

Лекция №12

Language as a mirror of the world (Part 2)

Until comparatively recently, language has been essentially a matter for linguists, with all the multitudinous complexities of the subject, the historical development of language, the theoretical developments in phonology, in syntax and semantics, in pragmatics and sociolinguistics, manifested in a plethora of grammars, syntactic theories, and semantic theories together with the overriding complexities deriving from the vast number of different actual languages to be studied, different lexicons, different grammatical systems. Nowadays there is concern with language in other disciplines. In linguistics proper, there has been the major development of syntactic theory associated with Chomsky, but also involving many other linguists. All these developments have in the process made linguistics an impenetrable jungle for non-linguists. In evolutionary biology there has been a widening study of language, given impetus by the New York Academy of Sciences conference on language origin in 1975. The view is emerging that the language capacity is the product of the evolution of the human brain; language is not a purely cultural and conventional construct. The study of language which for the last half-century had taken an abstract, purely linguistic approach has now been joined by the application of the increasingly powerful techniques of neuroscience to the functioning of language in the brain.

At the time when Wittgenstein's ideas were emerging, eventually to take form in the *Tractatus* and the *Philosophical Investigations*, linguistics was at the early modern stage. Saussure's *Cours de linguistique générale*, seen as the foundation of modern linguistics, was published in 1915 with its central thesis as the arbitrariness of the sign, language as convention, a socially constructed system. There is no evidence that Wittgenstein knew anything about Saussure; the *Cours* was not well known in English-speaking countries for years after 1915. Nor is there evidence that Wittgenstein knew much about current discussion in linguistics otherwise; he makes no mention of Saussure or of Bloomfield whose *Language* was published in 1933; in it Bloomfield also makes no mention of Saussure, though this is less surprising when one knows that the 1933 book was a revised issue of a book first published in 1913. There is an interesting parallelism between Saussure's *Cours* and the *Philosophical Investigations*. Both were compiled from students' notes and both were published posthumously, both undoubtedly incomplete and not fully systematic. In the *Cours*, as in the *Philosophical Investigations*, there are loose ends, not tied into a consistent, overall theory. For example, the *Cours* had little to say on the important topic of semantics. Whilst words are conventional, Saussure accepted that linguistic signs are realities with their seat in the brain: "If we could embrace the sum of word-images stored in the minds of all individuals, we could identify the social bond that constitutes language"²⁶.

The most characteristic feature of modern linguistics is structuralism, that is, regarding language as a system of relations, or more precisely a set of inter-related systems, the elements of which, sounds, words etc. have no validity independently of their relations of equivalence and contrast which hold between them, essentially

questions of syntax. The lack of a reasonably satisfactory theory of semantics remains. Chomsky's first impact on behavioural science was his notion that sentence-structure can be studied independently of meaning. The new linguistic science of sentence structure was to become more abstract, leaving behind meaning to study the pure laws of syntax. However, in a quite recent theoretical development, Chomsky has signalled a move back to the lexicon, to the importance of the role of the individual words. This not to say that syntax is any less important. The new theory, minimalism, is conceived as involving a fundamental re-orientation of grammatical theory with many differences between the minimalist programme and the theoretical insights of traditional transformational-generativism; the fundamental notions and constructs are different. The implication of the theory is that syntax is projected from the lexicon.

This has understandably led to a new concern with philosophical aspects of language for linguistics. Chomsky outlined his account of the relation of language and philosophy in *Language and Problems of Knowledge* (1988) and most recently in *New Horizons in the Study of Language and Mind* (2000). The 1988 book was based on lectures he gave in Managua; there he was asked about different theories of meaning and replied that there were no very good theories of meaning: "in fact most of the theory of meaning is called syntax"; but he recognised that there was a good deal more to the theory of meaning: for example, questions about the relation of meaning to use and to verification, about the way words come to refer to things and so on, "but about these topics I think there is very little to say of a constructive nature"²⁹. In the recent book Chomsky tackles some of these philosophical questions at considerable length after acknowledging that the earliest formulation of generative grammar was influenced by Wittgenstein, Austin and others. On current debates in philosophy between externalism and internalism, he says: "we are asked to consider whether meanings are in the head or are externally determined. The conventional answer today is that they are externally determined by two kinds of factors, features of the real world and norms of communication. A standard externalist argument is that unless the external world determines the contents of the thought of an agent, it is an utter mystery how the agent's thoughts can be publicly available to another"³⁰. Philosophers, he says, frequently claim that language is to represent reality but this is not the fundamental function. The key functions of language are to enable humans to form thoughts and communicate. Chomsky makes it clear that he thinks of himself as an internalist, which means restricting ourselves to studying the inner mechanisms which contribute to thought and expression; the approach is concerned with mental aspects of the world and includes the study of real objects in the natural world, specifically the brain, its states and functions. This moves the study of the mind towards eventual integration with biology and the natural sciences³¹, a more promising approach than philosophical explorations of language and mind. Linguistics is to be seen as the science of mind/brain. The boundary between linguistics and natural sciences will shift or disappear and in particular there will be a new relationship of linguistics and brain-science.