

The 6th China International Forum on Cognitive Linguistics

Language, Culture and Mind:

10 lectures on development, evolution and cognitive linguistics

Chris Sinha, University of Portsmouth, UK
chris.sinha@port.ac.uk

Lecture 10

Beyond Subjectivism and Objectivism: realism,
relativism and representation



Three fundamental philosophies of mind

- Mind is autonomous and exists in its own mental realm (of Forms, Ideas etc)
- Mind is in the brain. It is an aspect of matter and a property of the brain and the embodied nervous system
 - Spinoza, Darwin, Helmholtz, Wundt etc
- Mind is in society. It is intersubjective and communal.
 - From Vico to Marx, Wittgenstein etc.



Objectivism

- In general terms, the metaphysical position that complete and objective (3rd person, non-perspectival) knowledge of the world is possible (the “God’s Eye View”)
- In logic and linguistics, a formal theory of meaning based upon the objective correspondence between true linguistic expressions and states of affairs in the world



Meanings as Ideal Objects

- Linguistic expressions are decontextualised and have determinate meaning as ideal, symbolic objects
- These meanings (senses, concepts) exist independently of their employment in human communication and practice
- Meanings must be “grasped” by subjects, whose psychological concepts are imperfect, subjective and derived
- Meaning determines reference (Frege)



Objectivism in philosophy of language

- Meaning is a relationship of *true reference* between symbolic expressions and objective states of affairs
- Truth is *correspondence* between propositions and states of affairs
 - Carnap: “p” is true iff p
- The reference of an expression is determined by its *sense* (Frege)
- The sense of a complex expression is built up from the senses of its syntactically combined constituents (compositionality, productivity)
- Senses of expressions are invariant across their combinatorial contexts (systematicity)



Objective sense and concept

- Senses, or linguistic concepts (for Frege) exist in a Platonic ideal realm (objective idealism)
- Senses must be “grasped” by speakers, and are non-identical with psychological (subjective) concepts (“anti-psychologism”)
- Fodor, following Chomsky’s move in regard to grammar, re-locates senses in the individual speaker-hearer in the form of the concepts of an innate Universal Language of Thought (Rationalism)



Physicalism and cognitivist objectivism

- In classical cognitivism, objectivist meanings exist in the individual mind/brain (*physical symbol system*)
- But they remain independent of contexts human communication and practice
- Evolution replaces God as the guarantor of objectivity



Problems with objectivism

- It cannot guarantee correspondence between meaning and world (Putnam)
- It cannot explain the workings of real languages in the real world (metaphor, indeterminacy, polysemy)
- It cannot explain how innate concepts get into the mind/brain



Subjectivism

- Generally: the epistemological claim that the only access we have to reality is through individual sense perceptions
- Concepts are formed through association and abstraction from perception (empiricism)
- Linguistic semantics is based upon individual concepts (or similar structures such as image schemas)
- Experientialism is an “active” variant of empiricism



Problems with Subjectivism

- How can we be sure that the sense perceptions of other people are similar to our own? (Other Minds ... Common Experience and Embodiment)
- How can we refer to anything else except our own sense perceptions? (Solipsism)
- How can we know that the world continues to exist when unperceived? (Bishop Berkeley)
- How can we have concepts for unperceivable things? (Imagination, Metaphoric Extension)



A synthetic solution

- Preserve the distinction in Objectivism between psychological and discursive concepts
- Replace the Platonic Ideal realm with intersubjective, normative agreement
- Language is a system of conventions
- Reference is an achievement of people, not an attribute of meanings



The socio-cultural variant of Fregean sense

- “Plato called objects that manifest similarities [to linguistic meanings] *Ideas* ... That we have transformed the ‘eternal and immutable’ into ‘intersubjective’...only needs to be said in order to exclude misunderstandings.”
 - Karl Bühler, 1939.
- Intersubjectivity is the basis of social facts and social institutions (Durkheim, Searle – Lecture 9)



Realism

- The proposition that there exists a mind-independent reality to which at least some of our concepts and utterances refer
- Realism is often combined with Objectivism, but need not be (eg Lakoff and Johnson: experiential realism)



What is the world referred to?

- People do not refer to objective States of Affairs, but to **linguistically construed situations**
- More elaborately: Linguistically conceptualized referential situations
- The position I take in these lectures: Ecological and Perspectival Realism



The Conundrum of the Mind/Brain

- This brain is my brain. That brain is your brain. I cannot share your brain and you cannot share mine. The brain is a part of the individual organism.
- However, I can share your thoughts. Mind is shared and mind is social.
- The primary vehicle (in adults) for sharing thoughts is language.



