1 Purification and Hybrids

Language and 'Mind'

Here is a sentence encapsulating the approach to language and mind that has been dominant for half a century, written by the linguist who has dominated the field over that period:

> Particularly in the case of language, it is natural to expect a close relation between innate properties of the mind and features of linguistic structure; for language, after all, has no existence apart from its mental representation. (Chomsky [1968] 2006: 83)

This raises a number of questions. The obvious ones to start with might be as follows:

- How do the 'features of linguistic structure' relate to the 'mental representation' of language and its 'properties'?
- Why is mental representation the only 'existence' language has? Why is this presented not as a theory, but a fact, with the words 'after all' appearing to forestall any contradiction or even hesitancy?
- Regarding the innate properties of the mind that 'it is natural' to expect to be closely related to features of linguistic structure: do speakers of different languages have different innate mental properties? Or are the innate properties of the mind so broad and unspecific as to allow for all the structures found in the vast array of languages in the world?

The answer to the two questions in the last bullet point may come as a surprise to anyone unfamiliar with Chomsky's views. It is 'no' to both of them. Rather, Chomsky has insisted for decades on a third possibility that would never occur to most people: that there are no 'different languages', but only one human language. What we call languages are, he believes, separated only by superficial 'dialect' differences.

If we do not accept that position, one alternative would be that speakers of different languages do indeed have different innate mental properties. But this would constitute a strange form of quasi-racism that is flatly negated by our experience of bilinguals, and of children taken from their birthplace for

adoption at an early age who become monolingual speakers of the language of their adoptive family.

That leaves the third possibility that our 'natural' expectation of a close relationship between innate properties of the mind and features of linguistic structure is simply wrong – in which case we may question whether the mind has innate properties, a question which Chomsky has tacitly ruled out before promising that linguistic structure will shed light on what those properties are. The non-existence of innate 'ideas' was, in fact, the dominant scientific view from Locke in the seventeenth century until Chomsky renounced it, initially in favour of quite specific innate 'rules' for how languages can be structured, though latterly he has retreated to a weaker claim for innate 'principles', 'parameters' and 'operations' of a relatively general sort.

We might go further still and query the notion of 'the mind', which implies that mental experience is the same for every man, woman and child everywhere and has been since the beginning of the human species. And going even further, we might query the notion of 'mind', which Chomsky equates with 'mental representation'. It cannot be limited to that – too many of the operations which we attribute to our minds do not involve any representation; and, where language is concerned, if it has no existence without a 'mind' in some sense, it has no existence without a body either,

> as if one can assume that it is possible to consider language separately from speech and the hearing of speech, sight separately from eye and head movement and exploratory activity, and the brain and nervous system as operating without interdependence on other systems within the body. This is surely to build a metaphysics into one's method from the start . . . (Braine 2014: 53)

The next sentence following the one quoted above from Chomsky ([1968] 2006) is this (the 'it' is language):

> Whatever properties it has must be those that are given to it by the innate mental processes of the organism that has invented it and that invents it anew with each succeeding generation, along with whatever properties are associated with the conditions of its use.

This too raises questions, such as the following:

- Is there not a contradiction between language having no existence apart from its mental representation, and yet having properties 'associated with the conditions of its use'?
- By referring to its 'use', doesn't Chomsky extend language from its mental representation into an outward realm where, according to the first sentence, it has no existence? How then can the conditions of its use contribute any properties to it?

With the last question my intention is not to suggest that the 'conditions of its use' be eliminated from consideration where language is concerned, but

rather to revisit the main proposition, about how its properties must be those given to it by the innate mental processes of the organism that has invented it. Here the 'must be' is precipitous; it feels, as a reader, as though I am being force-fed a conclusion before the alternatives have been seriously considered. The 'innate' seems gratuitous. And what is meant by 'the organism' is curious: Chomsky plainly does not mean a single organism, but the human species (why does he not say 'person' or 'human being', since he denies the possibility that any other species might possess language?), with the implication that human 'mental processes' were universally the same at the dawn of language.

If indeed those processes are innate, as he maintains, and if we can still discover them now by investigating the properties of language, which is the research programme he lays out, this implies further that the use of language had no effect on human mental processes. That may or may not be so, but it merits debate rather than blithe or blind acceptance.

