hand, from his period, linguistic study has been shifted from corpus based methodology to a search for explanatory principles which may reveal the complexity of human nature**.**

So far, from the given account of language study we might say that language is not a cultural artifact comparable with our learning 'to tell me the time' or 'how the federal government works'. Language is an intricate and specialized ability that naturally develops in children without deliberate effort or formal teaching. It is used without conscious awareness of its underlying structure and is qualitatively similar in every person. To put it simply, acquiring a first language is a task that often occurs effortlessly for a typical infant within a few years, without the necessity of formal education. Language is separate from broader capacities to comprehend information and exhibit intelligible behavior. Due to these factors, certain cognitive scientists have characterized language as a psychological capacity, a mental organ, a neurological system, and a computational module. Thus, it is not surprising that children's acquisition of language has received so much attention.

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