

Paweł Przywara

Thinking about Mentalese

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Paweł Przywara

Rzeszów, Poland

e-mail: pawel_przywara@yahoo.com

Abstract:

Problem of the language of thought is connected not only with different epistemological points of view on human mind and body, but also with the way we define either language or thinking (or communication). The communication is the essence of language – not vocabulary, syntax etc. Hence I prefer speaking of ‘world-learning’ (during our early cognitive and communicational processes) to ‘language acquisition’ or ‘language learning’. In other words, the processes of perception are prior to any linguistic abilities and also fundamental to the structure of mentalese. The language of thought might be constructed of *intentional forms* whose (intentional) genesis is connected with our perceptual experiences.

Whereas the notion of thinking is not difficult to understand to us, since we know what thinking is (because we sometimes think, cogitate and observe ourselves thinking), the notion of mentalese or thought-language seems to be more than ambiguous. Its ambiguity does not rise from Jerry Fodor’s conception only but rather from different epistemological views of our mentality. If we are physicalists (as Fodor and his followers are) we think about our thinking processes as brain events only. If we follow Edmund Husserl’s phenomenology for example, we do not treat our mind as brain at all. Correspondingly mentalese for physicalists is (and must be) something completely different than for phenomenologists.

Then thinking about mentalese is not easy. Even if we wanted to avoid (so old as philosophy is) the discussion concerning the mind-body problem, we would have to face the problems of 1) thinking and communicating, and 2) thinking, communicating and cognizing, anyway. What about language acquisition? Well, that’s the third problem, too, but not the main problem. To know what language acquisition is, first we have to know what language alone is. Hence, the definition of mentalese is dependent on the definitions of language and of thought. This way we enter the realm of epistemology, but it is not the end of story, since philosophers quarrel each other for ages about what the realm of epistemology is and what epistemologists are allowed to do in their scientific routines.

Lots of linguistic books and linguists say that language is formed by spoken and graphic signs ordered in different ways. From that point of view language is separated from thought and thinking as we can see. And that looks very artificial. When we communicate thinking and cognitive processes are fundamental and prior to any ordering of signs (either spoken or written, printed, typed etc.) – then we should not forget about thinking when defining language. But how to define thinking or thought? Another problem, another philosophical quarrel or intellectual war.

Let us focus on communication instead. How is it possible to us to communicate effectively? It is possible only when we similarly cognize the world around us – it is not the ‘matter of language’. If we lived in different (private) worlds as monads the communication process would not be effective and possible at all. We would be the Babel tower eternal citizens or prisoners. There is

no any language without communicating subjects. Language does not exist when there is no communication processes. The texts of books in libraries, of plays, of poems, of languages' dictionaries, of theories etc. – they do not exist if nobody reads them. Naturally we can communicate without words since many things, feelings and even thoughts are expressed with our eyes or faces, and often there is said that we use nonverbal *language* (as well as utterances) when we speak to some people or audience. The notion of 'the nonverbal' is connected with that one which apprehend the realm of what verbal is.

This way we approach the problem of language again, focusing on word itself. Is word a sign simply and only? Is it a sequel or set of signs (spoken or graphic ones)? We should bear in mind that speaking was the earlier way of human communicating than writing (moreover when there is not a given speech community the given ethnic language is dead, it disappears), so the written form of language is later one to spoken communicating. But what is going on when people say something? Many theorists see the communication process as sign-exchanging only, then they forget about the priority of speech over sign-consciousness. And speaking seems to be impossible without thinking.

Linguists would say that first we have to take lessons (from speaking subjects around us) of articulation until we speak something that makes sense. Psycholinguists point that children understand lots of utterances quite long before they are able to formulate their own linguistic phrases. If we connected the process of language acquisition with the thinking one, namely, a given subject cannot think if he/she has not learned a given ethnic language – then it would be hard to explain the (observed by psycholinguists) phenomenon of understanding some utterances by very young children before their learning language, however.

Some linguists (following Noam Chomsky – and Fodor can be treated as one of the followers in philosophy of mind) solve the problem saying that linguistic (especially syntactic) structures are innate. There exists something like linguistic a priori in human minds (here: brains), that activates and develops during a child development. Why the children who are not spoken to for years cannot develop accurately their linguistic innate abilities then? Is communication not fundamental to language acquisition? And if so, then the linguistic a priori theory is not well-grounded.

Communication always exists in perceptual context (for communicating subjects). When a mother or father wants to communicate with her/his small child, there has to be a clear perceptual context of the communication act – clear to both sides of communication. The adult must see the same objects as the child. The objects are the same whereas the perceptions can be obviously different in some aspects (someone can be closer to some objects, than someone else, something is small for the adult when bigger one from the child's perspective and so on). Linguists say that that situation is the way of language acquisition in early years of child development – adults utter something that is remembered by child and assigned to objects. It does not have to be the right explanation of the cognitive situation, however.

It will not be overestimated if we assume that the small child knows nothing about language, its structures, phonemes etc. and of course about language acquisition process. We can assume that the child hears continuous voice signals not any sets of vocal signs, instead. Moreover the child certainly does not think about the situation in a way: 'well, I'm learning my mother language now, and must be focused on what is uttered to me' (and his/her parents do not approach to the situation that way: 'well, let's teach our baby the word 'dog' at the beginning which is the set of sounds [d], [o] and [g]'). That means the child does not discriminate *linguistic* behavior of the adults and he/she does not *learn language* (*phonemes, words, sentences, texts* and so on) but rather *learns world*. The child's consciousness is focused on *what* is perceived, pointed at, described, showed etc. and not on *what* and *how is said*.