The consensus that arose in linguistics in the wake of Chomsky was grounded in positions of his that, as we have just seen, require one to ignore contradictions and accept dogmatic assertions on a grand scale. Well, what theory of anything does not contain contradictions that are papered over with dogma? That is a necessary step in what Kuhn (1962) called 'normal science', where a consensus gets formed as a sort of plateau, or 'paradigm', for teaching and training the next generation who will work to overturn it. Of course, resistance to the paradigm will continue throughout its normalization, and the overturning may take centuries rather than just a generation or two. The question that bears asking about such a consensus concerns the balance between, on the one hand, its contradictions, silences and what it leaves unexplained, and on the other, what it enables, in both theoretical and practical terms.

The Chomskyan paradigm in linguistics has enabled a huge amount. It saw linguistics through a time of massive expansion, from being a little-taught subject in the 1950s to an academic specialization that no serious university could be without by the end of the 1960s. Even then, linguistics could have been crowded out of existence by newer fields such as cognitive science and informatics, but it held its own into the 1990s, by which time the paradigm had weakened and the field went into retreat and retrenchment mode. Which was the cause and which the effect cannot be determined with any certainty; probably each fed the other. But so long as the Chomskyan paradigm was strong, linguistics was a strong field. That is worth remembering as we embrace the excitement of watching the old paradigm break up and others contend for its place. Still, one could say the same about the former Soviet bloc: as long as the ideology was enforced, it could maintain an illusion of unity and strength, at the expense of personal freedom. And those who fought in the resistance against the Chomskyan paradigm found their professional 'freedom' limited in terms of publication venues open to their work, jobs and grant funding available to

them, and the like; but they were always free to leave for another field, which was not a choice open to East Germans, for instance, so the metaphor should not be exaggerated.

If the Chomskyan paradigm has broken, no new consensus has yet emerged. Academic linguists, being human, often prefer to present a façade of scientific certainty to students rather than expose them to a range of plausible but hotly debated positions. The students pay for an education because they expect us to *know* things. But a cornerstone of the Chomskyan consensus – the conception of *mind* – has shifted enough since the time when he formulated his views as to require deep and broad reconsideration of its place in and implications for linguistics. This it has been receiving over the last decade, and it is to this reconsideration that the present book is intended to contribute, by putting together the pieces of an intellectual heritage that gives due consideration to language in the body. It is at least as old as the heritage behind the 'Cartesian' view; indeed, I put Cartesian in scare quotes here because the last work of Descartes falls rather squarely into the body-based, non-'Cartesian' tradition. (I shall generally omit the scare quotes henceforth.)

Again, however, we should consider why the Cartesian paradigm has managed to stand as the basis of a consensus for so long, getting on for 500 years. Nothing holds up for that long unless it works, in the sense of enabling a massive amount of progress in both theoretical and practical spheres, or sometimes what is perceived as progress until it is overthrown. So much of modern philosophy, psychology and psychiatry, in addition to linguistics, is built on Cartesian foundations that it would be foolish to deny or underestimate its power. When we look at what body-based approaches have enabled, the tally is miserably low in comparison. It is not nil: phonetics has been an important body-based science, and psychiatry can point to the successes of certain drug-based and physical shock therapies in treating behavioural problems that are resistant to mind-based approaches. They are often so controversial, however, that psychiatrists shy away from pointing to them, unless pressed.

What is more, body-based approaches to consciousness and behaviour have sometimes had terrible outcomes. Sexism and racism, and quite a few other -isms, start with the belief that the physical configuration of bodies, including something as literally superficial as skin colour, determine what people are, in every sense. Their intelligence and their capability for doing anything are perceived in terms of their gender, ethnicity, height, weight, size, how they comport themselves, how they dress and otherwise adorn themselves. And how they speak, often taken as one of the things most deeply engrained in them – as the illogical phrase 'native speaker' betrays – putting it beyond the ability of their conscious will to alter. With such a long list of indictments in its background, it is not hard to understand the resistance to the idea that mind and language are 'incorporated'.

There is an additional issue that neither mind-based nor body-based approaches have dealt with successfully where language is concerned: individual difference. People who deviate markedly from 'the norm' (itself a huge conceptual problem) are treated either as innovators or as somehow deficient, in terms of intellect or achievement, with race and the other bodily features often creeping into the background. And yet linguistics maintains as a matter of doctrine that every individual is unique linguistically – though most of the practice of linguistics demands that differences be swept under the rug, or at least marginalized and 'explained'.

In Here and Out There

'All linguists agree on one thing, that linguistics is about analysing languages', Actual Linguistics PhD Student was saying to Philosophy PhD Student the day I was writing this. 'But some of them', he went on, 'think languages are in here, in the mind, and the others think they're out there, in the world'.

