

29

MÉLANGES

offerts au
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A NOTE ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THOUGHT AND LANGUAGE

The language/thought relationship is a problem which has preoccupied philosophers, scientists and men of letters alike. For John Locke, the relationship is relatively simple :

The comfort and advantage of society not being to be had without communication of thoughts, it was necessary that man should find out some external sensible signs whereby those invisible ideas which his thoughts are made up of might be made known to others. (Cited in Hayden and Alworth 1965, p. 42).

This way of viewing language as essentially a means of communicating already elaborated thoughts, is quite widespread today. One does, of course, find opposing views like the following, where thought appears to be dependent on a physical substratum :

Not only are there no thoughts existing independently of speech sounds ... but there is no thought independent of a system of such signs ... (Schaff 1962, p. 298).

For most writers, however, the relationship between thought and language is more complex than either of these two citations would indicate. Some idea of this complexity is suggested in the following passage from Einstein's *Ideas and Opinions* (p. 327) :

What is it that brings about such an intimate connection between language? namely in concepts and concept-combinations for which words need not necessarily come to mind? Has not every one of us struggled for words although the connection between "things" was already clear?

and thinking? Is there
no thinking without
the use of language?

It is not the aim of the present note to confront such reflexions, nor even to summarize them, but merely to focus on a facet of this relationship which, although mentioned by several writers, has not to my knowledge received the attention it deserves, perhaps because it is so difficult to bring into focus. The problem is usually approached by means of the question : is language necessary for thought? Far fewer are those who have raised the prior question : is thought necessary for language? And yet an exploration of what is implied by this second question may well throw light on the first one and on the problem as a whole.

Walter Hirtle

Most people would undoubtedly agree that without human intelligence man would never have invented and developed language as we know it today. And without the prior existence of a capacity for thought, no human being would have been able to come into possession of his mother tongue. In this sense our second question, being easily answered, is not very informative. There is another sense in which one can understand the question : can we have a concrete bit of language without a prior act of thought? Although the answer may not be quite so obvious, nobody to my knowledge has ever objected to the idea that without some sort of thinking, some sort of mental activity, we cannot produce a sentence, an utterance, a text. As long as one does not raise the problem of just what mental processes are involved in producing a given utterance - a problem specific to the discipline of linguistics but which few linguists have dared raise - one can simply take the priority of thinking with regard to language for granted. In neither of these senses, then, does our question raise any real difficulty; that is, whether we take "thought" in the sense of "capacity to think" or in the sense of "act of thinking", it appears as a necessary condition of language, provided, of course, we take "language" in the respective senses of "mother tongue (= capacity to carry out an act of language) and of "a resulting utterance, spoken or written". In neither of these senses should the priority of thought with regard to language occasion any difficulty.

There is, however, a third way of interpreting our question and in this sense it calls for more careful examination. A passage from Gilson's *Linguistique et philosophie* (p. 126-127) depicts this sense quite vividly :

Tout ce qu'on peut essayer de penser du non-encore-parlé est conditionné par l'impossibilité de le faire sans recourir au langage. La seule chance d'observer la pensée en elle-même serait d'en apercevoir une lueur au moment fugitif où elle descend dans le langage, comme ce rayon vert que jette le soleil couchant au moment de s'enfoncer dans la mer. Mais la pensée devenant langage est déjà langage et d'ailleurs même si l'expérience de la pensée pure était possible, il faudrait user du langage pour la communiquer. On ne peut donc que remonter de la pensée parlée à celle qui se parle, s'efforcer de discerner la future pensée de l'après langage dans celle qui est en train de s'incarner. C'est au moins

difficile, car ce que l'on conçoit mal ne peut s'exprimer clairement, mais il n'y aurait pas de langage si cela ne se concevait pas du tout.

For Gilson, then, a prior condition of an act of language is the existence of "thought in itself", that is, thought neither as a faculty nor as a mental activity but as a certain experiential content before its incarnation in language. There would seem to be little room for disagreement with this. After all, without some content of experience there would be no act of language, no utterance, simply because one would have nothing to say. Furthermore, considering that this experience is not merely the raw product of our senses but may call into play different mental processes involved in perception, memory and imagination, we can, with Gilson, properly call it "thought". (It might be pointed out in passing that this third, "resultative" sense of "thought" is to be distinguished from the two noted above). Moreover, the difficulty in conceiving this thought which exists before language plays its role is a real one. It arises not because thought before language is necessarily vague and hard to bring into focus; as Einstein points out, "the connection between things" may be clear already. This difficulty is, rather, part of the human condition, for the simple reason that language is man's way of grasping this experience and reducing it to conceptual thought, "after-language thought" as Gilson puts it.

The distinction between after-language thought and what might be called "before-language" thought is important because it brings out the difference between the state of consciousness involved in conceptual thinking and that involved in the flow of impressions that constitutes our experience. This is a difference of which we are all aware since at any instant we so wish we can reduce some portion or moment of our complex stream of consciousness to the appropriate conceptual units provided by the words of our mother tongue. The inadequacy of words to express the richness of experience, often felt by the poet, is a reflection of this difference. In the following passage, which, not surprisingly, comes from Virginia Woolf (1985, p. 165), the reductionism entailed in putting before-language thought into language is felt so vividly that the character depicted refrains from waking up a possible interlocutor and speaking :

But one only woke people if one knew what one wanted to say to them. And she wanted to say not

one thing, but everything. Little words that broke up the thought and dismembered it said nothing. "About life, about death; about Mrs. Ramsay" - no, she thought, one could say nothing to nobody. The urgency of the moment always missed its mark. Words fluttered sideways and struck the object inches too low. Then one gave it up; then the idea sunk back again... For how could one express in words these emotions of the body ? express that emptiness there ? ... It was one's body feeling, not one's mind.

