

Philosophy and Religion:  
Linguistics – I

J.L. Symonds Patel

August 5, 2020

# Contents

1	Introduction	3
2	What it Might Mean to Have a Language at All	4
3	Why We Might Have a Higher Affinity for Languages Compared to Animals	8
4	Final Remarks	12

# 1 Introduction

In this series of entries, I will explore the topic of linguistics, language learning, language history and more or less anything else to do with language. I will say that I am by no means a linguist, nor trained in any form of psychological or historical study. However, the reason I have grown an interest in these things is because I have been learning Japanese, and have, at this time, begun to learn German. And so through learning these languages, I have a few ideas relating to languages as a whole, and the mechanisms by which humans might use and create languages.

In this entry I would like to explore:

- What it Might Mean to Have a Language at All
- Why We Might Have a Higher Affinity for Languages Compared to Animals

## 2 What it Might Mean to Have a Language at All

Now, when I started learning Japanese, it being the first language that I've decided to learn separately to my mother tongue, I wondered if there were better ways for me to acquire new words, and understand more and more, in that very new language. In doing so, I wondered what it might mean to understand a language in the first place, and so experimented with my understanding of English, as well as, at the time, my sloppy grasp of Japanese.

It is quite obvious of course, that words themselves are pointers to the object or concept of which they symbolise. And I think that this is easily forgotten, in a world where words 'run the show'. It is easy to give the words the actual weight of the meaning they symbolise, and after all, that is the key to their power, we need not lift up an anvil to show someone what you want to talk about, you only need to say "Well about that anvil. . .", which saves a lot of heavy lifting. You can swap words for the object or concept they represent, without having to show the object, or act out the concept in reality. And so the rift between the pointer (the word), and what is symbolised (the object/concept) begins to close, leading to formations of meaning.

Where it got interesting, is when I thought about what came to mind when I said a word. So, in English I would think 'fire', and behold, I thought of red and orange entwining flames, the heat, and crackling of the burning wood, all in a very small instant, like a flash of information. I saw, very clearly, that these words conveyed imagery and sensory information, for simple concepts like 'fire'. And so, I realised, when I learnt the Japanese word for 'fire', what should come to mind is that very imagery and sensory information, and most definitely not, directly and solely, the English word (something I found, to be a common learning technique, whereby an app or website or book, taught only the English along with the target language words, which can work, but has serious problems I think). With regards to language learning, I will without a doubt write more about it in another series of entries. But to return to the main topic, I see language as being a layer on top of a more foundational process.

When a child learns their first language, it takes a while, from what I know. Now, there are many people that might think that they should learn a language when they are younger, as their brains would still be developing etc. which is in part quite helpful and true. But I think it is a gross mistake

to jump to the conclusion that you would learn a language quicker or more successfully, if you were still a child or had not yet learnt any language at all. You see, as a child, it is not just the language that you are learning, but the underlying concepts. The reason you know your mother tongue to a fluent degree, I would say, isn't because you simply spent more time with that language, which of course helps, but it is because your mind has grown up with the precise concepts that that language's words point to.

To go back to children, who are learning their mother tongue, it takes them at least a handful of years to become fluent. Then take an adult learning German, as an English speaker. They would only take around a year maximum, I think, with serious exposure to German, to speak, read and write to a fluent degree. Why? Well, one can argue that German is similar to English in spelling and word etymology for the most part, which definitely plays a part. But, I would argue that the main factor is not the similarity of the languages themselves, but the concepts behind the languages. Take the statement 'the tree'. In German, this statement is 'der Baum'. Now, as an English speaker I cannot argue that the two words are similar, for they are quite different. Even if Japanese was my mother tongue instead, I am sure I would be able to pick up this word with ease, although the semantics of the definite article might be a new thing to grasp. Thus, similarity of the word to your mother tongue is not the key here. And so, if I were two years old, being taught to understand 'the tree', the struggle is not from my mother tongue to a second or third language, but from concept to word. As a child, the problem is actually obtaining the concept of a tree, not so much the forming and using of the word itself. That is why, I think, there is minimal struggle in learning words like these even as an adult, and I would say that as an adult, you would be more equipped to learn new languages than a child might be.

However, there is one advantage that children have over adults in learning languages. The very fact that children need to grapple with the concept/meaning of a word, before the word itself, means that their conceptualisation of the world is far more malleable. This means that they can, more or less, 'shape their mind into the language'. That is to say, they can conceptualise the world, in a way that means their conceptualisation is accurately fitted to the language. An example is with idioms, so with English one might be 'Beat around the bush'. Now, a child, like an adult, might find it incredibly odd when they learn this idiom. But because the child, in this case, can still manipulate their conceptualisation of the world more than an adult, I would say that they can more easily 'push' this idiom into its proper

meaning, than an adult can, when learning English. In this case, it is the adult's preconception of the world that actually gets in the way, since 'Beat around the bush', with each word's true meaning and concepts behind them, leads to the whole statement meaning, literally, to beat around a bush.

