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# *Book Discussion*

# *The Power of Language: Discussion of Charles Taylor's* The Language Animal: The Full Shape of the Human Linguistic Capacity

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*The paper is a discussion of Charles Taylor's recent book* The Language Animal. *The criticism of Taylor's view of language clusters around two main themes: first, that he seems to "mysterianize" language somewhat, whereas the topics he addresses can be adequately dealt with within standard formal approaches in the philosophy of language and cognitive science; second, that his focus on language is in many cases misplaced, and should indeed be replaced with a focus on human conceptual structure, which language only fragmentarily expresses.*

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Charles Taylor's most recent book[1] contains, towards the end, this sentence which indicates its scope and ambition: "With phrases like 'animal possessing language', we are trying to answer a question like: 'what is human nature?'" (338–9). This aligns very closely with the leading thought of a book published also in 2016 by another crucial contemporary thinker, Noam Chomsky, who states: "there are much more fundamental reasons to try to determine clearly what language is, reasons that bear directly on the question of what kind of creatures we are" (2016: 2). But, if their goals in inspecting language are closely related, the respective takes on language by Chomsky and Taylor couldn't be more different. Whereas Chomsky is one of the founders of contemporary formal approaches to language, Taylor is concerned

[1] See references for bibliographical data.

throughout his book with stressing the affective, enactive, "embodied" aspects of language not captured by the formal theories; and whereas Chomsky is the arch-internalist and individualist of our time, Taylor insists on seeing language in the context of sharing ("the linguistic capacity is essentially shared" 333) and "communion" (situations of joint attention).

So, what is Taylor's exact take on language in the book that is the focus of this discussion? He states: "language can only be understood if we understand its constitutive role in human life" (261). Language brings to human life new goals and purposes that wouldn't exist without it, it alters our way of being in the world (echoes of Heidegger are non-accidental)—language is not just part of the framework of general human activities, but transforms the whole framework. Language is crucially *constitutive*, claims Taylor drawing on the work of Herder, in opposition to being purely designative of antecedently given entities, a position he identifies in the work of Hobbes, Locke and Condillac (what he calls the HLC theory), and continued in "post-Fregean analytic philosophy of language".

Crucial aspects of the linguistic capacity which demonstrate this constitutivity for Taylor are three: what he calls human or metabiological meanings; the efficacy of discourse; the sense-making power of narrative. So, let me explicate them briefly.

As examples of human meanings, Taylor lists virtue and motivational terms (generosity, loyalty, love/lust), terms for stances and ways in which we experience life (serene, troubled) and aesthetic terms. These meanings, as opposed to mere "biological meanings" (like "food", for instance), cannot be understood from the outside and dispassionately; instead, they are *felt*, they cannot exist without affect, and require *Einfühlung* (empathizing, putting oneself in the other's shoes) to be understood. Further, these meanings, claims Taylor, are interconnected, forming "skeins", and are deeply interwoven with culture (think of the notion of loyalty for a samurai and a member of contemporary individualistic society).

Crucially for Taylor, human meanings open up new domains, new ways of experiencing. They are not just names for antecedently existing and language-independently observable things. Rather, the expression used for the meaning is essential to the experience it names, not preceded by it. These meanings are in such a way constitutive of specifically human ways of being. Further, although they are dependent on us, we can, claims Taylor, get things wrong when operating with these meanings—both descriptively (wrongly describing somebody as loyal) and normatively (wrongly attacking somebody for lack of loyalty). And we can correct ourselves, through "transitions" (development of better understanding) ratified by intuition.

These meanings crucially involve enactment, claims Taylor—for instance, the display of loyalty involves types of bodily movement and

bearing. They can also emerge through works of art. These works, in case of literary works of art, contain no assertions about life and human meanings, but can *portray* them. In fact, Taylor identifies three levels of articulation of meanings (three "rungs in a ladder", as he puts it): enactive; symbolic (which concerns the portrayals that works of art offer); and descriptive-analytic.

Human meanings are, according to Taylor, understood hermeneutically: in circles, without a final and objective definition.

The second aspect of constitutivity of language that Taylor discusses is the efficacy of discourse. Norms, footings, institutions and social orders are constituted and transformed in discourse, claims Taylor. By "footings" he understands the mutual positions of interlocutors in social-discursive space. These are affirmed in discourse (talking politely to one's superior), but can be challenged and transformed ("go to hell, boss"). Whole social orders are carried and shaped in discourse.

The third aspect is narrative. Narrative, says Taylor, offers insight through diachronic gestalts, units of character, event, motivation, etc., where the issues involved concern human meanings. Taylor claims that narrative is crucial to self-understanding (a claim well known from a strand of contemporary research into the constitution of personality). The telling of stories is therefore a creative/constitutive feature of language.

