COMPETENCE AND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION : DETERMINING THE CONCEPTUAL LIMITS OF CHOMSKYAN NATIVISM

INDRANI BHATTACHARJEE

The primary objective of this paper is to critically assess two fundamental philosophical assumptions of Chomskyan nativism. The first of these is the methodological claim that the problems of language are best studied within the framework of an "internalist" theory of language. By an internalist theory is meant a theory about the linguistic competence of an idealized speaker-hearer. I shall call this Chomsky's *cognitivist assumption.* The second assumption that I wish to evaluate is the *poverty of stimulus consideration.* This constitutes a fundamental premiss of the argument for nativism. These two ideas form the basis of Chomsky's claim to have provided the best explanatory account of outstanding problems of language, in particular the problem of language acquisition. I intend to undermine this claim through analysis of these assumptions. Following that, I shall outline an alternative understanding of linguistic competence and language acquisition.

I

Let me begin by briefly mentioning the significant aspects of Chomsky's internalist account of language.

1. According to Chomsky, linguistic phenomena are most satisfactorily described within the conceptual framework of Transformational Generative Grammar.
2. The descriptive and explanatory efforts of linguistic theory are aimed at revealing features of the underlying grammatical competence of native speakers of language, in order to account for such phenomena as native intuitions of grammaticality and language acquisition.
3. The grammatical system sought to be recovered in linguistic theory is the generative grammar thought to be used by the ideal speaker-hearer, both in

the production and comprehension of grammatically well-formed sentences.

4. The idealizations under which grammatical theory is conceived involve making a clear distinction between competence and performance. The linguist is concerned to describe the most general and abstract features of the language faculty, abstracting away from performance variables.

5. The account of intrinsic grammatical competence includes a description of how such comptence is acquired. Roughly, language acquisition is the process of internalization of the grammar of a given language, a process that involves projection and testing of hypotheses by the child. Since primary linguistic data are very impoverished, consisting of incomplete, misleading and often, grammatically unacceptable utterances, the only plausible explanation for language acquisition is that the initial state of the child's language faculty is comprised of rich innate structures that constrain the choice of an explanatorily adequate grammar of the language in question. The innate mechanisms are described as linguistic universals or principles of Universal Grammar and are actualized as components of an individual's cognitive equipment through fixing of parameters. That is to say, the parametric switches are set in accordance with the form of the particular language at hand.

The technical name for a grammatical system internalized in this way is I-language. An I-language is an acquired state of the cognitive system of the individual speaker-hearer's language faculty. Language acquisition necessarily requires exposure to the social environment, which is said to trigger (or inhibit) the growth of language in the mind.

In this context, it is necessary to emphasize an important underlying idea. The subject matter of linguistic theory is not language *per se*, but linguistic competence. According to Chomsky's conception of the goals of linguistic theory[1]. a grammatical theory is justified to the extent that it correctly describes the native speaker's "intuitions of grammaticality." That is, the linguist's aim is to construct a descriptively adequate grammar of language that makes sense of native speaker's linguistic competence.

A further goal is to *explain* the phenomenon of linguistic competence. In Chomsky's view, only a nativist account of language truly explains the "intrinsic competence" of native speakers. The nativist theory of language is an attempt to reveal the essential structure of the human language faculty and thus the form of

human languages in general. By laying down the principles of human understanding of linguistic structures, it enunciates the fundamental conditions of language acquisition.

Hence the linguist's theory of language operates under strong psychological constraints. The rules of a generative grammar are subsumed under general principles that determine the conditions of their operation. If the operations specified by these rules are found to obtain in fact, then this constitutes evidence for the psychological reality of the abstract principles that define their scope. Further, a complete specification of the features of the initial state involves the identification of linguistics with neurobiology at an abstract level, since in the ideal case, grammar represents characteristics of the neural medium that realizes the postulated cognitive structures.

