Prologue

The goal of this work is to encourage linguists and other interested parties to recognize the extent to which language is inseparable from thought. Language begins with thoughts in the mind of a speaker and ends by affecting thoughts in the mind of a listener. Although this observation might seem obvious, it is seldom incorporated in a model of language for at least two major reasons. First, the role of thought is usually usurped by the semantic component of language. But semantic structures are imposed on thoughts by languages, they differ from one language to another, and while they are closely related to thoughts they are not equivalent to thoughts themselves. Second, thoughts are not structured in a way that lends itself to familiar techniques of linguistic analysis. Linguists, if they ever consider the question at all, might well ask whether thoughts are something their training and experience has prepared them to deal with.

A way forward cannot help appealing to introspection, which is viewed here as an essential tool in our observational arsenal, although one that profits from integration with observations that are more open to public view. Introspection also demands that we recognize the basic role of consciousness, concerning which there has been a surprising amount of disagreement and misunderstanding. The flow of thought is seen here as parallel to the flow of consciousness, a view already espoused by William James (1890).

This work, then, argues for a thought-based linguistics that contrasts with a bias toward sound (or even worse toward writing) that has upset the balance of linguistic investigation. The ineffability of thought makes this a more difficult approach by far, but there is no reason to believe that the search for truth should be easy. A corollary of this approach is a demotion of syntax, so often seen as the driving force behind language, and a recognition that syntax is only one stage along the path from a thought to a sound. In short, the claim to originality here lies in a stress on the crucial importance of thought as distinct from semantics, in accepting introspection and consciousness as essential observational resources, and in demoting the syntax-centered approach on which so much of linguistics has been based. Let us see where this leads.

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Part I of this book introduces some preliminary considerations. Chapter 1, Background, tells how this work grew out of my own attempts to understand the nature of language and the mental processes behind it, as seen against the background of developments in the field of linguistics. Chapter 2, Ground Rules, sets forth certain assumptions that underlie the approach taken here, including what it means to understand something, the importance of introspection and consciousness, and the value of linguistic diversity.

Part II discusses various properties of thought. Chapter 3, The Priority of Thoughts, illustrates briefly why priority should be given to thoughts rather than sounds. Chapter 4, The Path from a Thought to a Sound, provides an overview of the stages that lead from thoughts to sounds, including the formation of semantic and syntactic structures and their symbolization by abstract and overt phonological structures. Chapter 5, How Thoughts Are Structured, explores what language universals can tell us about types of ideas and the ways in which ideas are related, as well as "participant roles" like subject and object, ergative and absolutive, and agent and patient. Chapter 6, How Thoughts Are Experienced, focuses first on the role of language and then more briefly on the roles of imagery and emotions. Chapter 7, How Thoughts Are Shared, focuses on differences between speaking and writing and on the special properties of reading aloud. Chapter 8, How Thoughts Flow through Time, identifies coherence at several levels of organization, including intonation units, sentences, and topics.

Part III traces the verbalization of thoughts in more detail. Chapter 9, From a Thought to a Sound in English, illustrates the verbalization of thoughts in English with a brief conversational excerpt. Chapter 10, From a Thought to a Sound in a Polysynthetic Language, describes the partially different ways in which thoughts are verbalized in a language of that type.

Part IV discusses a number of related issues. Chapter 11, The Translation Paradox, asks how it is possible for thoughts that are expressed in one language to be translated into another language with reasonable success. Chapter 12, Repeated Verbalizations of the Same Thought, looks at ways in which thoughts may be verbalized differently when they are remembered at different times. Chapter 13, Rethinking Whorf, suggests a way of dealing with the controversial question of whether speakers of different languages think differently. Chapter 14, Lessons from Literature, illustrates ways in which written literature can offer insights into the nature of thought, with illustrations of the mimetic and diegetic options.

Part V discusses a few common ways in which languages orient thoughts. Chapter 15, Small Numbers and Subitizing, shows how the mind deals with small numbers of objects and compares findings from linguistics and psychology. Chapter 16, Thoughts and Gender, discusses a relation between grammatical gender and a thought pattern that favors masculine singular in Iroquoian

languages. Chapter 17, Time, Tense, Memory, and Imagination, shows how linguistic expressions of time are related to memory and imagination. Chapter 18, Relating Ideas to Reality, illustrates ways in which different languages relate thoughts to their speakers' conceptions of reality.

Part VI is devoted to the emotional component of thoughts. Chapter 19, Emotional Involvement in a Conversation, illustrates ways in which emotions are expressed by prosody in a conversational excerpt. The final two chapters then look at two commonly experienced emotions that are usually overlooked when emotions are discussed. Chapter 20, The Feeling of Nonseriousness, deals with the feeling that underlies humor and its expression with laughter. Chapter 21, How Language Can Be Beautiful, identifies the emotion behind the experiencing of beauty and explores features that contribute to making language beautiful.