Language as a Vehicle

- The transmission view: language is a means of transportation of thoughts from one thinker to another (the Conduit metaphor from Aristotle to Locke)
- The toolkit metaphor: language is a means of coordinating and transforming
 - The shared, *inter*-subjective universe of discourse of interlocutors
 - The *intra*-subjective cognitive processes and capacities of individual speaker / hearers



Relativism: A disease of the modern world?

- Relativism “appears to be the only attitude acceptable to today’s standards”
- “The dictatorship of relativism [which] does not recognize anything as definitive, and has as its highest value one’s own ego and one’s own desires”
 - Pope Benedict XVI



What is the target of papal wrath?

- Relativism is identified with:
 - “Anything goes”
 - There is no truth, of knowledge or ethics, that is superior to any other
 - So relativism leads to the rule of self-interest, hedonism and libertinism
 - And is therefore devoid of both sense and morality



The “paradox” of relativism

- Relativism denies the possibility of all truth claims
- Relativism is therefore a claim about the nature of truth
- Therefore relativism, if true, cannot be true
- This criticism identifies relativism with deep scepticism: its target is “negative relativism”



Some more manifestations of “negative relativism”

- Romantic multi-culturalism:
 - It is not permissible to condemn the customs of cultural groups on the basis of external judgements of value
- The denial of universal human rights:
 - Freedom of expression, democracy etc are inconsistent with this or that cultural tradition
- The denial of scientific rationality:
 - Scientific theories are no more valid than folk beliefs
- These propositions cannot be tested scientifically, they are a-priori judgements



A brief history of relativism

- Protagoras:

“Man is the measure of all things”

- This anti-Platonic claim suggests that relativism is a variety of pragmatism: what is true is what works, in some context or other
- If contexts vary, so does truth-in-context
- The judgements, beliefs and actions of individuals are comprehensible only against the background of their own culture and language (positive relativism)
- The last of these claims is a hypothesis which can be investigated scientifically



Relativism in modern thought

- Relativism emerged in anthropology and linguistics as a reaction against 19th century Social Darwinism
- And, more generally, the theoretical assumption of a universal pattern of cultural evolution, from savagery to civilization, from irrationality to scientific rationality



The Phyllocultural Complex

- 19th Century thinkers identified “primitive” thought with the thought processes of children and the insane
- Auguste Comte, the father of positivism, during episodes of psychiatric illness,

“felt himself regress through various stages of metaphysics, monotheism and polytheism, to fetishism, and then, in the process of recuperation, watched himself mount again through the progressive changes of human consciousness, at once historical and individual, to positivism and health”



The legacy of phyloculturalism

- Karl Marx: Oriental despotism, and Greek thought as “the childhood of humanity”
- Sigmund Freud: Moses and monotheism
- Levy-Bruhl: primitive thought as “participation” (he later abandoned this theory)
- Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky, in their early work, both accepted the hypothesis of a generalized child-primitive mentality (but later abandoned it)



Franz Boas and Linguistic Anthropology

- Boas builds upon the theories of Wilhelm von Humboldt: languages express cultural and psychological diversity
- Documents North American indigenous languages
- Concludes there is no “primitive language”:
 - “The outstanding fact about any language is its formal completeness” (Edward Sapir)
- Situates linguistics in interdisciplinary “cognitive science”: “The purely linguistic inquiry is part and parcel of a thorough investigation of the psychology of the peoples of the world”
- Comparative anthropological psychology is also pioneered in Britain by W.H. Rivers and Sir Frederick Bartlett
- But the lessons take a long time to filter through ...



Culture and psychology

- “Between our clearness of separation of what is in the mind from what is out of it, and the mental confusion of the lowest savage of our own day, there is a vast interval” (Tylor, 1965)
- “Most psychologists are poorly prepared by education or acculturation to understand the mental processes of people living in traditional cultures or to grasp the fact such people’s experiences have not required them to develop and use many of the cognitive strategies that our Western experience has instilled in us”
(George A. Miller, 1971)



Verbal logic

- E: Flumo and Yakpalo always drink rum together. Flumo is drinking rum. Is Yakpalo drinking rum?
- C: Flumo and Yakpalo drink rum together, but the time Flumo was drinking the first one Yakpalo was not there on that day.
- (Repetition of question and answer)
- E: What is the reason?
- C: The reason is that Yakpalo went to his farm on that day and Flumo remained in town on that day. (Cole et al 1971)
- NB the construction of a hypothetical *scenario*



The importance of context

- Cole et al's research (in categorization, memory and learning) demonstrated that the choice of materials (according to familiarity/unfamiliarity of objects and categories), and the verbal formulation of the task (whether categories are explicitly named; whether instructions or questions) could differentially disadvantage *either* nonliterate Liberian *or* literate American groups.
- Many developmental psychologists reached similar conclusions in researching children's reasoning during the 1970's.