I shall call this exercise an attempt to provide a C-model of language.[2] This approach strips away the public, shareable features of natural language to arrive at an idiolect-based essentialist notion of language. In other words, it construes knowledge of language as a theory possessed by an individual speaker-hearer. This is probably the most definitive feature of the C-model. It is certainly the most dogmatic aspect of Chomsky's explanatory account of linguistic competence and acquisition. In what follows immediately, I shall attempt to undermine this idea, taking it to be the cornerstone of the nativist thesis. The latter idea is examined in Section 5, below, where I reject poverty of stimulus considerations as providing the ultimate argument for nativism.

II

A good place to begin our inquiry into the philosophical assumptions of nativism is Chomsky's views on native linguistic intuition. Chomsky is deeply sceptical of ordinary intuitions of meaning revolving around norms in public language because they are notoriously open-textured. For example, native speakers have firm intuitions about the individualization of abstract objects such as cities ("Jerusalem" and "al-Quds" refer to the same city, but one can talk meaningfully of moving al-Quds to the north-east of Jerusalem), languages (one can meaningfully speak of Chinese being the language of Beijing, whereas according to Chomsky, "Chinese" has no real-world denotatum"), and fictional characters (Tom Jones could turn into a frog and yet remain Tom Jones). But Chomsky feels that the mere observation that speakers require no aid in understanding names in appropriate ways adds nothing important to naturalistic inquiry. In other words, Chomsky

considers the analysis of ordinary, surface-level competence irrelevant to empirical inquiry. For him, the notion of a common, public language is "mysterious", he emphasizes that as far as empirical inquiry is concerned, "there is nothing in the world selected by such terms as "Chinese" or "German".[3] According to the theory of Universal Grammar, there is only one human language with several variants. In keeping with the considerations that give rise to that view, Chomsky maintains that "empirical inquiry reuires a different concept" to account for such phenomena as the systematic deviation from norm noticed in the speech of young children. The linguist's analysis of the sentence

1. * I rided my bike and brang it home

would be that the child who utters it "is following the rules of Binding Theory, conforming to the community." In other words, what empirical investigation reveals is that the child who utters (I) has her language faculty in a certain state, and this fact about her determines her language.

Nobody, I think, would deny that there are some psychological facts that explain the child's use of (1) *as if* it were an acceptable sentence in English. But I do not think it is possible, even in principle, to put one's finger on them. There is a problem of plenty involved: there are, as Quine has said, too many extensionally equivalent grammars to account for the same piece of linguistic behaviour.[4] This well-worn objection to Chomsky is actually backed by a deeper consideration. To state it, however, I shall need to digress a little.

In *The Rediscovery of Mind,* Searle makes the valuable point that syntax is not an intrinsic property of any physical system (that is minds/brains or computers or whatever). This is actually the underlying assumption of his famous "Chinese Room" argument. According to this view, syntactic manipulation is essentially observer-relative, it is attributed from without. This is true in the case of every artifact or machine-state that represents anything at all. For instance, Searle says, "[W]e could not discover objects in nature that were functioning as chairs, except relative to some agent who regarded them or used them as chairs."[5]

The same reasoning applies in the case of extensionally equivalent interpretations of a formal calculus. Given the following string of symbols as a true rule of an uninterpreted formal calculus

2. $! * (\theta \# p) = (! * \theta) \# (!* p)$

we could interpret it in a variety of ways, a few of which are mentioned below:

3. $3 x(4+5)=(3x4)+(3x5)$

4.. $p.(q \vee r)=(p . q) \vee (p . r)$

Searle is emphasizing this fundamental idea when he says that syntax is not intrinsic to physics. For, "to say that something is *functioning as* a computational process is to say something more than that a pattern of physical events is occurring." For that, you need to interpret the said pattern of events as the implementation of a computational program. This yields a very important result for us. As Searle says,

"As applied to the language of thought hypothesis, this has the consequence that the thesis is incoherent. There is no way that you could discover that there are, intrinsically, unknown sentences in your head because something is a sentence only relative to some agent or user who uses it as a sentence."[6]

The moral to be drawn from this is that if something is a sentence relative to both a native speaker and a linguist, then for both of them it functions as a sentence in a given language. Hence, evidently, competence *can be* explained *without* reference to grammatical intuitions. A theory of competence must necessarily focus on the speaker's understanding of meaning, on her ability to have her utterance function as a *linguistically significant utterance.* At bottom, native speakers' intuitions of meaning boil down to the ability to use terms correctly in discourse. A public language is what one appeals to in order to determine the meaning of what one says.