The Epilogue mentions some questions that were raised earlier in passing and that are in particular need of further exploration.

Part I

Preliminaries

1   Background

The human brain has justifiably been called the most complicated object in the known universe. But the remarkable evolution of the brain has been inseparable from the evolution of thought and language, which are in turn inseparable from consciousness, imagery, memory, and imagination. All these faculties and more combine to form a complex whole that has bestowed on us, its beneficiaries, the power to radically reshape our environment for good and evil while surrounding ourselves with transcendent beauty and stultifying ugliness. The complexity of this feast has overwhelmed our ability to understand its full nature while providing endless topics for investigation, frustrating where they seem intractable and exciting where they open new avenues for discovery.

A number of academic disciplines have taken up the challenge of exploring selected parts of this complexity, each adding insights supplied by its own traditions. The present work builds on ways of understanding that have arisen within certain areas of linguistics, with brief bows in the direction of psychology and literary studies. It departs from the mainstream of linguistics by replacing an approach based on sound and writing with a less explored perspective based on thought.

Because this thought-based approach has been a natural outcome of my own attempts for half a century to understand language and what lies behind it, the reader deserves to know a little about those attempts and the directions in which they have led (Chafe 2002a). At first I pictured language as simply a bridge between meanings and sounds (Chafe 1962). Later I tried to show how meanings underlie syntax (Chafe 1970a), and later still I explored the relation between language and consciousness (Chafe 1994). Since then I have come to appreciate more clearly the difference between thoughts and the ways in which thoughts are molded by the unique semantic resources of each language.

When I first became acquainted with linguistics in the mid-1950s it was a small and relatively homogeneous field. There were heated arguments over details, but linguists were more or less content to view language as a coherently designed structure composed of phonemes (basic units of sound), morphemes

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(sequences of phonemes that functioned as parts of words), and words them-
selves. There was uncertainty about the best way to approach syntax (how
words combined to form phrases and sentences), and there were at least a few
who felt uncomfortable ignoring the fact that words and sentences actually
mean something. A great deal of effort went into describing little-known
languages within this framework, and people took pleasure in discovering
ways in which every language was different from every other language.
Searching for properties that extended across many or all languages was
not seen at that time as a particularly interesting or rewarding way to spend
one's time.

     We who were students of linguistics in those days were sternly warned
to steer clear of a few misguided individuals who tried to relate language
to the mind, consciousness, perception, imagery, or ideas. The prediction
was that "within the next generation [this] terminology of mentalism and
animism [would] be discarded, much as we have discarded Ptolemaic
astronomy, and will be replaced . . . in major part by terms of linguistics"
(Bloomfield 1936: 89). We were required to read a book by Zellig Harris
titled *Methods in Structural Linguistics* (1951), which promised that we
would sooner or later uncover the underlying structure of languages if we
ignored meaning altogether and studied only the statistical distribution of
sound-based elements. We couldn't do it just then because it required
huge corpora of linguistic material and powerful computers, but those
resources were glimpsed, realistically enough, on the not-too-distant
horizon. Before long the hidden structure of language would be revealed
in all its glory and we would no longer need to appeal to mentalistic
nonsense. Ironically, advances in technology have now brought us to
a point where Harris's goal seems realizable, but for some of us at least
it does not offer all the answers he anticipated.

     One often hears of a revolution in linguistics that was set in motion by
Syntactic Structures (Chomsky 1957) and solidified by *Aspects of the Theory of
Syntax* (Chomsky 1965). A revolution must be in the eye of the beholder and
my own experiences suggested something different. The belief that we could
unearth an abstract syntactic structure on which language was built, with
meanings and sounds somehow emanating from it, coupled with the belief
that a major goal of linguistics was to formulate rules that would generate such
a structure – wasn't that an outgrowth of the distrust of meaning that was
already impeding progress? Two roads now diverged, but for me they were not
an outmoded "structuralist" road and an exciting new "generative" road. Very
different was a road that asked how language was used in the real world while
recognizing the crucial role played by meanings. It was indeed a road less
taken.

Most people today may be unaware of the extent to which, during the 1960s, investigating languages "in the field" and describing what one found were scorned as leading to nothing more than "observational adequacy." At Berkeley, my home at the time, that scorn gradually sapped the vitality and enthusiasm that had sustained the Berkeley Department of Linguistics during the 1950s and early 1960s. Fewer talented students were applying for admission, seeing little to be gained from pursuing an approach that was only a historic relic. When I became chair of that department in 1969 I was pressured by faculty in other departments to abandon our emphasis on "just writing grammars" and to join the march toward greater enlightenment.

