

# Language and the World

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By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, after the theory of evolution became the guiding paradigm of a scientific explanation of life, Descartes' fundamental distinction between body and mind was transformed into a distinction between nature and culture. This transformation is supposed to explain the variety of ways of life without humanity evolving into different species. The conception of the natural world remained the physical world as Descartes saw, but instead of the thinking mind being independent of the body came a culture independent of nature. According to this new dichotomy, the variety of languages came to be seen as distinct 'cultural lenses' through which its users understand the world and act accordingly. And most important, while Descartes' postulated that reason, with its purpose to create true knowledge was the essence of the thinking mind, reason became the product of *some* cultures and not of others. In this paper I want to show that while this transformation has led to cultural relativism, Davidson's criticism of Quine's version of it is reminiscent of Spinoza's naturalistic challenge of Descartes' dualism.

For scientists in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, 'the world' generally meant as Descartes understood it, namely all things and events which can be described as having positions in space changing in time. According to Descartes this world was causally explicable and was the only domain of science, which included animals and the human body. In a letter to the Marquess of Newcastle [1646] he wrote that more than anything else the use of language distinguishes humanity from the beasts. However, this distinction is not due to animals lacking the body organs used in speech, but due to their lacking thoughts, which belong to the realm of the mind. Although animals do many things better than we do, without thinking, like a clock which tells the time better than our judgement does, no animal is known which can use vocal signs beyond expressing passions. Contrary to them, there is no human being who cannot convey reasons for action. Even deaf-mutes invent special signs to express their thoughts. This, according to him, is a strong argument for proving that the reason why animals do not speak as we do is that they have no thoughts. It is due to this distinction that Descartes assigned understanding governed by reason to mankind alone.

In the 17<sup>th</sup> century Spinoza opposed the Cartesian consideration of the mind as being independent of the body. According to him, everything which exists, including the human mind, must be part of nature. He saw Descartes' distinction between the world and thoughts as a distinction between two ways of understanding the same natural world: either in terms of proximate causal relations or in terms of abstract laws which underlie them. Spinoza's central idea about language is that it is a natural 'instrument of the mind' comparable to the muscles which are natural instruments of the body. A language enables us to create logic and mathematics which improve on this natural instrument just as the creation of a hammer improves on the power of our muscles [TCU VI]. A language allows also the cultivation of the power of persuasion. And this can serve for both spreading the acquisition of knowledge and strengthening the tendency of people in power to impose their ideas on others.

Spinoza did not write about a variety of cultures. But he explains that the more one interacts with the environment in many ways the more mind one has and that a human passion is a combination of a change in the body with an idea of its cause [E. II, XIII and its corollary]. Together these explain that different ways of life lead to different effects on people's ideas and thus to different responses to these effects [TCU VI]. And most important, he explains that even if an idea or a response to it are natural, these can be suppressed or distorted by power-structures. He explains that when people in power design the rules for preserving the integrity of the community, they can never be free from their desire to preserve their own power [PT V]. The result is that they strongly influence the reasons for action in the minds of the population. The balance of these reasons, he says, is equivalent to the balance of physical forces acting in the body. We do not call these reasons causes because we do not know the 'instrumentality of the body' which corresponds to it [TCU X].

Although it would have been reasonable to adopt a naturalistic view of humanity after Darwin, this did not happen. The evolution of species concentrates on genetic change, and as pointed out already, a variety of languages are seen as providing distinct 'cultural lenses' through which its users understand the world and act accordingly. This view is well illustrated by two champions of the theory of evolution, Richard Dawkins and Daniel Dennett [UR and KM respectively]. According to both, the *evolution* of language can only apply to the brain's capacity to process ideas, because only this capacity can be inscribed in the DNA. The ideas themselves, which they call *memes*, are derived from cultural experience. However, for my purpose in this paper the interesting version of the nature/culture dichotomy is that of pragmatism because it provides the clearest challenge to cultural relativism.