Before discussing these crucial aspects, Taylor discusses figuring, or the creative use of language. In "figuring A through B", mainly in metaphor, we gain new powers of articulation, with bodily know-how underlying this (here Taylor draws heavily on the work of the cognitive linguist George Lakoff and collaborator Mark Johnson who stress the creative role of metaphor and the bodily basis of metaphorical meanings). This is something that the HLC paradigm, according to Taylor, completely misses. Taylor concedes that Frege made some crucial adjustments to this paradigm: by introducing the context principle, he freed it of atomism; by construing sense as abstract and public, he cured it of individualism. However, this paradigm is, in Taylor's view, still limited by recognizing only designative (as opposed to constitutive) logic, which it attributes to language: it sees language as objective depictive power, and nothing above this. Taylor challenges this view throughout the book, as indicated above.

But before discussing language as constitutive, Taylor attributes to it other important characteristics. First of all, crucial to operating with language is an irreducible sensitivity to rightness (echoes of later Wittgenstein are obvious). Words have right and wrong uses, and an awareness of this is ineliminable as an aspect of the language capacity. Further, language is impossible unless holistically conceived—one word presupposes all others, does not function in isolation (Fodor would have a lot to say about this, but that will not be the focus of this discussion). Finally, language is part of a range of symbolic forms, which all have to

be taken into account if language is to be appreciated in its full scope.

Language (along with the self) develops, claims Taylor, following the work of Michael Tomasello, in the context of emotion-infused joint attention, which Taylor calls "communion". Of course, the ineliminable emotional chargedness of situations enables us to acquire the human meanings which are, as we have seen, "felt".

Language alters, Taylor claims, our way of being in the world, it opens up for us new dimensions of existence, which wouldn't be possible without it.

Criticism of Taylor's view of language will cluster around two main themes: first, that he seems to "mysterianize" language somewhat, whereas the topics he addresses can be adequately dealt with within standard formal approaches in the philosophy of language and cognitive science; second, that his focus on language is in many cases misplaced, and should indeed be replaced with a focus on human conceptual structure, which language only fragmentarily expresses.

Let me return to Taylor's "human meanings". First of all, Taylor seems to claim that many forms of thought would be utterly impossible without language—e.g. thought about loyalty. However, empirical research has shown this to be false. Steven Pinker's (1994), which Taylor cites, provides abundant evidence of this (cf. ch. 3). There are fully intelligent aphasics, capable of complex mental operations, such as playing card games or recounting pantomimed narratives. There are also languageless beings, such as prelinguistic infants or monkeys, who are able to reason about space, time, objects, number, causality and, interestingly with regard to the example of loyalty, obligations (in vervet monkeys) to members of family, such as avenging a member. Finally, many creative people report that their crucial insights didn't come through language, but through mental imagery.

On the other hand, if we take into account what kind of terms Taylor gives as examples of his human meanings, we see that these are simply value-laden terms, or thick concepts, in Bernard Williams's usage. And these, mostly in the guise of pejoratives or slurs, are actually a hot topic in contemporary philosophy of language. The most recent book-length contribution to the debate is Nenad Miščević's and Julija Perhat's (2016). This book offers a detailed, layered account of the meaning of such terms. For any pejorative (or laudative) it factors out its meaning into the following layers: minimal descriptive, descriptive-evaluative (e.g. "primitive, lazy, dangerous"), prescriptive (e.g. "to be avoided, discriminated against") and expressive (e.g. "yuck"). This account then offers a basis for claiming that using a pejorative or a laudative gives rise to several propositions being expressed by a sentence in which it is used. Now, this kind of account lends itself to realization in computational terms, and seems to take away a lot of the "aura" that Taylor builds around his human meanings—it places those meanings squarely within something that can be dealt with by a formal account of language. For example, the term "loyalty" could be cashed

out as having descriptive (the set of loyal acts), descriptive-evaluative ("proneneness to help those one is obliged to"), prescriptive ("be such!") and expressive ("commendable!") layers.

As for the notion of human value itself, Ray Jackendoff, in his (2007), offers a whole theory of the human value system in computational terms. Jackendoff posits that the value system is a multidimensional calculating system, a part of the cognitive system which helps govern action. By multidimensional he means that different kinds of value can be distinguished, each with a valence and a magnitude, and with subjective and objective versions. The types of value Jackendoff identifies are affective value, utility, resource value, quality, prowess, normative value, personal normative value, and esteem. Important relations obtain between these kinds of value: e.g. the greater the affective value or utility of one's act for another, the greater the normative value of the act (positive or negative). Whereas this system is in all likelihood innately based, proposes Jackendoff, a major component of learning a culture is learning the rules that assign values to particular sorts of action. This, or something like it, is, I propose, the system that could be said to underlie Taylor's human meanings. And this is, I submit, the kind of theory we should strive for when it comes to human values. It is easy to see how loyalty would fit nicely into it.