I suppressed the urge to accost them, which I was tempted to do, not because I thought Actual Linguistics PhD Student was wrong but because, on the contrary, he had with absolute precision and admirable conciseness put his finger on the very problem I have been grappling with, lo these many years. Yet I could tell from his tone of voice that he thought about this 'great divide' in a totally different way from how I do.

He was trying hard to sound broad-minded, and to let Actual Philosophy PhD Student know that although he positioned himself on one side of the divide, he could see the point of those across the chasm. He might allow that the other side was doing something worthwhile, even if his own scientific values were otherwise inclined.

What I wanted to tell him was that the chasm is a mirage. The people he perceives as fundamentally divided actually share much more than a belief that linguistics is about analysing languages. They have in common a linguistic worldview in which language, or languages, *could be* either in here or out there. Endless conceptual problems beset every aspect of this way of imagining language, languages, the mental, the in here and the out there. They are not solved by saying that language or languages do not exist. That just sweeps the problems under the rug. Nor are they solved by saying that language is both in here and out there, which may alleviate some of the problems, but only by making others more intractable (and then usually sweeping them under the rug).

Language and languages are concepts. Do concepts exist? Or do only physical things exist? And then, can we know physical things in themselves, or only through the concepts that shape our seeing, hearing, interpreting and understanding? Can concepts have any existence outside thought? How we answer these questions, which have been debated in various guises throughout recorded

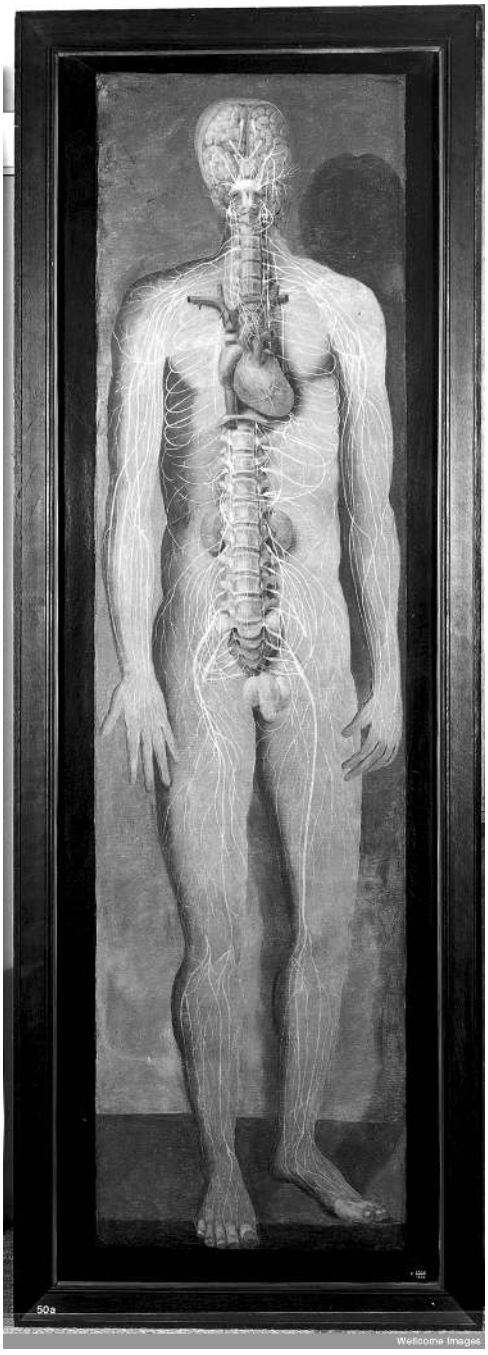
history, is crucial to how we conceive of language(s). At the same time, the questions show that it takes very little scratching of the surface before the distinction between 'in here' and 'out there' begins to get fuzzy, or at least not as straightforward as it may initially appear.

'Language(s)' does not have exactly the same sense if conceived as a mental attribute or a socially shared system. We appear to be debating whether the same thing is in here or out there, but it cannot be the same thing. It is our thing versus their thing, and we act most of the time as though that thing is also more or less what is called 'language(s)' in everyday discourse, while at other times acting as if, quite the contrary, it is *not* that, but instead something else which all linguists basically agree on. Except that, of course, we do not.

