



THE PROBLEM OF LANGUAGE IN RELATION TO MIND AND THOUGHT: A PHILOSOPHICAL VIEW

Vijay Vishal¹

¹ Student,

Indira Gandhi National Open University,
New Delhi

ABSTRACT

Language is the primary mode of communication, if not the only way. Many linguists have tried to understand language and the complex nature of human cognitive abilities. This paper deals with the relation of mind and thought with language and the problem associated with it. The discussion has been kept open ended as the area of discussion is very broad and the ever changing nature of language and its connection with human mind to comprehend the abstract entities in a meaningful notion or ideas. Chomsky also believes that what differentiates human from animals or other primates is the distinctive feature of creating a well established language by putting sense while articulating and then able to comprehend from that articulation. Humboldt says that it is the language that controls the operation of mind. It can be argued, at last, that language is inherent and language is necessary for true thinking as well as for the communication of thought.

KEYWORDS: Language, Language thought, Cognition, Phenomenology, Psycholinguistics, Innateness, Language determinism, Consciousness.

1. INTRODUCTION

‘Language is one of the main means... to express our thought’; this is the most common way in which we can define a language in relation to mind. Many linguists have defined the language in their own way and made attempts to understand the complexities of human cognitive abilities and especially the acquisition and use of language which are as old and as continuous as history itself. As Saussure defines thought as a swirling cloud, with no intrinsically determinate shape and no advance established ideas. He further goes on to say that before linguistic structure was introduced, there was nothing distinct about the expression.

Further taking the notion of this expression of mind and thought about localization of linguistic ability in the human brain through the theory of localization proposed by Mr. Joseph Gall which is different human cognitive abilities behaviors are localized in specific part of the brain and he proves that language is located in the frontal lobe. Also, it is known that the brain is the physical locus on the mind and mind emerges from the brain at work. This refers to that person from different stream like philosopher, linguists and scientist has their different views about the relation of brain or mind with

the language. There is a big debate; about the history of origin of language, about the relation of language with human brain (or the relation of the sound produced while speaking) with thought, and also about the problems with these relations; by some of the philosophers like Humboldt, Locke, Condillac, Horne Tooke, Saussure and others as well.

There are many contemporaries also who are working on the idea of relation of mind and thought with language and its problem.

2. LANGUAGE AND THOUGHT

Language is a psychological and cognitive property of humans, i.e. if there are some set of neurons in a human head firing madly away that allows humans to write certain things, and there are some other set of neurons which makes coherent ideas and thoughts by translating abstract symbols or sounds. So, the cognitive science is an umbrella term for a group of disciplines that aim for the same goal which is describing and explaining human beings’ ability to think. Noam Chomsky says about language and mind relation that “When we study human language, we are approaching what some might call the “human essence,” the distinctive qualities of mind that are, so



far as we know, unique to man.”(Chomsky,1968). Here, what Chomsky tries to say that humans have a distinctive feature of creating a well established language, just because humans have a distinctive qualities in their mind, which differentiates humans from animals resulting in bringing sense while speaking something and then able to comprehend that speech.

It can be said that language is the formative organ of thought. Intellectual activity which is entirely mental, entirely internal, and to some extent passing without trace comes through sounds, externalized in speech, and perceptible to the senses. Thought and language are therefore one and inseparable from each other. Lafont(1990) brings the debate that it is necessary for intellectual activity to be intrinsically bound to enter in to a union with the verbal sound; otherwise neither it is possible to achieve clarity of thought, nor does the idea takes the shape of concept.

Talking about Saussure’s view on language and thought, he said “the sounds, which lie outside this fabulous world of thought, in themselves constitute entities establish in advance. The substance of sound is no more fixed or rigid than that of thought. It does not offer a readymade mould, with shapes that thought must be inevitably conform to. It is a malleable material which can be fashioned in to separate parts in order to supply the signals which thought has need of. So it can envisage the linguistic phenomenon in its entirety, the language, i.e. as a series of adjoining subdivisions simultaneously imprinted both on the plane of vague, amorphous thought, and on the equally featureless plane of sound”.(Saussure,1966). Just as it is impossible to cut the paper without cutting the other side at the same time, likewise it is impossible to isolate sound from thought or thought from sound. In Saussure’s *Course de Linguistique generale*, it is mentioned that ‘Linguistics, then operates along this margin, where sound and thought meet. The contact between them gives rise to a form, not a substance’.