As Michael Kober points out, I think correctly, Searle's views on syntax carry over to semantics as well. Accordingly, the meaning of a symbol is a *social fact.*

> "That some specific portion of matter can be a sign or a symbol and that there is some specific meaning which the symbol may bear or indicate, is not due to empirically determinable intrinsic properties of that very portion of matter. Rather that there is a symbol with a certain meaning depends on a community of speakers who treat that physical phenomenon as syntactical and semantical. The meaning of a symbol depends on its use in a linguistic community, and the meaning is assigned to the symbol within communicative practices. Hence meaning is essentially a user-relative notion, and the fact that symbols do bear meanings can be understood as a social fact.'[7]

This is of course suggested by Kripke's analysis of Wittgensteinian rule-following considerations, and Kober is interested in emphasizing the convergence of Searle's point of view with "Kripkenstein's". This is a very important result for our purposes.

The C-model treats language as a code in which content is assumed to be antecedently available to the speaker-hearer. This follows from the deeply rationalistic cimmitment of the Chomskyan view. It is claimed that owing to a richly specified innate structure, the speaker is able to generate the syntactical form of the purported utterance. But notice that the internalist program is not sensitive to the fact that sentences in language are genuinely expressive of speakers' intentions. It also does not provide an account of the processes through which a particular use of language is deemed correct or incorrect. In this context, it is helpful to note that Chomsky rejects conscious access to rules as a possible explanation of competence (in the sense of first-person authority) and rule-following behaviour.[8] If we accept the Searle-Kober argument, then it is clear that neither first person authority (and rule-following behaviour) nor correct use of language is readily explained on the internalist accout. As for the availability of content at the representational level, I do not see how the claim can be sustained given the order of ontological commitment it involves.

One might say that the code conception of language offers powerful reasons for believing in the psychological reality of linguistic representations. But it turns out that the attractiveness of the C-model on this count is only skin-deep. The Chomskyan cognitivist assumption already involves rationalism. Where linguistic competence is conceived in terms of a system of geneative rules, it becomes imperative to characterize the acquisition of grammatical competene in terms of an innateness hypothesis. Given that (a) one is capable of learning any language whatsoever; and, (b) systems that do not possess the characteristics of generative systems are also learnable, it follows that in order to learn language at all, the mind must come equipped with language-specific universals. There is an obvious circularity involved in this argument. In the words of Joseph Margolis,

> ".....[W]e suppose that the most comprehensive linguistic generalizations are linguistic universals because we are already committed to the rationalist thesis that the mind ia "preset" to learn all possible languages, and we adopt the rationalist thesis because we suppose that the acquisition of language, taking place "with great speed, under conditions that are far

> from ideal, and [with] little significant variation among children who may differ greatly in intelligence and experience"..... cannot be accomplished unless the mind is appropriately supplied with linguistic universals --- of which our generalizations are approximations. There are no independent considerations."[9]

Thus we have little to go on except *a priori* considerations. This is the most unappealing aspct of the Chomskyan framework.

The root cause of the above objections is Chomsky's equating of grammatical competence with speakers' understanding of language. In the following section, I shall attempt to undermine this equation. In particular, I shall attempt to show that the specification of molecular-level linguistic representations does not automatically explain the molar phenomenon of speakers' understanding.

