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The Dialectics of Consciousness and Language

1. Introduction

This volume has emerged from a theme session with the same title as that of this introductory chapter, organized at the *Towards a Science of Consciousness* conference in Budapest, on July 23, 2007. Both the session and this volume have been motivated by the wish to redress the peculiarly low profile of informed discussions of the place of *language* within the modern field of consciousness studies (e.g. as witnessed by the contents of this journal). Conversely, while few linguists write of ‘consciousness’, the terms ‘cognition’ and ‘mind’ figure prominently in just about every linguistic publication, irrespective of theoretical school (e.g. Lakoff and Johnson, 1999; Chomsky, 2007). I believe that this is not a coincidence, but a result from a combination of two factors.

First, the ‘anti-mentalistic’ attitude in psychology during the first half of the 20th century also dominated language studies, and when ‘the mind’ was brought back to respectability in the second half, through the ‘cognitive revolution’ (Gardner, 1987), this was a functionalist-computational mind that was made ‘scientific’ by stripping it of its essential characteristic: qualitative experience. The second reason, following from this, is that when subjectivity — the ‘what-it-is-like-to-be’ problem of phenomenal experience — inevitably appeared to the fore, it was the ‘hard problem’ of explaining this within a basically materialistic framework that grabbed the imagination of most philosophers and scientists alike. The result is that for both sides — those of ‘empirical’ linguistics and philosophy/consciousness studies — the relationship between language and consciousness appears as a rather peripheral matter. For (psycho)linguists, the ‘C-word’ still conjures the ghost of dualism, and is best avoided. For most consciousness scholars,

language seems to be irrelevant for addressing the ‘hard problem’, unless one adopts a rather extreme position that it is language alone that in one way or another brings about the (illusion) of having qualitative experience, a position suggested in some readings of Dennett (1991), and explicitly presented by Macphail (1998).

But if the separation between ‘consciousness’ and ‘mind’ is an artificial creation of the 20th century, brought about (largely) by the invention of the digital computer, it should not be forgotten that the relationship between language and consciousness/mind¹ has been a controversial topic since the dawn of Western thinking (and Eastern too, see Gudmunsen, 1977).

2. The Pendulum of Consciousness vs. Language Dominance

For Aristotle, mental concepts were basic in being natural ‘signs’ of things, while spoken words were conventional signs of concepts, and written words were signs of spoken words. However, Plato had characterized thought as ‘the self talking to itself’ and there was a general view in Greek thinking that language and consciousness were intimately related. In the middle ages, the debate on the ontological primacy of language *vis à vis* consciousness was reflected in the discussion on the nature of ‘universals’: general notions such as *blackness* and *human being*. Two of the three warring camps (the third being the ‘realists’) were the ‘conceptualists’ claiming that universals were creations of the mind, and ‘nominalists’ denying their existence altogether, claiming that the members of such categories were held together solely by the existence of words denoting them.

In the Enlightenment, for both rationalists such as Descartes and empiricists such as Locke, consciousness was assumed to be primary, though Descartes appealed to the human use of language as an argument that animals were but sophisticated machines. However, more recently, it has been pointed out that Descartes could not have formulated, or even thought his famous *Cogito, ergo sum*, if he did not possess a public language (Kenny, 1975; Itkonen, 2003). In his still-influential synthesis of rationalism and empiricism, precursor to some forms of cognitive linguistics (Johnson, 1987), Kant also postulated a

[1] In most languages there a single term, which does *not* distinguish between the two, and the modern use of the English word ‘mind’ is particularly hard to translate, even to closely related languages such as French, Swedish or Russian. As a humorous illustration, it has become common to translate ‘mind’ as ‘hjärna’ (= brain) in Swedish, so that when the mysterious character Morpheus in *The Matrix* utters the (intended to be) profound ‘When the mind dies so does the body’, the Swedish subtitles tell us that when the brain dies, so does the body, which is distinctly less profound. Perhaps eliminativism will win through mistranslation?