Here the impossibility of cutting a sheet of paper without simultaneously cutting recto and verso symbolizes for Saussure the intrinsic inseparability of the phonetic and conceptual facets of language. What Saussure says about the nature of language from one point of view may be regarded as a resurrection or modern restatement of the primitive Greek concepts of the logos, whose structure is called as langue.

Comparing this to Humboldt’s theory of language which is found on an opposition between what he identifies in the first extract as the two constitutive principles of language i.e. first is inner linguistic sense and other is sound. With regard to this, he argues that language is an activity not a product; it is

the ever repeated mental labor of making the articulated sound capable of expressing thought. Language propels in the act of its real production, this proposition was stated by Humboldt in his work *Verschiedenheit*. Humboldt also stated that the sound form of a language is based on “what has been handed down already, the mental activity which as earlier explained, produces the expression of thought, is always directed at once upon something given, it is not a purely creative, but a reshaping activity” (Humboldt, 2016).

Therefore, it can be said that Humboldt might have meant that ‘language is always encountered as ergot, a product already in place’. Humboldt’s take on language is also in the form that language is a creative act when he says “Words well up freely from the breast, without necessity or intent, and there may well have been no wandering horde in any desert that did not already have its own songs. For man, as a species, is a singing creature, though the notes, in his case, are also coupled with thought.” (Humboldt, 2016).

In other words, language is originally something that comes from the inside. And the particular form of singing that comes from one nation, one race, will depend upon the mental characteristics of that one nation that is on their linguistic sense. Now it is clear that what a speaker says to this extent is determined from within, by his individual character, which itself can be reflected in the degree of his mental power. On the other hand what he says also determined from without, by the rules and patterns of the language which he speaks. Here again Humboldt has mentioned that Subjective activity fashions an object in thought. “For no class of presentations can be regarded as a purely receptive contemplation of a thing already present”(Harris, Talbot, Taylor,1997). But language is indispensable for this. “For in that the mental striving breaks out through the lips in the language, the product of that striving return back to the speakers ear.(Humboldt,1999) Thus the presentation becomes transformed in to real objectivity, without being deprived of subjectivity on that account.(Putz, Verspoor,2000) Only language can do this; and without this transformation all true thinking is impossible.

Like Condillac, Humboldt argued that it is only because one has a language that he is able to control the operations of mind. Language enables self-consciousness and the articulation and analysis of the otherwise formless thought stream. So, it can be seen that Humboldt and Condillac both has quite similar views on Language and Thought or Mind. To compare their view, Condillac’s statement from his book *Grammaire* can be looked at: “If a thought is not linear in mind, it has a linear order in discourse, where it is analyzed in to as many parts as it includes component



ideas.”(Condillac,1803). By this means we may observe and even understand what we do while thinking; consequently we may learn to control our reflections. Thinking thus becomes an art, and it is the art of speaking.

Language is therefore more or less perfect relative to their adequacy for analysis. The more they facilitate analysis, the more they give assistance to the mind. “In effect, we judge and reason with words, just as we calculate with numerals; and languages are for ordinary people what algebra is for geometers.”(Harris, Talbot, Taylor, 1997).

These statements are very much reliable in terms of the importance of language in human’s life as one just cannot express themselves or express their thought without communicating with each other; and to communicate with people, one has to have a language. In the above statement Condillac has compared geometers and the ordinary people; because for geometers, the algebra is the only way to define their mathematical calculations; likewise the ordinary people also need some language to express their thought what they have in their mind, in their ordinary life because this is the only way in which they can define themselves. As with Locke’s ideas on language, an exposition of Condillac’s linguistic ideas must begin with an account of his ideas about the nature and components operations of the human mind.

“Although Locke is not clear on this point in the *Essai*, by his later work Condillac is explicit: all the faculties of the mind are derived from the faculty of sensation. For instance, what Condillac calls the faculty of attention is supposed to consist simply in focusing on one component of a complex sensation to the exclusion of others. The faculty of comparison is no more than that of attending to sensations at the same time. Memory is the comparison of present sensation with an absent one.”(Harris, Talbot, Taylor, 1997). So we see that different philosopher has different views about language and thought or we can say language and cognitive science.