III

In Chomsky (1988), we find an intensive analysis of the notion I-language. An I-language, according to Chomsky, constitutes "one of the many systems of knowledge that the person has come to acquire, a cognitive system with specific properties that are determined by the mind/brain." More generally, for Chomsky, the term "language" is used to denote an "individual phenomenon"; two persons are able to communicate "to the extent that their I-languages are sufficiently similar." On the other hand the term "language" *ordinarily used* signifies "a *social* phenomenon, a shared property of the communty." According to Chomsky, this particular use involves "obscure sociopolitical and normative factors" and hence is unsuitable for empirical inquiry. Before we can undertake a study of language in its sociopolitical dimension, it is necessary to "grasp..... the properties and principles of language..... in the sense of individual psychology. "

Further, an I-language "determines an unlimited *range of possible phenomena that far transcend the experience of the person who acquired the language or the speech-community that this person joins.*"[10] This implies that an I-language is a self sufficient system of linguistic representation; it does not bear the influence of one's peers and fellow-speakers. In other words, *the process of language acquisition does not depend upon the child's relation to other speakers of her language.* The shareability of linguistic knowledge is a non-issue under this dispensation.

But will this work? If there are extensionally equivalent grammars, there is

no way the child can isolate the correct grammar from among them. The recourse to evaluation measures is similarly doomed, for there could be infinitely many of those as well. The implied idea that the child eventually discovers the resources required to correct herself without help from mature speakers (witness the time taken to respond to prompting by older speakers etc.) is therefore a non-starter. It is also clear that Chomsky is really explicating an artifact of linguistic theory rather than linguistic competence or its acquisition. Language is a normative phenomenon, and the acid test of internalization of language by the child is the ability to conform to established linguistic practice. As David Wiggins would say, the practical abilities of speakers are answerable to particular public languages. In effect, Chomsky has not proved that "speaking a language is no more than a psychological function of human beings."[11]

This does not imply that idiolects are theoretically worthless. Idiolects exist, but only as elaborations of the shared reality of a given natural language. They exist within the "clearing" provided by public language, to use Heidegger's phrase. This is what gives them their separate identities.Languages are normative objects; they cause speakers to regulate their linguistic behaviour with respect to them. As Wiggins say, I use the term 'red' to denote the colour of red objects because "that is how to say in English that a thing is red.'[12] The prescriptive element in language follows from its basically shared character.

Given these assumptions, language acquisition is the process of acquiring a manner of expressing one's thoughts and intentions in an existing system of signs. In effect, it is the process of initiation into the linguistic community. It also necessarily presupposes the communication situation. For, as Dummett reminds us, it is fundamental to our acquisition of linguistic practice that we learn to act on what others tell us to do.[13]

In view of the foregoing, we can conclude that Chomsky reifies an artifact of linguistic theory, in effect subverting the intuitive idea of speakers' linguistic ability. This has the consequence that the C-model proves itself inadequate to grapple with the concrete problems of language. We can find no way to connect molecular-level linguistic representations with the molar issues of communication and language acquisition, and are therefore led to conclude that the C-model cannot serve as the core of a model of linguistic performance.

IV

I shall now make a brief detour in order to clarify a few of my assumptions.

I have spoken above about natural languages forming the clearing within which idiolects assume significance. As I see it, this idea combines two related conceptions of language, namely, language as public norm and language as activity. To take an example, when I tell a child, "Stack up the blocks to your right," I gesture towards something I want her to do. If I follow up the order by pointing helpfully to the right, or by beginning to stack up the blocks myself, it amounts to an explication of my command. Both my utterance and its explication are meant to transmit information to my audience/interlocutor, and their intention is fulfilled by appropriate acts on the part of the hearer that manifest understanding of my meaning. The possibility of communication implies a background of shared linguistic practices in terms of which linguistic acts come to be interprected or misinterpreted. To borrow an example from Wittgenstein, the grocer's understanding of the instructions "five red apples" written on a piece of paper is based on his sharing my form of life, its background assumptions. This is an important element of the present conception of speakers' understanding.