Charles Peirce, one of the earliest pragmatists, explains that what we believe to be true depends on the methods used for settling disputed opinions. He distinguishes between three such methods. The first, is the psychological *method of tenacity* by which a person keeps to his opinions whatever the evidence against them. The problem with this psychological attitude is that opinions of others are bound to shake a person's confidence. So the real problem is how to fix beliefs in a community. This problem is solved by *the method of authority*. It is the attempt of any class of men, whose power depends on certain beliefs being held true, to prevent others from doubting them. Although this method of authority led to horrible atrocities in the eyes of any rational person, he says, there is no better method for preserving the survival of a community. This he says, is well documented in history. However, by analogy to individuals, people realized that it is a historical accident which caused them to believe as they do. This led to *the third method*, namely the rational methods of science [Philosophical Writings of Peirce pp.12-15]. But, he adds, although this method is superior to others, it can never become as general as the other two, because those in power "will never be convinced that dangerous reasoning ought not be suppressed in some way." Moreover, the suppression is not totally external because people are tormented when finding themselves believing a

proposition they have been brought up to regard with aversion [Ibid pp.18-19]. Peirce concludes that if a society chooses the rational method it does so by accident [Ibid pp.20-21], which means that the choice is not natural but the product of a particular culture.

In a series of lectures delivered from November 1906 to January 1907, with the title *What Pragmatism Means*, William James adds to Peirce, that pragmatism is primarily a method of settling disputes about unproven assumptions. Since such assumptions have been found to be strongly connected to the power of words, pragmatists turn to 'radical empiricism.' By this method they have discovered that although scientists believe to have discovered eternal truths, the evidence [of different cultures] shows that they describe the world from some useful point of view. [Pragmatism p.32]. In his book *The Principles of Psychology* James shows that his contemporary psychologists take the conception of nature prescribed by the nature/culture dichotomy to be the useful point of view. And in the chapter *The Perception of Reality* he agrees with Spinoza that faced with two contradictory ideas we cannot continue to hold both, but disagrees with him that it is not up to us to choose which reason we disregard [Ibid, p.448]. In this he sees the *psychological* basis for his assertion that "each of us literally *chooses*, by his ways of attending to things, what sort of a universe he shall appear to himself to inhabit" [Ibid p.424].

Later in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the pragmatist Quine, argues in the introduction to his *Methods of Logic* that the most fundamental pragmatic principle is that the more central a belief is in our conceptual system of thoughts, the less likely we are to choose it for revision. The principles of logic are so central to *our* Western system of thoughts that in practice they enjoy immunity from revision. Therefore they seem to us as being inherent to the mind.

It is to the effect of this conclusion on Quine's theory of interpretation of a natural language [n.l.] that Donald Davidson addresses his criticism. His objection is not to the fact that theoretical logic was developed in some cultures and not in others, but to the conclusion that its basic principles are not natural.

Davidson's argument against this conclusion starts from Quine's own argument that a theory of interpretation for a n.l. must take into account start the evidence available to interpreters consists of while sentences [ITI p.7]. As support for this claim he takes his cue from Frege. Frege, he says, rightly assumed that the meaning of words is derived from known true sentences in which they appear. For example, the meaning of fatherhood is derived from all sentences of the form "x is the father of y" when the replacement of x and y by two names yields a true sentence. The empty operator then is said to be satisfied (ITI p.18). Davidson generalises Frege's idea to the creation of all *concepts*. Concepts are literally abstracted from true sentences. For example, the concept of reference is abstracted from all sentences satisfying the operator "y refers to x." It follows that knowledge of true sentences precedes having concepts.

Now Davidson considers the possibility to derive the concept of truth by abstracting it from Tarski's theory of truth where its theorems – called 'T-sentences' – are of the form

T) S is true if and only if p

where p states the condition of truth for S. The objection to his theory is that it simply shifts the question of establishing truth from S to p. But Davidson explains that Tarski

developed his theory for formal languages, where p is a sentence in a n.l., knowledge of which is taken for granted [Ibid p.167]. Obviously this cannot apply for a theory which purports to describe what must be known in order to acquire a n.l. However, Davidson thinks that Tarski's theory can be modified so as to apply to a n.l., provided p is not taken to express the truth condition for the whole sentence at once (Ibid pp.49-50). For example, in his notorious sentence

"Snow is white" is true if and only if snow is white

the second 'snow is white' [p] is divided into two conditions: either

a) we assume that the meaning of "x is white" is known and we assert that 'snow' satisfies it, or

b) we assume that we know what 'snow' means and we assert that 'white' applies to "snow is y."

In other words, while Tarski takes knowledge of a n.l. to be non-problematic, Davidson suggests that the notion of truth should be taken to be non-problematic. This means that *true* is a primitive concept.

To say that the concept is primitive means both, that we cannot define truth in terms of other concepts, and that we cannot have the required theory without presupposing that every person has an idea what it means prior to knowing any particular true sentence. He compares this to Kant's argument that we must attribute to the mind a percept of space known prior to the perception of any spatial relation, because without it we cannot perceive any spatial relations, such as one object being adjacent to another. Although we cannot anymore accept Kant's conviction that the Euclidian concept of space correctly articulates this primitive percept, we must still accept his insight that an undefined *percept* turns into a *concept* of space through geometry. Similarly, the formal system of satisfied operators articulates the primitive concept of truth [Ibid p.218].