Though, it is known that psychology is all about human behavior which relates with human mind, so that human mind can deal with language and thought in terms of psychology. In present day many psychologist are working on the idea of language and thought. The phenomenology will be a suitable term to combine the philosophy with psychology to deal with language and its problem. But in the field of language which relates to psychology, there is a separate branch called ‘psycholinguistics’. So, psycholinguistics is a recent branch of linguistics developed in nineteen sixties, in which there is an interrelationship between psychology and linguistic behavior. This field has different

explanation about different criteria of mind in relation to language, like perception process of objects; that how we perceive the things and how it results to speak. Zahevi and Gallagher explains about phenomenology as “The meaning of the presented profile [of an object] is dependent upon its relation to the absent profiles ...,and *no perceptual awareness of the object would be possible if* our awareness were restricted to the intuitively given. In other words: in order for a perception to be a perception-of-an-object, it *must be* permeated by a horizontal intentionality...” (Zahavi, Gallagher,2008), and he goes on to say that

“A perception cannot merely be a perception of what is now; rather, any perception of the present slice of an object includes a retention of the just-past slice and a pre-tension of what is about to occur.... Perceptual presence is *therefore* not punctual; it is a field in which now, not-now, and not-yet-now are given in a horizontal gestalt. *This is what is required* if perception of an enduring object is to be possible”.(Zahavi, Gallagher,2008). From this we can get an inference about perception but the other main area of psycholinguistics is ‘language acquisition’, which has been a topic of huge discussion in the history of language also. Language acquisition refers to a property of language which is **innateness**, introduced by Noam Chomsky. He has given the theory of universal grammar; this is the faculty of mind which determines the nature of language acquisition in the infant and of linguistic competence (knowledge). The properties that lie behind the competence of speakers of various languages are governed by restricted and unified elementary principles rooted in Universal Grammar.

With the help of discussion so far, it can be assumed that there is an inseparable relationship between language and mind or language and knowledge as well. We have already seen it from the philosophical and psychological point of views. Thus, language is necessary for true thinking as well as for the communication of thoughts. Without language, as Condillac, and to some extent also Locke, argued, the mind cannot bind individual sensory inputs into manipulable concepts and so it cannot truly know what is passive experiences. Nor it can analyze complex experiences in to comprehensible parts.

3. THE PROBLEM OF LANGUAGE WITH MIND

When we talk about mind or knowledge and its problem with language then the first thing which comes in mind is rationalism vs. empiricism. This is one of the other historically important clusters of topics in the philosophy of mind concerning what is in mind.



Rationalism and Empiricism is the views of nature of human knowledge. On a broader level, it can be assumed that empiricist holds the view that all of humans' knowledge derives from sensory, experiential, or empirical interaction with the world. On the contrary, rationalists hold the negation of this view, that there is some knowledge that does not derive from experience. Since at least our paradigm of knowledge; of our immediate environments, of common physical objects, of scientific kinds, seem obviously to be based on sense experience, empiricism has significant intuitive appeal.(Wilson,2004).

The different views of the sources of knowledge held by rationalists and empiricist have been accompanied by correspondingly different views of the mind, and it is not hard to see why. If one is an empiricist and so holds, roughly, that there is nothing in mind that is not first in the senses, then there is a fairly literal sense in which ideas, found in the mind, are complexes that derive from impression in the senses. This in turn suggests that the processes that constitute cognition are themselves elaborations of those that constitute perception, that is, that cognition differs only in degree, not kind.

Here we see the problem of language acquisition, which was a topic of argument between the rationalists and the empiricists; and also it is continuing in the contemporary era and contemporary nativism is more often expressed as the view that certain implicit knowledge that we have or the principles that govern how the mind works, most notoriously, linguistic knowledge and principles are innate, and so it is not learned. And because the types of knowledge that one can have may be endlessly heterogeneous, rationalist tend to view the mind as a domain specific device, as one made up of systems whose governing principles are very different. Thus, it should be no surprise that the historical debate between rationalists and empiricists has been revisited in contemporary discussions of the Innateness of language, the modularity of mind connectionism.(Wilson, 2004). These are some recent problems which come under the domain of relation between language and mind.

A second dimension to the issue of the structure of the mind concerns the place of consciousness among phenomena. Consciousness is not a process...but a behavior that is controlled by the brain. The emergence of human consciousness is based upon the interface of three animal behaviors which are communication play, and the use of tools. These components do not distinguish humans directly from the primates (our close relatives) as they are also available in many species but a particular combination of these components brings the uniqueness in the humans. The

interaction of communication and plays gives rise to language (Kotchoubey, 2018). Consciousness is a situation of awareness in mind or brain. "The two main fundamental position regarding the mind brain problem are 'Dualism and monism'. Dualism is like mind and brain is separate and the monism is mind and brain are really one."(Gould, 2009).