primacy for the ‘faculties of the mind’, and was mainly silent on the place of language, which does not fit his divisions: ‘Language ‘deconstructs’ Kant’s separation of the sources of knowledge into receptivity and spontaneity because it is both sensuously manifest and dependent on logical structures’ (Bowie, 2003, p. 49). But this silence was soon filled within the German philosophy of the 19th century (Hamann, Herder and Humboldt)² suggesting that not only language as such, but the variety of individual *languages* imply different world-views. This idea re-appeared again later in European structuralism and American anthropological linguistics, and is somewhat a-historically called ‘the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis’. Despite occasional setbacks, it has persistently re-emerged, and is currently undergoing something of a renaissance (Lucy, 1992; Levinson, 2003).

But back to the historical narrative. Phenomenology was founded by Husserl at the beginning of the past century as a new foundational philosophy, based on ‘the careful description of what appears to consciousness precisely in the manner of its appearing’ (Moran, 2005, p. 1). While regarded with suspicion by most Anglo-American thinkers during the 20th century (for being ‘idealistic’), the importance of phenomenology for topics such as the nature of consciousness, the embodiment of subjectivity and the intersubjective constitution of the lifeworld, has become widely acknowledged (Thompson, 2001; Zahavi, 2001; Moran, 2005; Gallagher, 2005). However, while Husserl wrote extensively on language, there is surprisingly little said about it in the new ‘phenomenological turn’, e.g. in the new introductory book by Gallagher and Zahavi (2008). Critics have not failed to point out this lacuna: ‘Phenomenologists ... claimed to be getting back to the “Sachen selbst” [things themselves], but this was carried out by writing texts and giving lectures’ (Krois, 2004, p. 14).

Language was, of course, all that ‘the linguistic turn’ (Rorty 1992 [1967]) was about, giving rise to ‘analytic philosophy’, with Frege, Wittgenstein and the philosophers of the Vienna Circle setting the stage. This movement of the pendulum is often summarized by Schlick’s claim that ‘the fate of all “philosophical problems” is this: Some of them will disappear by being shown to be mistakes and misunderstandings of our language and the others will be shown to be ordinary scientific questions in disguise’ (quoted in Rorty, 1992, p. 1). However, this prophecy can hardly be said to have been fulfilled. The most influential representative of this movement up to now is

[2] This idea emerged even earlier in French philosophy (e.g. Condillac and Maupertuis), which often is forgotten in the historical narrative. I thank Göran Sonesson for pointing this out.

undoubtedly Wittgenstein, and his general approach has proved edifying in reanalysing, if not dissolving certain issues, such as the ‘other minds problem’ (Overgaard, 2007). On other issues concerning consciousness, we are still bothered by the problems that Wittgenstein tried to rid us of. For example, concerning the idea of panpsychism, Wittgenstein wrote: ‘Only of a living human being and what resembles (behaves like) a living being can one say: it has sensations; it sees; is blind; hears; is deaf; is conscious or unconscious’ (Wittgenstein, 1953 #281). It is typical that attempting to solve the ‘hard problem’ has brought back versions of panpsychism on the agenda, e.g. in the form of ‘dual aspects’ theories (Clarke, 2004). In general, while convincing (and liberating) for some, others have objected that the linguistic turn implies an exaggeration of the power of language over consciousness, since it is far from obvious that ‘the limits of my language mean the limits of my world’, which even Wittgenstein rejected in his later philosophy.

Of course, some would argue that Schlick was right after all: cognitive science (Lakoff and Johnson, 1999), ‘neurophilosophy’ (Churchland, 1988), and ‘scientific linguistics’ (Chomsky, 2007) are the heirs of the dark ages when consciousness and language were regarded as something different from physics and biology. However, questions concerning the nature of the ‘first-person perspective’, the role of linguistic *intuition* for linguistics (Itkonen, this volume), narratives (Menary, this volume), have refused to go away, which testifies to the fact that both consciousness and language *are* somehow different from both inorganic and organic matter. The question of how they relate to one another is therefore highly pertinent.