Ordinary intuitions regarding meaning are safeguarded by habitual deference to the established norm. The correct use of a term constitutes tacit acknowledgment of established conventions on the part of speakers. Also, individuals conform to conventions, thereby upholding them, but upholding use does not form part of their intention to conform. Speakers conform in order to be understood as saying just so-and so in a given language. In a sense, expressions in language are cultural artifacts, since they collectively describe forms of life. Therefore linguistic competence includes grasp of linguistic meaning in this fundamental, lived sense.[14]

One needs to interpret this intuition as gesturing towards the idea of language as activity. For a natural language describes a sphere of rule-governed, meaningful linguistic activity. Common sense recognizes the public character of language, but its categories are too coarse to identify linguistic acts as moves in particular language games. But a theory of language must make explicit the background of meaningful linguistic activity.We can think of native speakers' linguistic abilities as *habits* or practices that have grown into second nature. Habitual acts are performed unconsciously, but it is possible to interpret the patterns of understanding that give rise to them. To understand how people acquire and use language, we require just such an interpretation of ordinary skilled linguistic behaviour.

When we get down to the fundamentals of speakers' understanding --- consider one of Wittgenstein's "primitive language games" --- we find patterns of what Heidegger called "coping": skilful acts performed thoughtlessly. The builder calls for a slab and his assistant carries one over. Notice that no "meanings in the head" are assumed. 'Slab' here has a purely extrinsic meaning; its denotation is fixed by its place in the context of the game. (In other words it is a cultural artifact of that miniature universe.) Knowledge of criteria comes about from observing how linguistic tools are used by people follwing the rules of a game. In fact, linguistic habits are "contagious".

Elements of a language also have a tendency to refer to each other. This feature is relevant to our acquisition of language. To become familiar with a given form of life is to understand the "equipmental whole" that constitutes its structrue, to use a term from Heidegger. How a given rule is interpreted by the individual speaker is determined by the collective interpretation assigned to the entire equipmental nexus described by the language. As a rule, we cannot remove a linguistic tools from its context of use. What Heidegger calls "privative seeing" is never the norm, its an exception. (It is interesting to note that according to Heidegger, "privative seeing" becomes possible in cases of breakdown of the normal flow of life.) Our understanding of language is identical with the capacity to use it, and hence the ability to use a given linguistic tool reflects our understandig of the context of its use. Thus understanding is really know-how. Also, our knowledge of the context of use is never explicit. It is part of our understanding of languae, but it stays as a presupposition of linguistic activity. As Heidegger might say, for all practical purposes, what matters is that the background "bears in itself the structure of interpretation."[15] Speakers' knowledge of the background captures the normativity of natural language. The mutual imputation of knowledge of the background constitutes the fundamental precondition of linguistic communication.

This sketch should suffice for present purposes. A detailed picture of the place of language in human life will emerge from a phenomenological study of the conditions of language acquisition and use, a matter that is beyond the scope of this paper.

V

Chomskyans are agreed on regarding primary linguistic data as far too improverished for the purposes of projecting a grammaticl theory. On the strength

of this assumption, Chomsky claims that an empiricist algorithm cannot be shown to be up to the task of language acquisition. In other words, recourse to nativism is the only way to solve the projection problem that forms the core of the problem of language acquisition.

In view of what I have said above, the acquisition of linguistic practice involves acquiring ways of coping with linguistic tools. But since understandig is already "coping" (in the manner described above), language acquisition involves elements of both practice and cognition. The two are essentially inseparable. The child does not hear linguistic utterances as a series of sounds out of which she is expected to extract significance. Linguistic sound is invested with meaning from the start. This is what distinguishes it from the accompanying noise. Expressions in language are symbolic in that they point to their place in the language game. (To say that one hears linguistic sound as mere sound is to hold that privative seeing is normally possible.) A child born into a linguistic community internalizes the socioculturally determined meanings as part of her acquisition of the linguistic practices of the community.