Then we have the problem of what 'in here' means. Actual Linguistics PhD Student associated it with 'mental', which is perfectly normal. Except that if it stays in the mind, it isn't going to be language as normally conceived; it requires a body to get out. And, for that matter, to get in, since a mind devoid of all the bodily senses would never manage to have a language. But different conceptions of the 'mental' already roam the land, some of which restrict it to inside the skull, while others extend it out through the whole nervous system, and other still beyond the body to include tools on which we rely for carrying out our cognitive processes. This last definition already takes 'in here' out there.

But what is 'out there'? Those linguists who locate language(s) 'out there, in the world', as Actual Linguistics PhD Student put it, conceive of it in a wide variety of ways, including as social facts, observed behavioural norms, institutions, sets of utterances and texts, and sometimes simply as things – things that can be 'acquired', which is to say brought from out there to in here. 'Out there' linguists are every bit as likely to reject other 'out there' concepts of language different from their own as they are to spurn 'in here' concepts. Some think that language is in here, but that 'in here' is a black box, knowledge of which can be inferred only from what can be observed out there. Or is the difference between out there and in here itself an illusion? A way of conceiving of consciousness and perception that seems to accord with everyday experience but wobbles under close scrutiny?

Linguists will label these as philosophers' questions, and indeed they are ones which have resisted any definitive answer. So linguists may feel justified in taking whichever position they like, and investigating language on that basis, since, after all, investigating language is what linguists are meant to do. But given that *the concept of language itself* is centrally in question here, there is, or ought to be, a worry that they are spending their time conducting an investigation of a mysterious nature on something the nature of which is equally mysterious – in which case they are bound to end up 'explaining' *obscurum per obscurius*, the obscure by the more obscure, which is really no explanation at all.



Jacques-Fabien Gautier d'Agoty (1716–1785), A standing figure showing the vertebral column, nerves, kidneys, heart and brain (1764/5). Wellcome Library, London

Much of this book is devoted to looking into how language and languages, in here and out there, mind and body, abstract and concrete, and other connected concepts have been wrestled with over time, up to and including the present. It is not a narrative of linear progress, nor a history of myths or errors, but an account filled with muddles that have been inevitable because none of these concepts have ever been as clear-cut as they appear – something which those of us who use them have always known, however much we have striven to deny it, to ourselves and others.

Viewed from the outside, science can look clear and absolute, its progress a straight line from ignorance to knowledge. On the inside, things are always messier. The arguments that architects have with engineers, and engineers with one another, are not visible on the finished building except to those who did the arguing. With medical research, though, the general public is well aware of discrepant scientific results regarding, for instance, alcohol intake. One day a report appears stating that half a bottle of red wine per day promotes health and longevity, only to be followed a week later by a study showing that anything over one glass is dangerous to brain and heart. Here there is no equivalent of a building to erect, and hence no urgent action needed, just more studies to be done, with larger and more varied populations. Still, the factors of individual difference in genetics, personality and lifestyle can never be wholly controlled.

The study of language is more like medical research than engineering, since it is about human beings, indeed about something which requires our bodies to produce. Bodies factor indirectly into engineering but are not its focus. Many linguists go about their work of analysing language as if in engineering mode, dealing with something self-standing, autonomous, part of the brain though disconnected from the other parts; really part of the mind, which is a way of denying its bodily nature. Or part of the 'mind/brain', a term that wears its muddledness on its sleeve yet is used and accepted in some quarters as a scientific concept.

A further muddle: what are treated as universals in language, features that reflect some deep physical or functional unity, prove on investigation actually to be *norms* – what most people tend to do. The same is true with what are treated as 'possible' versus 'ungrammatical' (i.e. impossible) sentences in a given language. The result is that features get treated as physical and analysed in engineering mode when it takes very little to show that they are in fact behavioural, where behaviour always has a degree of individuality, even when people are trying to conform, or at least not striving to be non-conformist.

To speak of linguistics as being a web of denials and muddles would not be to disparage it, but only to say that this confirms its standing as one of the human sciences. No such science will ever be without muddles. Those in the science should strive to become aware of them and how they can direct our thinking, since only then can there be progress – solid results, but also new, previously

unexpected muddles that will be denied, confronted and superseded in their turn.

Nevertheless, no one likes to be told they are in denial or labelled a muddlemonger. Another way of conceiving the problem may be less threatening and more enlightening: they are *hybrids*, in the sense given to the term by the French historian of science Bruno Latour, whose best-known book is entitled *We have never been modern* (1991). His title and the meaning of *hybrid* require explanation, which will follow in the next section.