3. Beyond the Pendulum?

The fact that even the best ‘naturalized’ philosophy of the late 20th century has not been able to answer this question is reflected in the stalemate between the positions of Searle (1992) and Dennett (1991). While both agree that at the bottom there is nothing but the ‘biological organism’, for Searle consciousness is basic, having ‘intrinsic intentionality’, while language inherits its intentionality (‘aboutness’) in a derived manner: ‘The conventional intentionality of the words and the sentences of a language can be used by a speaker to perform a speech act. When a speaker performs a speech act, he imposes his intentionality on these symbols’ (Searle, 1999, p. 141). For Dennett, it is pretty much the reverse: ‘Human consciousness is itself a huge complex of memes (or more exactly, meme effects in brains) that can best be understood as the operation of a “von Neumannesque” virtual

machine implemented in the parallel architecture of a brain that was not designed for any such activities' (Dennett, 1991, p. 210). And the most important memes are, of course, those of language, so the question to be addressed is not Austin's 'How to do things with words' but rather 'How words do things with us'.

How to move beyond this 'stalemate'? We can begin by noting that the relationship between consciousness and language is necessarily more complex than either of the two extreme positions, since neither is a monolithic phenomenon (cf. Zlatev, this volume). Both consciousness and language have a subjective (individual) and an intersubjective (social) dimension, and while one may argue for the primacy of subjectivity in the case of consciousness, language is essentially social, not only due to the fact that its primary use is communication, but due to its inherent *normativity* (Itkonen, 2003; this volume). Furthermore, human consciousness, though unified in a 'field' (Gurwitsch, 1964) can be divided into at least three different types or modes: *affective*, *perceptual* and *reflective* consciousness (e.g. Honderich, 2006), and language can be argued to influence each in different ways and to different degrees.

This was the starting point for the Budapest theme session and this volume, and the goal was precisely to investigate *the dialectical relationship* between consciousness and language. Instead of swinging the pendulum to one side or the other, all the chapters in this volume assume some form of *interaction* between the two. The way they conceptualize this interaction however differs, and this is in part due to differences in how they *conceptualize* and define consciousness and language (or narrative). Thus, the question is not only empirical — despite the fact that all authors refer to relevant empirical research to support their points — but also clearly philosophical: The questions 'What is language?' and 'What is consciousness?' cannot be decided on the basis of observations or experiments in the laboratory. It is hardly the case that the 'science of consciousness', towards which we all aspire, will ever provide a *definitive* answer to the second question, any more than the 'science of language' has been able to provide a definite answer to the first. The reason for this is simple: it is with consciousness that we attempt to understand consciousness and language and with language that we express our understanding of language and consciousness. There is no escaping the 'hermeneutic circle' in dealing with matters that define who we are, and it would be arrogant to expect to somehow leap out of it and provide Explanations. We can though, offer *explications* of consciousness, language and their interaction, which is probably how the contributions in this volume are best regarded.

4. Overview of the Papers

In this section, I briefly summarize the five papers of this volume, showing how they constitute parts of a discussion of the nature of the relation between language and consciousness.

In the first paper, **Itkonen** asks a question seemingly different from the central topic: not what is the role of consciousness for language, or vice versa, but what is the role of consciousness for *linguistics*, the systematic study of language. That is above all an epistemological and methodological question. But in the process of answering it, Itkonen shows clearly one of the points touched on above: that at least three forms of consciousness need to be distinguished: *observation* (of the external world), *introspection* (of the ‘internal’ contents of the mind), and *intuition* (of socially binding norms), and these three play differential roles in linguistic analysis. True to his many publications on this topic spanning 30 years, Itkonen focuses on the third, arguing that it is ontologically irreducible, and methodologically prior to the others. Indirectly, this also implies the irreducibility of consciousness to physics or biology, but on a quite different basis from the usual thought experiments of zombies and suchlike. Itkonen begins his presentation by rejecting both the professed physicalism of Chomskyan linguistics and the mentalism of (certain) cognitive/functional linguists — the two main warring camps in the field — since both fail to see the fundamental role of consciousness-cum-intuition. Finally, Itkonen unites what has been divided, by linking introspection and intuition through empathy (‘vicarious introspection’). He supports his argument in a Khunian way: not by arguing that his analysis is necessarily true, but that it is implicit in the practices of all linguists, irrespective of theoretical persuasion.