As mentioned by Jay Gould, that there are two positions regarding the mind and brain problem; one is dualism and other is monism which can be defined in the following ways;

- i. Dualism : It is the proposed idea that mind and brain are separate, which formally known as Cartesian Dualism after it's originator. The human mind, which controls human behavior lacks physical substance and obeys no natural laws.
- ii. Monism : It is the proposed idea that mind and brain are one, today this unity position is generally accepted, but there are many who still believe that some aspects of the mind, for example consciousness, cannot be just a product of physical brain.

Here, we looked at the problem of mind and brain but we can also relate it with the problem of language; since only humans appear to have natural language abilities (as proposed to what is taught to apes and parrots), and thus verbal working memory, then only humans typically have verbal consciousness. This vastly expands our mental capabilities, such as, for pre evaluating problem solutions, humans have the capacity for silent self-narration; which can only be done through our mind and for which we need a language of course.

So, the problems coming to the mind and brain can relatively be the problem for the language also. Hence, it can be seen that humans have problems with language and mind, such as problem with language acquisition, relativism, realism and empiricism and so on. Also, the relationship of language and thought is very much visible when looked in the Sapir –Whorf hypothesis:

'Human beings do not live in the objective world alone, nor in the world of social activity as ordinarily understood, but are very much at the mercy of the particular language which has become the medium of expression for their society... We see and hear and otherwise experience very largely as we do because the language habits of our community predispose certain choices of interpretation' (Whorf, Lee.1971).

The above hypothesis called language determinism; defines that language we speak determines that how we perceive and think about the



world. The relativism refers to the relativity between the objects and their names and there is a long discussion on this notion of relativism by Sapir and others. So, the idea of language and mind relation is inseparable. There is a complementary relation between language and mind.

4. CONCLUSION

Language is inherent; this is a fact, and also every human has their own language in their mind to define themselves and it can be said that all human beings are living under the shadow of supreme phenomena that is language. As discussed above, language is necessary for true thinking as well as for the communication of thought.

Saussure's comparison of language and thought with cutting of paper with a scissor can be taken as a fact that relationship of language and thought or mind is inseparable; but also, there are some problems regarding language and mind, on which there have already been lots of debate, discussions, and deliberation in past and still in contemporary time it is a topic of argument because language and thought cannot be properly defined in its true sense as it is ever changing and ever evolving in nature. (Robins, 1985)

From a long time the psychologists, philosophers, and linguists as well are trying to find a proper definition of this relationship between mind and thought, but at the same time there is problem in defining this relation in its true sense. Therefore, a conclusion that can be drawn from all these assumptions is that these discussions are not enough to prove the relationship between language and mind. So, leaving it open ended I would propose some further discussion on this relation and on its other relative topics as well such as:

- (a) Linguistic Relativity
- (b) Language acquisition process
- (c) Proving realism is a better idea of Language acquisition process

REFERENCES

1. Gould Jay. (2009) *Mind-Brain Problem*
2. Fromkin, V., Rodman, R., & Hyams, N. (2011). *An Introduction to language, 9e. Canada: Wadsworth Cengage Learning.*
3. Gould, J. *Mind-Brain Problem and Consciousness.*
4. Wilson, R. A. (2004). *Boundaries of the mind: The individual in the fragile sciences-Cognition. Cambridge University Press.*
5. Chomsky, N. (2006). *Language and mind. Cambridge University Press.*
6. De Saussure, F. (2011). *Course in general linguistics. Columbia University Press.*

7. Von Humboldt, W. (2016). *Über die Verschiedenheiten des menschlichen Sprachbaues. andersseitig. de.*
8. Condillac, É., & Dufart, F. (1803). *La grammaire. Chez Dufart, Imprimeur-Libraire.*
9. Locke, J. (1970). *An essay concerning human understanding, 1690. Scholar Press.*
10. Zahavi, D., & Gallagher, S. (2008). *Reply: A phenomenology with legs and brains. Abstracta, 4(3), 86-107.*
11. Robins, R. H. (1985). *Linguistics and Linguistic Evidence: The LAGB Silver Jubilee Lectures, 1984 (Vol. 25). Grevatt & Grevatt.*
12. Harris Roy and Taylor J. Taylor (1997) *Landmarks in Linguistic Thought I (2nd edition) Routledge.*
13. Zahavi Dan and Gallagher (2008) *The Phenomenological Mind: An Introductory to Philosophy and Mind and cognitive, Routledge.*