Against this view, consider the nativist account of language acquisition. It is claimed that nativism about linguistic universals constitutes a more powerful explanatory theory than the best empiricist algorithms *because empiricist algorithms cannot model language acquisition.* Now, just what is an empiricist algorithm? Ramsey and Stich list up the virtues of one, calling the system that runs the algorithm a "Rational Scientist" following a convention used by Chomsky. These include the ability to record and analyze data and to think up imaginative hypotheses, and the ability to employ a simplicity criterion, by which are meant the whole set of methodological principles and intuitions that are employed in empirical theory-construction. The Rational Scientist is of course denied the luxury of learning the language from which the data are drawn, to preserve some kind of parity between the pre-verbal child and herself.[16]

But surely it is obvious that such an algorithm is irrelevant to the task at hand. *The child does not have to project a hypothesis to account for primary linguistic data.* Given the way we have read the problem of language acquisition above, there is no projection problem involved in language learning. Hence, the relative merits of rationalism and empiricism are tangential to the real issue.

Here I would like to refer to Chomsky's debate with Putnam over the

innateness hypothesis. In his "What is Innate and Why?" Putnam argues that the syntax of linguistic utterances is essentially determined by contextual clues regarding the sense of the sentence and its constituent parts. This consideration is related to Putnam's objections to the idea of linguistic universals to account for linguistic competence. The former idea is akin to Searle's view presented above.

In light of the above arguments, it seems clear that we do not have grounds for assuming language-specific innate structures. For one thing, even if there are transformational relations common to all grammars, this fact does not constitute evidence of the irreducibility of the linguistic structures in question. We can easily conceive of them as instantiations of more fundamental *psychological processes.* Secondly, it isn't clear how these universals are supposed to explain the acquisition of particular grammars. The principles and parameters theory (see above) leaves the consequecne that *children still need the cognitive structures to learn the grammar of the community they find themselves in.* With respect to discovering the "local grammar" (Margolis's term)--- and making sense of the world through it --- they are more or less left to their pragmatic resources. This gives us reason to suppose that they have available *general learning mechanisms* that help ininternalizing the particular grammar in question. [17] Once again, while rationalism accounts for the molecular facts of linguistic representation it does not explain the molar phenomena of performance. In general, the wholesale reduction of the molar capacities pertaining to performance to molecular innate processes fails to work because too much is left unexplained.

The most important consideration against Chomsky's account of language acquisition is the following. According to the internalist framework, language acquisition ia a function of the innate linguistic endowment of a human being. It is a process altogether independent of external influence. Language is learnt by a process of projection and testing of grammatical hypothesis, which makes the internalized system into a set of privately owned set of rules. Hence, as Chomsky says, no two individuals share the same language. But this is disconcerting. For this means that the account of I-languages cannot be integrated seamlessly with an account of communication. This result is of course accepted by Chomsky. But can we remain satisfied with such a theory of language? *We are interested in the phenomenon of language acquisition for all that it makes possible, and communication is one of them.* Just why would anybody be interested in a theory about the acquisition of private languages? We have already preempted the

argument that such an account is the first step towards the understanding of linguistic phenomena at the molar level. Thus it appears that Chomsky's theory of language acquisition does not serve any explanatory purpose. This is my basic reason for rejecting nativism as an account of language acquisition.

NOTES

1. See Chomsky (1957), Chapter 6 for details.
2. The term "C-model" is borrowed from Bruce Derwing.
3. Chomsky (1995), p. 48.
4. Quine (1974), pp.110-111. The example (1) is from Chomsky.
5. Searle (1992), p. 211.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 210
7. Kober (1998), pp. 324-325
8. Chomsky (1995), pp. 34-35.
9. Margolis (1978), p. 113. The quotation used by Margolis is from Chomsky's *Language and Mind.*
10. Chomsky (1988). pp. 35-37
11. Wiggins (1997), p. 501.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 512. He emphasizes that it is not a matter of *human will* that a name refers to an object. Reference is socially fixed. See ibid., p. 519
13. Dummett (1989), p. 197
14. That meaning is sociocultural is explicated by the fact that the functional properties of the same object can be determined differently in different cultures. The Hindi term 'mej' (meaning 'table') stands for an object which is used to read or write at, but not (necessarily) to eat at.
15. Heidegger (1962), p. 190.
16. Ramsey and Stich (1990), p. 184.
17. Margolis (1978), p. 102.

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