The role of context: cultural variability and universality

- “Cultural differences in cognition reside more in the situations to which particular cognitive processes are applied than in the existence of a process in one cultural group and its absence in another” (Cole et al’s “major conclusion”)
- Compare with Boas:
 - “the existence of a mind absolutely independent of conditions of life is unthinkable” --- but also
 - “the functions of the human mind are common to all humanity”



Linguistic relativity: origins

- The hypothesis of linguistic relativity:
 - “users of markedly different grammars are pointed by their grammars toward different types of observations and hence different evaluations of externally similar acts of observation, and hence are not equivalent as observers but must arrive at somewhat different views of the world” (Whorf, 1940)
 - However: “Gestalt psychology gives us a canon of reference for all observers, irrespective of their languages or scientific jargons, by which to break down and describe all visually observable situations, and many other situations also”. (Whorf, 1939)



The truth about relativism?

- A major failing of most 20th Century psychological theories was their restriction to studies of the Euro-American mind, language and culture
- To really understand what is universal in the human mind, we have to conduct comparative studies
- Psychologists, linguists and anthropologists all have to learn from each other, as well as from the diverse peoples that they work with
- Positive relativism represents a methodological necessity as well as a testable hypothesis about cognitive variation and the constraints upon it
- Each of the world's 4,000+ languages represents a unique source of evidence and resource for human identity. This imposes ethical responsibilities regarding the treatment of the cultural and linguistic diversity of our own species.



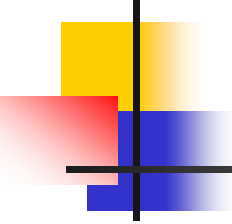
Representation as an Act of Meaning

- *Linguistic expressions represent linguistically conceptualized situations*
- This formulation emphasizes
 - the contextuality of meaning
 - representation as based in communication
 - the nature of meaning as conventional mapping from conceptualization to expression
 - The distinction between linguistic conceptualization (Kant's "**discursive concepts**") and pre-conceptual schemas



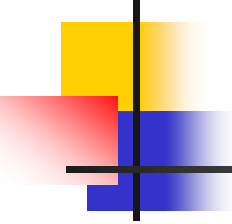
Language and Representation

- Language is a symbolic semiotic system
- The core symbolic function of language is **representation**
- Representation is both communicatively and cognitively complex
- Communicative representation was the key **functional attribute** driving the evolution of language (what was selected for)
- Linguistic representation **is the same as linguistic conceptualization**
- Language represents **by means of concepts**



Language as system and language as practice

- Traditional linguistic theory is based upon the analysis of language as a formal or systemic *object*
- Language can also, however, be approached as a *practice*: anything we do that involves the use of language)
- Use-based cognitive-functional theories attempt to unify the two perspectives



Language, subjectivity, narrativity

- Language is the developmental vehicle for the construction of subjectivity
 - The discursive self
- And for the integration of the self with culture and community
 - The narrative self



Narrative (stories)

- Narratives bind together events, causes, effects and reasons into organized intentional structures.
- People do not deal with the world event by event or with text sentence by sentence. They frame events and sentences in larger structures. Bruner 1990.
- Narratives are the glue for sticking together event sequences.
- Narratives have a timeline which may be referenced to a public timeline



Narratives and memory

- Episodic memory (events)
- Semantic memory (propositions, facts)
- Narrative memory
 - Structure
 - Participants
 - Setting
 - Moral or Point



The Narrative Self

- The self is an agent and a protagonist
- The story is populated with other protagonists and sometimes antagonists
- A story involves a goal, mission or quest
- Fulfilling the mission involves overcoming obstacles
- The resolution of the story exemplifies a message, moral or point.
- If not: so what? The story is just one damn thing after another.



Narrative, self and others

- Narratives are crafted for audiences
- Narratives are often collectively constructed
- Often, narratives belong to groups, and to belong to the group, individuals have to take ownership of the narrative
- The narrative may script the role of individuals
- Eg the Family Narrative.



Group narratives

- Groups may be constituted in and by narratives
- The nation, the family
- Narratives always speak in some way of origin
- Narratives are about *us* and *them*.
- Narratives often mix fact and interpretation: “faction”.



Narrative and metaphor

- Narratives often derive their power from metaphoric association with other narratives:
 - The cast of characters
 - Their motives and their goals
 - Their values and their strengths
- Eg “appeasement” as a narrative resource for the Iraq war.



Conclusion

- Narrative is a fundamental aspect of human communication and cognition
- It is unique to humans
- It fulfils a human need for meaning
- It integrates the individual with the group
- It makes sense of the world
- It differentiates “us” from “them”.