Zlatev, whose thinking as a linguist has been influenced by Itkonen, takes up the challenge and advocates a strong form of consciousness-over-language relationship. He starts with conceptual definitions of the key terms, and then marshals arguments, both philosophical (conceptual) and empirical that *reflective* consciousness (requiring the ability to pass judgments and not only to perceive, act or feel) is necessary for the existence of language as a ‘social institution’, as well as for our individual knowledge of language. The more empirical arguments for the ‘dependence of language on consciousness’ involve issues such as self-monitoring and choices in language production, and recent work in cognitive and linguistic development showing that language learning presupposes preverbal concepts, understanding communicative intent, and learning grammatical

generalizations — all of which seem to presuppose reflective consciousness. On the basis of this argumentation, Zlatev draws implications for linguistics, consciousness studies and cognitive science. Most important for the present context is his conclusion that language cannot have a strong effect on the ‘basic layers’ of consciousness, including sentience, reflection and the formation of a self-concept, but may very well have such a role when it comes to the ‘higher levels’ involving self-regulation, reasoning, an autobiographical self and even the understanding of others (cf. the ‘narrative praxis hypothesis’ of Hutto, 2008). Finally, Zlatev aligns his approach with the new wave of phenomenology (Gallagher and Zahavi, 2008), and his proposal for a ‘phenomenological linguistics’ would seem to redress the relative lack of attention to language within this tradition.

From a different starting point, **Menary** arrives at rather similar conclusions concerning the relation between selfhood and narratives. He takes up Dennett’s proposal that the self is a ‘centre of narrative gravity’ and shows that this can be interpreted in two very different ways, both of which are problematic. On a literal interpretation, where narratives are stories about a protagonist that are *actually told* (or enacted), it is hard to see what would unify them and thus serve as their ‘centre’ if there was not an embodied subject of experience, which Menary follows Gallagher in calling a ‘minimal self’. But the concept of ‘narrative’ is often interpreted broadly to include experiences of temporal sequences of events prior to their being represented in a semiotic medium such as language. This is a rather metaphorical use of the term ‘narrative’. Apart from the problem that this abolishes the important distinction between unmediated and mediated experience (presentation vs. representation), even this professed role of ‘narrative’ for the construction of the self seems to rest on the minimal self defined by the living body. Then Menary addresses the question of where (actual) narratives derive from, and argues this to be in a dialogue. Thus he follows Vygotsky’s famous dictum that the inter-psychological precedes the intra-psychological in development, and therefore there is a ‘dialogical self’ prior to a narrative, autobiographical self. Language is thus essential for the creation of these highest levels of selfhood, but not for their lowest layers. Where Menary differs from Zlatev is that he supposes language, in the form of dialogue and narrative, to have a crucial role not only for explicit thought and self-regulation, but for self-awareness: Zlatev’s reasoning rather presupposes that there is already self-awareness in the reflective consciousness that precedes language. But this disagreement can probably be resolved by adopting a ‘layered model’ of selfhood such as that

of Stern (2000 [1985]), where a bodily ‘sense of self’ precedes and co-exists with a verbal ‘sense of self’: there are different layers of self-awareness, and the one based on language is an elaboration of pre-linguistic self-awareness, as testified in e.g. mirror self-recognition.