Taylor claims that in the case of human meanings, the experience does not preceed the expression. However, how would this be cashed out? One of his examples is the attitude of "cool" as adopted by young people. The idea is that it isn't the case that, first, there was a fully shaped attitude, mode of behavior, which was then just christened as being "cool"; rather, the expression "cool" helped the attitude emerge, take shape. But it seems that a more illuminating account of this process is this: there was an *incipient conceptualization* (emotionally coloured) of what it is to be cool, which additionally crystallized when the term "cool" was coined (rather, transferred metaphorically from the temperature domain). The notion of an incipient conceptualization seems to be able to bring down to earth, so to speak, the rather mysterious notion of the expression "opening up new domains" and not being preceded by what it designates.

The theme of stressing conceptualization rather than language is the second one I would like to develop here in opposition to Taylor. Taylor talks of the efficacy of discourse in constituting social reality. This is of course reminiscent of Searle's (1995). But that book also seems to talk of language where talk of conceptualization would be more adequate. An institutional fact can be created by language, but also by raising a flag or touching one's shoulders with a sword, or putting a crown on one's head. It is the conceptualization of a physical action counting as the creation of a new institutional reality that is crucial; this conceptualization can be prompted/anchored by a linguistic act, but also by other symbolic acts.

We can continue the theme of conceptualization as being dominant to language in discussing Taylor's account of narrative. He sees the constitutivity of language embodied, amongst other things mentioned above, in the sense-making work of narrative. However, recent work on understanding narrative (cf. Turner 1996, Dancygier 2012) draws on cognitive linguistics (the wokk of Lakoff and Johnson and others), which operates under the premiss that language doesn't encode meaning directly, but is a system of prompts for the construction of meaning (cf. Fauconnier and Turner 2002). As Dancygier elaborates, the story that we reconstruct from a text, the *emergent story*, is the result of a process of *blending* of *mental spaces* (technical terms in cognitive linguistics). Mental spaces are conceptual packages we construct on-line during thinking and speaking. The crucial thing here is that language only prompts us to this, but does not contain explicit instructions on how to do it, so that the resulting construction is much richer than the language used to spawn it. To give an example, dealing with complex constellations having to do with (multiple or shifting) points of view in a story requires building and manipulating a multiplicity of such mental spaces. The moral: language is only the tip of the iceberg, and conceptual structure is what's doing the real work here. And not only is language as a rule only the tip of the iceberg, but it is not even necessary to activate the said cognitive structures—this can be done rather well by means of pantomime or pictures, for instance.

The point of the language vs. conceptual structure discussion could be encapsulated thus: it is not that language "creates new ways of being" for humans; it is rather that human conceptual structure, evolved through natural selection (and possible other mechanisms), and expressible by language, makes us what we are, and has made us such since it appeared some 50 000 years ago.

A few final remarks. Taylor insists that language should be viewed as part of a range of symbolic forms, including dance, music, literature (echoing Cassirer). However, language seems to be rather unique amongst these, perhaps justifying the claim of a categorical difference. For one thing, language is the only system which has both form and content, and has undisputable minimal units which combine both. These are morphemes, e.g. "horse" and "s" in "horses". Dance or literature have no such undisputable units (despite valiant efforts of semioticians to identify them). Second, language seems to have an innate basis which channels its development, one which kicks in almost right after birth, and delivers full-blown language by age three. If this window is missed due to lack of input, the language ability never develops in a normal capacity. Nothing of the sort holds of dance or understanding/producing literature.

Finally, Taylor claims that language develops in the context of "communion", i. e. emotion-infused joint attention. This is undoubtedly true, but it is very questionable whether this proves that language is

essentially shared. Chomsky would say that "language is essentially an instrument of thought. Externalization then would be an ancillary process" (2016: 14). It is as yet unclear, that is, to what extent being exposed to external input really shapes language in the child's mind, or merely prompts it to grow along a genetically predetermined course.

In conclusion, Taylor's book is an insightful, learned, ambitious, and coherent discussion of language, that attempts to offer an alternative to accounts dominating current formal linguistics and philosophy of language. I am just sceptical of the approach it argues for and of the limits it claims for the standard picture.

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