

Language Acquisition and the Third Realm

The word *seminal* gets bandied about in the scholarly world. Perhaps a better word would be *critical*, though that is likely to be misunderstood. But take *critical* in both the literary and medical senses. Here is news of a paper that is critical both in forming a judgement about something non-trivial and critical in showing a new direction after a turning-point. This is a large claim to make for a ten-page essay, and therefore, if justified, worth reporting.

The essay is “How Children can Learn their Mother Tongue: They Don’t”, by Mark Halpern. It is to be printed in the next *Journal of Psycholinguistic Research* and is now available for free download, subject to copyright restrictions, online.* Mr Halpern is not alone in recognising that it is misleading to talk of a child’s “learning” language if “learning” is taken to mean “being told how to do” in much the same sense as when it is said a child learns how to operate a computer. Halpern is not alone, either, in objecting to Noam Chomsky’s idea of the Language Acquisition Device, or LAD, which is said to incorporate Universal Grammar, or UG. The LAD is supposed to be part of the brain of all normal human beings, set off, by the supposedly scanty and unsystematic linguistic data the child happens to hear, to decode the fragments of the particular language heard into the “hard-wired” Universal Grammar. In this picture the child’s language is in a peculiar way hereditary, grown (in one of Chomsky’s images) in much the same way as arms and legs, though not without the stimulus of a natural language. The business of the grammarian is then to show how the particular grammars are all varieties of UG, which is much the same as describing what the LAD does. Bilingual children can be accounted for by a LAD that acquires two languages at the same time, but like some computer programs the LAD only works once, so if we learn new languages at school it is much harder than the toddler’s acquisition of language, and requires deliberate teaching.

If this is so, if we all have a built-in grammar, all languages are at a deep physiological level the same; the underlying possibilities of sense are the same for any normal human being. Chomsky is accordingly convinced that anything said in one language can be said in another. The noticeable differences between actual languages are “surface” matters, sorted out by this amazing inborn capacity to take the grammar of any language as a variety of the one universal grammar.

There are problems about reconciling the LAD to orthodox Darwinian evolution, for it is difficult to

account for this amazing organ, peculiar to the human race, as having developed in the usual way by very small mutations, but the LAD really is a scientific hypothesis in that it postulates either the existence of an organ within the brain, or a physically identifiable organisation of the whole brain. This is as much a hypothesis as the prediction of an as-yet-undiscovered planet, from calculations of gravitational fields. Alas! the LAD has not been physiologically identified. It is an open question at what point the failure to discover the LAD in the brain or as a particular brain configuration may be taken to have neurologically refuted the hypothesis.

The more important objection to LAD/UG as grammar, that not all uses of language are translatable, as they must be if the LAD is truly the organ of UG, is often made but largely ignored by means of the empiricist-based positions that all real meaning is propositional, and the meanings of all words analysable into certain universal elements. (Try that, for instance, with *love*.) So the objection that the translation of *Pride and Prejudice* into classical Latin falls short of “complete equivalence” is answered by the proposition that all the real meaning can be translated, and what is left over is just of the surface. (Like the difference in style between Mr Collins and Mr Bennet.)

Mr Halpern proposes a different way of looking at how children begin to talk, a way that need not commit us to either innate universal grammar or infinite translatability. Children do not learn language. “It is language that turns the brain into a mind, and it would be more accurate to say not that the child acquires the language, but that the language acquires the child.” The child’s brain is not a *tabula rasa*: “He doesn’t even have a *tabula*—and does not learn a language, but is shaped by it, literally organized by the language he hears.” But this is a short and concentrated article, and needs to be read, not met only in brief quotation.

The language that shapes the child is naturally the language, or languages, the child hears, normally, firstly from the mother. It follows that “the mother tongue” is a *neurologically* accurate phrase. If the mother is bilingual or trilingual, or if one parent speaks one language and the other another, the child has two or more native languages. But “native” is only not literal because the process happens after birth.

It should always be kept in mind that any neurological investigation of language is secondary, depending on an understanding of language that need not appeal at all to

* <http://www.springer.com/home?SGWID=0-0-1003-0-0&aqId=2849963&download=1&checkval=551a52508ab4bf82161fed8d9e5b3646>

brain science, in just the same way that the phonetic investigation of tongue and teeth positions will not itself tell us whether the sounds are those of speech. First we hear and identify the sounds as linguistic sounds, then the experts draw plans of the vocal organs. One equivalent in script is to investigate the shapes of letters, which can only be done when we already know they belong to an alphabet. The kind of neurology the grammarian is interested in will depend on his grammar. Mr Halpern's hypothesis about language acquisition is nevertheless important because as well as "saving the appearances" it removes a stumbling-block in the path of understanding, by allowing the language for which the child develops an embodied capacity to be the language we, and the individual toddler, actually hear, not the hypothetical universal language waiting to be released.

If Halpern is right, the difference between an English speaker and a French speaker is (in this aspect) a difference of brain formation. Now any impartial observer knows that, with whatever individual differences, the French are not quite the same as the English. Anybody unconvinced by the UG/LAD hypothesis can accept just by observation that there are profound cultural differences (as well as similarities) between different languages. Mr Halpern has suggested how, physiologically, this may work. This does not make communities more different than we knew they were. France, thank God, is not England. It does give a physiological account which recognises the actualities.

In turn this suggests a neurological aspect of Leavis's third-realm philosophy. (Halpern, without any reference to Leavis, calls his thesis "a third way".) Aristotle notoriously said that man is a social/political animal.* The truth in this is not Spinoza's opinion that men "are scarcely able to lead a solitary life",† rather that humanity is by nature, including physiological nature, something shared. Robinson Crusoe leading his solitary

life on his island is as much a social animal as the most inveterate tweeter. His nature is to use language, and his language, in which he is himself and not anybody else, is at the same time what he shares with other English individuals. Mr Halpern's thesis is that the capacity for English (the capacity to generate what Chomsky calls new sentences, and to understand those of others when he gets off the island) has been in his brain ever since he began to talk. But something not quite the same has been in the brain of Man Friday.

What does *communion* mean? or *community*? *koinonia*? That the individuals who are in communion or who comprise the community have something in common. Here, what they have in common is in its neurological aspect a brain-formation.

As it happens, this does not make Halpern a racist. Remember the perhaps mythical English-speaking couple who adopted a new-born Chinese baby and hastily began learning Mandarin ready for when he began to speak.

That the speakers (or writers) of a language have the language in common does not deny the other truth that language only exists in use and that every use without exception exhibits the individuality of a human soul. This element of individuality is itself simultaneously an element of a particular community. Communion is only found in individuals. Halpern's thesis does support the truth that when we talk, the exercise of individuality is itself *koinonia*. (Halpern may also have started a train of thought about St Paul's doctrine: "The bread which we break, is it not a communion of the body of Christ?‡ Readers may work out the connection.)

One mark of a *critical* paper is the reader's feeling of sudden enlightenment or release. (Doesn't Wittgenstein somewhere use the image of showing a fly the way out of the bottle?) Read Halpern's paper and see whether you agree that it is critical!

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* The remark comes in the passage where the city state is asserted to be both natural and the consummation of human associations. (1253a)

† *Ethics*, IV, proposition 35, corollary II, Note; Everyman translation (1910) 1925, p. 164

‡ 1 Corinthians x.16, RV margin on *communion of*: "or, *participation in*". Cf. the concept of *partaking*: literally, to have a part of.