According to Davidson, he can show that all sentences in a n.l. can be understood by appeal to their truth conditions if, in addition to attributing to each mind a primitive concept of truth he also attributes to it an intuitive knowledge of the difference between the structure of grammar and the constraints of logic. The relevant constraint in this case is that a new truth can be inferred from previously known truths only within the same domain of interpretation. For example, for ascertaining the truth of "John thinks that p" the sentence is resolved into two assertions

1) p

2) "John thinks that", where "that" refers to p.

When interpreters hear the grammatically combined sentence they know that they have passed from one domain of interpretation (of p) to another (namely to the content of another's mind) (Ibid pp.165/6).

His point is that understanding a language and judging whether its sentences are true are not as distinct mental processes as assumed by linguists and logicians. Their mistake is that they fail to recognize what every interpreter naturally knows.

It is worth noting that Spinoza pointed out that logical thinking imposes constraints on understanding the world. If a person is killed by a falling stone, he says, a logical science can only explain separately the power of the falling stone and the reason for the man's walking in the direction he did [appendix to E.I]. But Davidson's inter-

est is not in the organization of science. His purpose is to resolve a paradox implied by what Quine called the indeterminacy of translation. According to Davidson, if this indeterminacy were as Quine's theory suggests, then any communication would have been impossible. But communication is possible, even under the conditions of *Radical Interpretation* (RI), namely the conditions which anthropologists face when confronted with a completely foreign language of people in a completely unknown culture. Therefore it is reasonable to assume that there must be some natural constraints on conceptual variability. Such constraints, he says, *must* be presupposed if one wants to explain how with them, different beliefs, no matter how strange or novel, can be understood, while by dropping them one drifts into the absurd and non-comprehensible (Ibid p.184).

The usefulness of RI, he adds, is that under its conditions an artificial differentiation can be made between speakers and interpreters (Ibid p.178). This is possible because there is a crucial difference between attributing to speakers intentions and beliefs in order to understand their actions, and attributing to them intentions and beliefs for understanding what they say. For understanding what speakers say, one always attributes to them the same intention and the same belief: they intend the sentence to be understood *as if* they were uttered under the specific circumstances under which they believe the sentence to be true (Ibid pp.161 and 166). 'Davidson emphasises the 'as if' because the function of a natural language in social life is not merely to give a true interpretation of the world. A n.l. allows people to avail themselves of the possibility to make dishonest assertions, as well as invent stories and much more (Ibid pp.164-165). Nevertheless, he says, only if a large enough number of sentences are taken to be true by both speakers and interpreters, these possibilities become available (Ibid pp. 157 and 179). In other words, only if the truth of utterances is taken to be the basic relation between a language and the world, it can also be used for other purposes. Moreover, these commonly assumed true sentences enables us not only to understand but also to correct beliefs found to be false.

His example is the belief of the ancients that the earth was flat. According to his theory, the meaning of 'the earth' could not be the same for them and for us because the set of sentences from which the meaning of 'the earth' is extracted today includes sentences like "the earth is a planet of the sun", and "planets are semi-spherical objects rotating around the sun" which were not among the sentences from which the meaning of the earth was extracted by the ancients (p.168). Nevertheless we do understand what they meant by their word for our 'earth,' and we also understand that ontologically nothing changed. The same applies to their conception of flatness which is abstracted

from the set of all satisfied operators "x is flat," because this set includes their word for 'the earth' but not for us. Yet, with sufficient overlapping of sentences held true in both languages, we can identify which of their held true sentences had led to their error.

Finally, although Davidson insisted that his theory is necessary only if Quine's version of pragmatism is accepted, *my* point in this paper is that it true for Quine it is also true for all versions of the nature/culture dichotomy. In particular, we must reject the idea that reason, with its main function to distinguish between true and false, is not natural to the human mind but is the product of *some* cultures and not of others. If the conception of truth is inherent to the mind, as Davidson suggests, then pragmatism comes very close to Spinoza's explanation, which in terms of this paper says that the evolution of language had given rise to the evolution of two contradictory drives in human nature. One is the drive to improve on a 'cultural lense,' namely to increase the understanding of the world, and the other is the drive to shape this lense to fit the interests of particular power structures. Both drives are well documented in human history.

## Literature

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