Now I think it would be good to clear up the idea of the conceptualisation of the world that a child builds when learning. All it is, is essentially the differentiation, separation and creation of concepts from the observable world. Take the classical scenery of a park for example. As an adult, one can see trees, bushes, soil, fountains, paths, grass, flowers, and birds et cetera, and can even say that grass, trees and bushes are a subset of the concept of plants. Yet, a child is still differentiating between the imagery of trees, the touch of grass, and the smell of flowers, let alone between what they are called. That is why, when learning other languages, adults have the upper hand, because human languages have similar conceptual frameworks, no matter the language. Learning Japanese, I had no problem learning about the words for 'tree', 'flower' and 'plant', because I already understood the imagery and concepts behind them through growing up with English, and so the only hurdle was the written form and pronunciation of those words. I would say that the problem in learning other languages as an adult might come with more abstract concepts, where your mother tongue hasn't enforced the same concept with the same meaning as in another languages. That is where children would have an easier time in being able to change the way they 'divided' concepts in order to fit the words themselves. But as adults, having already learnt at least one language, our conceptualisations of the world are very much set in stone to a rather large degree.

And so, what it means to have a language at all, would be, in my mind, first and foremost the capability to divide the world into concepts. Separate the birds from the trees, fire from water, light from dark. This is, I believe, the basis for language in the form of words and symbols, since words, without these concepts behind them, are empty. And so, I would go further to say that the framework and system by which we separate these concepts is language itself, as well as the words that symbolise them.

Thus, I can push forward a definition of language that I have built up from what I have seen:

“The ability, and way, in which the world is divided into separate concepts”

And so, words and signs are only a few offshoots of language, and language is actually not just the symbolising of concepts, but the defining and articulation of them themselves. With this, I shall move onto the next section.

### 3 Why We Might Have a Higher Affinity for Languages Compared to Animals

Now that I have explained a bit on what I believe the mechanism of language is, I will apply my thinking back onto how it might affect the capacity of humans for language, compared to animals.

According to my definition of language, reached at in the previous section, I would think that all animals mostly possess the affinity for a sort of language. That is most certainly not to say that an animal's affinity for language is the same as a human's. I will look at the human capacity a bit more later on, but for now, let us simply consider animals, and more specifically chimpanzees and dogs. In the case of dogs, we can without a doubt know that they try to, and with much success, discern food from non food. The same can be said with chimpanzees, and many other animals. Dogs can differentiate between certain emotions in other dogs and humans, between scents, between tastes, and can differentiate between different humans. Let us simply take the case for the last example I just gave. If a single dog sees/smells someone who is not their owner, and differentiates that person from their actual owner, then something quite special is happening, I think. In order for the dog to think that that person is not their owner, they must have some conceptualisation and memory of their owner's scent, form or 'essence' that they compare the stranger with. Memory alone is insufficient, since memory of a scent must be attached to a conceptualisation within the dog's mind for it to actually represent something. Even in human memory, one might remember a party they went to, but the real meaning in that memory comes from attaching the faces to mental conceptualisations of friends and family. In that way, memory is simply stored observations of the outside world, and so if you were to see the world without any conceptualisations to divide it, you would be looking through the eyes of a child essentially, who is yet to form those conceptualisations. And so, the act of differentiation displayed by dogs, in my mind, is the embodiment of the fact that they hold a conceptual framework in their mind. Now these conceptualisations need not be complex at all. A dog might even only differentiate food from non food, and that, essentially, may be sufficient to survive.

Now, in chimpanzees, I would argue a similar thing happens, but on a larger scale. Chimpanzees can discern between food and non food, quite clearly, as well as tools and non tools. But what can also be seen is that chimpanzees have a far more complex social model than dogs, which I would think is a

result of chimpanzees differentiating between ‘enemy’ chimpanzees outside of their group, and between variations of value of certain chimpanzees within their group (such that an alpha chimpanzee might hold the largest importance et cetera), as well as being able to form the concept of social hierarchies. The reason chimpanzees might have a larger capacity and framework of conceptualisations could be due to them mirroring social hierarchy, onto conceptual hierarchy. And so, a tree consists of sticks and leaves, and sticks and leaves make a tree et cetera, which is incredibly powerful. The conceptualisation that chimpanzees have which leads to objects having value/properties, and possibly a hierarchy of composition, might be incredibly key to their similarity to humans. This is what I believe leads to them being able to use tools and show very complex behaviour. They can pick up a rock and use it to crush leaves, or something along those lines, which is pretty bland stuff from our perspective as humans, but they can divide their conceptualisation of the world in a way that lets them see tools and non tools, which is alone quite amazing relative to no conceptualisations of those things at all. Just imagine the processes by which they decide that something is a tool or not, I wouldn’t say that it’s simple. Now, the division of the world into these specific sets of concepts (such as tools and non tools) might be taught, but I think there is a key biological element to it too.