The impression of general agreement on the primacy of (embodied) consciousness *vis a vis* language in the first three contributions, changes with the paper by **Stamenov**. First, Stamenov explicitly disagrees with the way Itkonen and Zlatev define language, as primarily a social interpersonal phenomenon, and defends Chomsky’s concept of an ‘internal language’ that is (radically) inaccessible to consciousness. This interfaces with consciousness in its expression side (e.g. actual utterances) and its meaning side (which Stamenov views in terms of mental imagery), but is hidden when it comes to what connects the two: grammar. Stamenov presents examples of asymmetries between linguistic structure and what is accessible to consciousness: imagery and intuitions of acceptability (as opposed to Itkonen’s intuitions of correctness) in order to support his position. Most original (and provocative) however, is Stamenov’s final proposal for *why* language is inaccessible to consciousness: in order to maintain (from ‘behind the scenes’) the illusion of the ‘Cartesian Theatre’, the metaphor for consciousness that Dennett (1991) finds to be so tempting for us, despite (according to Dennett) being false. Thus, Stamenov’s conclusion is surprisingly Dennettian, but with the proviso that it is not just (culturally derived) ‘memes’ but also the (evolutionarily derived) machinery of grammar that gives us not only the ‘higher layers’ (admitted to be language dependent by Zlatev and Menary), but also the experience of a self within a coherent world. Stamenov supports this speculative (in the neutral sense of the word) idea, by referring to schizophrenia, where both language and the Cartesian Theatre come apart at the seams. On a meta-level, it should be noted that the clear difference between the conclusions in this and the earlier three papers illustrates the point made in the previous section on the essentially philosophical basis of the relationship between language and consciousness: we need to explicate what we mean by ‘language’ and ‘consciousness’ (the ‘what’ question) before addressing more empirical questions (‘how’ and ‘why’).

In the final contribution, **Simpson** offers an analysis of ‘verbal irony’, a topic that initially may seem peripheral to the relationship between language and consciousness. But the ‘low-key’ nature of the topic (and the voice of the author) is deceptive. Simpson begins by reviewing the classic, if marginal, treatments of irony in the philosophy of language by Grice and Searle. These imply a ‘pragmatic

mechanism' for inferring the intended meaning from sentence meaning and the context, and Simpson shows the problems with this approach. Then he moves to more recent attempts to explain irony as 'echo' or 'pretence', viewing it as an expressive phenomenon in which the 'ironist expresses a dissociative attitude' toward what is being *shown*, rather than *said*, and finds this, with some modification, much more congruent. It thus turns out that, 'with only apparent paradox, that verbal irony is not an essentially linguistic phenomenon' (p. 124), as he puts it. Its basic nature is to express, for oneself and others, a dissociation from a perspective, which implies a self that can reflexively engage with the world, including other selves, and with its own attitudes towards it. Simpson declines to answer the question whether this reflexivity derives from the use of language, as Menary would probably hold, or from the 'emotional, sensory-motor, perceptual and non-conceptual practices' (p. 133), as Zlatev would, but in using the metaphor of irony-as-a-tool, related to that of language-as-tool, illustrates how the 'embodied skill' of irony may play a role in both the emergence and the sustaining of a reflexive self. Thus, without mentioning the term 'consciousness', Simpson nicely illustrates how a clear (if marginal) case of the philosophy of language, cannot be understood by analysing *only* language, but requires a consideration of bodily experience and selfhood, thus reversing the 'linguistic turn' dictum of resolving or dissolving philosophical problems (e.g. the nature of consciousness) though linguistic analysis.

5. Conclusion

The summaries provided in the previous section were intended as facilitation for the reader to see some of the main points in each contribution, as well as their interrelation. They do not do justice to their individual richness, and thus constitute only one possible interpretation: the reader may very well disagree with these readings. The summary traced both agreements and disagreements between the authors, and given the relatively unexplored nature of the theme, the latter are inevitable. However, even the disagreements indicate a *convergence* in several respects: between philosophers (Menary and Simpson) and linguists (Itkonen, Zlatev and Stamenov), between philosophical argumentation and empirical research, and between broadly speaking consciousness-oriented 'phenomenological' and language-oriented 'analytical' perspectives. This gives us hope that the dialectical relationship between language and consciousness has moved out of the margins, and will constitute a productive theme for future research.

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