I never lost my enthusiasm for what I thought linguistics could and should be, but I was unable to transfer that enthusiasm to the perspective that had so quickly captured the field. I was fascinated by interactions I thought I saw between language and mental states and processes, convinced that it was futile to separate language from the mind or vice versa. Whatever linguistic phenomenon I came across raised questions about the light it shed on how the mind worked. I was not finding answers in the linguistics of the day.

At first I naively assumed that others shared my concerns. In 1973 I blithely initiated a course titled Language and Cognition in which the mind–language relation was paramount. It was disappointing to discover that few of my students were consumed by the same passion for relating discoveries about languages to the mental insights they offered. Students who wanted to learn about, teach about, or conduct research in phonology, morphology, or syntax evidently did not share my curiosity regarding their mental foundations.

It seemed natural, then, to turn to psychology for more encouragement, but there too I was disappointed. When I was asked to review a book on psycholinguistics (Saporta 1961; cf. Chafe 1964), I was surprised to find that all of its chapters were reports of experiments. I remarked on this to a psychologist friend, who said, "Oh, but that's what we're supposed to do." The experiments seemed unduly narrow, and I was bothered by the way they so frequently relied on concocted "data" that failed to come close to what I had found language to really be like. It was especially disconcerting to find the word "empirical" applied to studies that were intentionally disconnected from reality in order to achieve control. When I tried to imagine myself a "subject" in one of those experiments, I found it hard to believe that my responses would show very much about what real people did under real circumstances. This isolation of psychology from real people doing real things in the real world is something I still find disheartening.

The "cognitive revolution" was then being born, and with it I ventured a hope that psychologists would loosen up a bit. It has been a further disappointment to see their straitjacket becoming still more confining. I suppose it is not surprising that calling something cognitive science failed to revolutionize the ways people actually did their research. We all have our favorite frameworks for understanding what interests us, and we can't be expected to shake off those frameworks just because we've acquired a new name. Recent years have given us impressive new techniques and technologies, which, however, continue to be laid on top of assumptions about "best practices" that have stubbornly resisted change.

When friends ask, as they occasionally do, what this book is about, I like to point out that they just did two things. One was to make sounds. By itself that was of limited interest. Lots of animals make sounds. It was what those sounds accomplished that was so magical. As they passed through the air from my friends to me and made their way into my brain, they let me know a little of what was happening in their brains: in this case that they were experiencing a mild curiosity about what I was up to, and that they were inviting me to make noises of my own that would let them know a little of what I was thinking. My dog makes sounds that alert me to an intruder in the neighborhood, but the complexity of what my friends did with their sounds and what they expected me to do with mine was greater by an order of magnitude. This ability to link thoughts with sounds defines what language is.

To repeat something said in the Prologue, although many may be willing to agree that language begins with thoughts in the mind of a speaker and ends by modifying thoughts in the mind of a listener, that seemingly obvious fact has seldom been incorporated into an understanding of language structure. I mentioned two easily understandable reasons for this neglect. One is that thoughts have been regarded as adequately accounted for in the study of semantics, and so there is no need to pay attention to thoughts as if they were something else. The other reason is that thoughts may appear too nebulous to be incorporated within a satisfying model of language. This work suggests ways of dealing with both those problems.

Attempting to discover the full nature of language can be compared with climbing a mountain whose summit is occupied by thoughts but is so enshrouded in fog that hardly anyone even considers reaching it. Remaining in the valley where one can devote one's full attention to sounds can allow disagreements to be resolved in relatively objective terms. Many linguists, however, proceed from phonetics to phonology, where they explore what different languages do with sounds. They may stay at that level, knowing that climbing further to syntax invites greater risks and disagreements. Many who do venture on are likely to be satisfied with syntax as their final goal, but there are some who struggle on to semantics, hoping for a view that will be still more

revealing. The air is thinner and the fog thicker and there are still more disagreements, but the potential rewards are enticing. Hardly anyone is foolish enough to venture still further into the realm of thought, where the air is so thin and the fog so thick that one can easily fall victim to vertigo and hopeless confusion. This book, nevertheless, undertakes forays in that direction, hoping for glimpses that are otherwise unobtainable if and when the fog lifts, if only momentarily. Because even the best-intentioned linguists have usually ended their explorations with semantics, there is little to guide those forays. I thus beg the reader's tolerance for missteps as I trudge onward in a direction I am convinced must sooner or later be pursued.