I would argue that both dogs and chimpanzees in this way have the affinity for language ,according to my definition, and I hope I have reasoned my case for this in the last few paragraphs. I believe this affinity for language can be measured by, and is in part, the amount of conceptualisations a certain animal might be capable of making, which in turn is shown by the amount of differentiation they can make between those concepts in their behaviour. Thus there is arguably a strong biological factor, in the capability of an animal’s nervous system and brain to handle and contain these conceptualisations. So chimpanzees may have a higher storage capacity for conceptualisations compared to dogs, meaning chimpanzees have a higher ability to learn new conceptualisations and store them. But ultimately I think, in animals, there is a limit to the number of conceptualisations they can store and process. Thus their communicative language (through sounds and signs) is incredibly limited. Let us not forget, the process and affinity, for animals and humans alike, to differentiate between certain sounds is the basis for spoken language itself. This is one of the reasons why I cannot say that language is simply and solely ‘the spoken word’, which is rather constricting in my mind. And so, spoken language is a mirror of the capacity to differentiate between conceptualisations with a deeper language, shown by the capacity to differentiate between sounds/words, which represent those conceptualisations. I also can-

not say that language is solely the ‘method of communication’, because there clearly resides a more foundational layer underneath communicative methods, which I believe is my idea of a deeper language of conceptual division. A beaver can differentiate between sticks and stones, yet cannot give words for them. Thus I would find it wholly ineffective to say that a beaver has no affinity for language, by limiting the definition of language to something that is simply observed as spoken word. So what I might be saying is that if language is indeed, simply, ‘the method of communication’, then there is a whole foundational layer which supports this ‘language’, which I have not found to be fully explored aside from this entry, and which I hope I have begun to explore in this entry. Although, I simply may have not looked hard enough elsewhere. To put it simply, we ourselves think with language. Now, that alone, is certainly no method of communication, since you are thinking, not talking. Now, especially with abstract ideas, we need our language, in the form of words, to think to ourselves. That should allow us to void the traditional definition of language itself, since here it is not simply a ‘form of communication’. We can think in terms of imagery, but it is by no means efficient, and many concepts, as I have said, cannot be expressed by anything else than words. Thus humans have enough of a capacity for conceptualisation, to be able to separate reality from artificial constructs (words), and so can manipulate words, yet not have to manipulate reality, as well as have the two be linked by conceptualisations, which may be the root of human logic and creativity.

Now, what I think is special about humans in this respect is simply one thing: we can divide reality into what seems to be as many mental conceptualisations as we see fit and useful, and could very well be capable of having an infinite number of conceptualisations created. What I mean to say is that we seem to have a clear ability to control our mental conceptualisations. It might even be the case that consciousness is simply the ability to differentiate mental conceptualisations from reality, implying that animals see reality purely through their conceptualisations. For example, we can change, improve, update, or even wreck our mental conceptualisation of what food is, but a dog might not be able to do anything to their mental conceptualisation of food, once it has been realised, since they see through the lens of that concept, and cannot get out of that lens, so to speak. But I diverge, although, I will have at some point, entries on consciousness to fully explore this idea. To return to the original assertion, I think that humans are the wielders of a mental scalpel, where we ourselves can choose how to divide reality. Beavers might have a fixed neurological system that creates the concepts of sticks, and non sticks for example, yet us humans can choose to update our conceptualisa-

tions where, for example, we can split ‘sticks’ into several different types of sticks like maple or oak sticks. I think we are also capable of destroying conceptualisations so as to lose the capacity to differentiate between them. For example, we might see ‘beautiful leaves’ and ‘ugly leaves’, but we can also just scrap those concepts and just choose to see ‘leaves’. This is what gives rise to our immensely complicated ‘language’, or rather by my terms, and more precisely, *spoken* language, and not just to differentiate it from written language, but also the conceptualisation processes which I also think are part of language itself. A really good example of the fact that humans wield a ‘mental scalpel’ to divide reality into conceptualisations at will, and infinitely, is the creation of words. Over many, many centuries, humanity has created new words, which mirrors the creation/division of underlying conceptualisations of reality.

I would say that humanity also has the ability to link and join conceptualisations at will too, so we can divide and construct, infinitely, our mental conceptualisations. Maybe this is the evidence of consciousness and creativity, but that will have to be for another entry.

## 4 Final Remarks

I hope I have given some form of new thought towards the construction of language and what I think language is, and why humans have an incredibly high affinity for language. Whatever you take away from this entry, I ask that each and every one reading this takes away simply one thing: language is so much more than simply communication, whether you may take that to mean language is simply more powerful, or that its roots in the human mind run far, far deeper, is up to you. I do think that the roots of humanity's capability for language might lead to an idea of how we are conscious compared to animals, not implying that animals aren't conscious, but that we do seem to have a higher form of awareness than animals.

In any, either, or no case at all, I do hope this entry on linguistics has given some things to think about.

Thank you for reading.

*END*