My investigation will focus on a particular web of hybrids surrounding language and the muddles that can arise from misunderstanding them. For the most part they occur in dichotomous pairs, for reasons that will become clear. The pairs include the physical and the behavioural, the universal and the normative, as well as others that are related to these: the abstract and the concrete, the arbitrary and the motivated/iconic/natural, the native and the non-native, language and dialect, standard and non-standard. Spinning the web is the pair of master-hybrid-spider-muddlers, the *body* and the *mind/soul/spirit*, bent on entrapping us hapless linguist-flies. No, that won't fly: it is we ourselves who continually patch up the web in which we have become enmeshed. We feel obliged to keep the web woven, to attract younger flies through whose blood we vampire-spider-flies can stay alive, in spirit, if not in body.

Latour's Hybrids

In November 1917, at the height of a war that felt like the death struggle of an earlier age, Max Weber lamented 'the fate of our times, with their rationalization, intellectualization and above all, disenchantment of the world' (1919: 36, my translation).[1] This indictment of the modern condition was implicitly echoed seventy-five years later by Latour, for whom Weber is an 'antimodern':

> The antimoderns firmly believe that the West has rationalized and disenchanted the world, that it has truly peopled the social with cold and rational monsters which saturate all of space, that it has definitively transformed the premodern cosmos into a mechanical interaction of pure matters. But instead of seeing these processes as the modernizers do – as glorious, albeit painful, conquests – the antimoderns see the situation as an unparalleled catastrophe. (Latour [1991] 1993: 123)

Latour adds that 'The postmoderns, always perverse, accept the idea that the situation is indeed catastrophic, but they maintain that it is to be acclaimed rather than bemoaned!'

The history of science has been through an exciting if turbulent period, in the wake of a series of eruptions from the late 1960s through the mid 1980s. Foucault and Bourdieu in Paris, Kuhn in the United States, and the Edinburgh Social History of Science group were among the volcanoes, producing work so

conceptually challenging that historians of science would all too often be cast as enemies of science. Latour, who bridges the Paris and Edinburgh schools, was among those aiming to expose the situation and envision a rectification.

Latour argues that modernism, anti-modernism and postmodernism are all equally grounded in a 'Constitution' which took shape in the seventeenth century, whereby Nature and Society were separated, and then gradually made into irreconcilable opposites. By the early nineteenth century, this Constitution had become impervious to criticism. It undid the premodern incapacity to tamper with either the natural or the social, each being conceived as inexorably bound to the other at every point, under the authority of God. The moderns 'crossed out' God, allowing them to depict their Constitution as 'humanism' – but this gave rise to an asymmetry, which Latour considers the true mark of the modern, and the source of its ultimately fatal contradictions.

> Modernity is often defined in terms of humanism, either as a way of saluting the birth of 'man' or as a way of announcing his death. But this habit itself is modern, because it remains asymmetrical. It overlooks the simultaneous birth of 'nonhumanity' – things, or objects, or beasts – and the equally strange beginning of a crossed-out God, relegated to the sidelines. Modernity arises first from the conjoined creation of those three entities, and then from the masking of the conjoined birth and the separate treatment of the three communities while, underneath, hybrids continue to multiply as an effect of this separate treatment. The double separation is what we have to reconstruct: the separation between humans and nonhumans on the one hand, and between what happens 'above' and what happens 'below' on the other. ([1991] 1993: 13)

The 'human' pole will be split between what Latour designates as Subject and Society. He never directly addresses that split but refers throughout to Subject/Society as though they were conflatable. He knows of course that they are not, but dealing with this split would require another book. It is a gaping lacuna, but his reader's willing suspension of disbelief is repaid with a grand narrative of modernism as the proliferation of 'hybrids' which mediate between the natural and the social (see Figure 1). The Constitution denies the existence and even the possibility of such hybrids, being committed instead to 'purifying' the split. And yet, Latour maintains, the split, being artificial, has to be mediated. The Constitution thus ends up surreptitiously demanding the proliferation of hybrids it claims to forbid. The modern Constitution provides three guarantees (*ibid*. p. 32):

1. Even though we construct Nature, Nature is as if we did not construct it.
2. Even though we do not construct Society, Society is as if we did construct it.
3. Nature and Society must remain absolutely distinct: the work of purification must remain absolutely distinct from the work of mediation.

The contradictions embedded in these guarantees give rise to the intellectual paradoxes of the modern world, while simultaneously rendering the