This passage brings out clearly an important characteristic of this thought before language : it is not dependent on language. The endlessly varying impressions of our experience exist in their own right, regardless of whether we choose to conceptualize them by means of the "little words" made available to us by our mother tongue. One linguist, Gustave Guillaume, emphasizes this autonomy of thought in the following way :

La pensée est libre, entièrement libre, infinie en son devenir activement libre ... (1973), p. 94).

Indeed, if thought in this sense were not independent of language, it is inconceivable that the millenia-long development of human language could have produced such finely tempered instruments as the languages we observe today. That is to say, the often repeated (but seldom demonstrated) remark that language is systematic presupposes not only the organizing, systematizing work of the infant when it first encounters the language of its parents, but also the unceasing tendency of the human mind to invent less inadequate means of representing the endlessly varying experience constituting our before-language thought. Were thought totally dependent on language, we would have neither thought nor language as we know them today.

Granted this independence of before-language thought with regard to language, one wonders how the two are brought into a meaningful relationship. There must be some other factor involved here which leads one to confront a set of impressions with the resources of one's language in order to embody them in words. William James (1983, p. 245) has commented on this factor :

Has the reader never asked himself what kind of mental fact is his intention of saying a thing before he has said it ? It is an entirely definite intention, distinct

from all other intentions, an absolutely distinct state of consciousness, therefore; and yet how much of it consists of definite sensorial images, either of words or of things? Hardly anything! Linger, and the words and things come into the mind; the anticipatory intention, the divination is there no more. But as the words that replace it arrive, it welcomes them successively and calls them right if they agree with it, and rejects them and calls them wrong if they do not. It has therefore a nature of its own of the most positive sort, and yet what can we say about it without using words that belong to the later mental facts that replace it?

In stressing the intentional aspect of the before-language "mental fact", James pinpoints what brings a given experience into contact with our language. This is a unique moment when a complex of impressions is caught in the net of our intentions to be pulled below the threshold of consciousness, like the sun below the horizon in Gilson's striking image, there to be broken up, analyzed into the notional units available, only to reappear in the form of words grouped in an utterance which delivers its message, a conceptualized representation of the original experience, which may be more or less faithful to the original. Once freed from language, the message itself becomes part of our experience, entering into the on-going stream of impressions and as such constituting a new experience eligible to become the intended content of a further act of language.

Granted the existence of these two sets of mental facts, those arising before language plays its role and those persisting after the act of language, it becomes clear that there is a double relation between thought and language. Without pre-language thought, no act of language would ever be undertaken; and without language, no post-language conceptual thought could enter into the universe

of our experience.¹ Such considerations lead to the view that there is a binary connection between thought and language, a connection that can be described as the thought/language/thought relationship. This view of the basic relationship is more complex than that implied by the widespread notion of language as merely a means of communication but by the same token is more realistic because it brings out the essential role of human language: that of "mediating"² between experience and conceptual thought. From this point of view, the act of language itself has been described as "une commutation, opérée dans l'homme pensant, de sa *pensée* du moment en *parole*" (Guillaume, ms. of the lecture for January 28, 1960, F. 2), that is - to paraphrase the same writer - as a means of converting what is by itself unsayable into something said.

The implications of this view of the relationship between thought and language are manifold, particularly for the discipline of linguistics. Language cannot be reduced to just another means of communication, a means of signalling "invisible ideas" to others, but is instrumental in forming the ideas to make first the speaker himself, and then others, aware of them. Such, in any case, appears to be the view of the unchallenged master in the use of the English language, if we can judge by what he has Prospero say to Caliban, the semi-human being:

¹ This is not to limit all conceptual thinking to the strictly verbal, but rather to suggest that without the prior capacity based on language, the ability to think in, say, mathematical concepts could not be acquired. As Einstein observed:

We might be inclined to attribute to the act of thinking complete independence from language if the individual formed or were able to form his concepts without the verbal guidance of his environment. Yet most likely the mental shape of an individual, growing up under such conditions, would be very poor. (Loc. cit.)

² The expression is taken from T.P. Waldron's *Principles of Language and Mind*, p. xv: "... the central function of human language: the manner in which it *mediates* between sense experience and conceptual thought". As has been pointed out above, however, there is no need to limit pre-language thought to experience arising directly from the senses as Waldron appears to do.

Walter Hirtle

I pitied thee,

Took pains to make thee speak, taught thee each
hour

One thing or other : when thou didst not, savage,
Know thine own meaning, but wouldst gabble like
A thing most brutish, I endowed thy purposes
With words that made them known.

(*The Tempest* I, II, 353-358)

In this light, one cannot but marvel at human language and at
the God-given ability permitting man to construct his most
remarkable instrument.

Walter Hirtle

Fonds Gustave Guillaume
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