Most of parents are not linguists so they are not very attentive to making the best conditions for 'language acquisition' processes. They rather concentrate on showing different world-objects than speaking perfectly, correctly, slowly etc. The child actually 'learns language' (his knowledge

about lexicon grows month by month, year by year, anyway) on the occasion of world-learning or world-acquiring then, because epistemic structures are prior to any linguistic ones in his/her mind. When we assume that there is no such process as (strictly or pure) language acquisition in early childhood, it will be easier to understand mentalesé.

Cognition processes are prior to any communication, we said. If we did not cognize similarly, we would not communicate effectively. Communication between parents and their child is connected with their common spheres of perception and what is perceived by three of them. First 'world-layer' perceived by a child is the realm of subjects (certainly I do not concern child diseases or mental disorders cases here). Before he/she learns anything with respect to 'things-world', he/she learns the subjects who take care of him/her. The child perceives the community around him/her and then from the members of the community he/she learns other world-layers.

Why bother the child cognitive development? Because mentalesé should be a 'manner of thinking' already in the very early years of child development. In Fodor's view mentalesé is a system of neural symbols causally connected with the world objects, that means the referentiality of the brain-signs or brain-symbols is founded upon causation (from physical objects which (somehow) correspond with the signs/symbols in our brains). As we can see Fodor's language conception does not focus on intersubjectivity of language. Our language is intersubjective because 1) our community use it, 2) it is impossible to learn language individually (without communication with other subjects). There is no any private language, hence we 'learn language' as 'non-private' medium of communication, as 'public' one. We use the same language elements (signs, words, sentences etc.) as other subjects. When we are small children we rather enter into the language sphere which exists in communication processes around us than the linguistic structures enter into our minds. We hear others speaking, laughing, crying etc. – we do not grow up in the space of complete silence. Even unborn children react on parents' voices.

To understand mentalesé we have to understand that we do not have metalinguistic attitude when we think. Of course, a linguist can think about the language structures which he recollects in his analysis, for example. When we think: *I can see the screen of my computer is dirty*, we do not think: *let me take the words: I, can, see, the, screen, of, my, computer, be, dirty – and then I'll make a sentence about my seeing some things*, however. We simply perform a mental operation on some elements (which are understood in philosophy in different ways) in our mind.

Some philosophers say those elements are just words (then mentalesé is language the same as spoken or written one). Some say the elements are only representations/mental pictures (then mentalesé is a pictorial code). Who is right? If we thought in words only, we could not understand what is said to us until we learned the language – and we would not have abilities to imagine geometric figures and other things. If we thought using 'mental pictures' only, it would be difficult to explain the 'word operating' processes in our minds.

And now we can think for a while about mentalesé itself. Let us assume, we think by means of words, sentences, texts. However, we do not speak to ourselves (and then hear what is said by us) or write in our minds (and then read what is written by us). If we assumed that we operate with words when thinking, we should assume also that our mental attitude is metalinguistic, namely, we stand on some higher level in our mind and we 'see the language' which we want to use (and it spreads out like landscape before our mental eyes), choosing that word or sentence to 'express thoughts'. If so, our thinking processes would have to be two (or even more) operations at the same time: either metalinguistic, or linguistic ones. Would the former be linguistic/verbal or not? Would it have the syntax of natural language or not? I guess we are very close to regressus ad infinitum.

Well, if not words and pictures then what are the primary elements of our thinking? It is possible that we do not think with words or pictures but with special intentional forms, which are our apprehensions of words and other contents of our perceptions. Our communication (thinking and talking, writing etc.) is so effective because we do not use any *mental words*. When we communicate our attitude is not to grasp a linguistic layer but to comprehend the subject matter of communication – we intentionally deal with *about what* is communicated. We (very often)

communicate about the results of our cognitions, perceptions etc. – not about our language. We certainly can focus on language itself (especially for scientific purposes), but in our ordinary conversational interactions, we focus on *what about* not on *how it is said* or *what is the meaning of the word?*

The (immanent) intentional forms (they are not intentional objects as referents of our thoughts are) were discovered by Husserl in his analyses of spatial consciousness. He was antipsychologist and antirepresentationalist in his epistemology. His intentional forms are not ‘schemes’ participating in our perceptions but transparent and plastic structures that can be modified in different ways. We use the same intentional form ‘house’ to apprehend perceptually any objects similar to house – no matter their shapes/colours differences (we use ‘house’ to apprehend any house which is on a photography, sketched, drawing or film, as well). The seen objects are different (a house far away seen from car – the house before me, a house filmed in *Number 23* movie), but the intentional form which regulates our spatial perceptions of them is one. It is not a mental *picture* of *some house* (nor any mental *model* of house) because houses are different and our mind does not mirror every house seen by us with another representation.

If there were a representation (or brain symbol as Fodor wants) assigned to a *given* (here and here) object, there would be so many representations (in our mind) as many objects are (and as many perceptual situations of seeing such and such objects are). We do not use a different ‘representation’ to different objects of the same type, however. We can differentiate ‘grandma’s house’ from ‘grandma’s friend, Ms. Molly’s house’, but the criterion of the discrimination is connected rather with the people living or that were living in such and such buildings. And we do not distinguish that way all the houses seen by us when travelling or walking, but only ‘special, familiar objects’.

Our cognition works so fast because the process of world-learning implies different structures than linguistic ones. They are epistemic, so mentalese as a fundamental means of our thinking works in a different way than operating symbols or representations. The elements and structures of mentalese are connected with the complicated contents of our perceptions, hence every theorist who wants to deal with mentalese must get to know with perception analyses especially those of Husserl’s in his works on spatial perceiving (f.e. *Ding und Raum* – lectures of 1907). Generally speaking Husserl proves that every single object seen by us is perceived in thing-context, and our perceptions of spatial objects and any spatiality itself are correlated with movement of our perceptual systems (those of eyes’, head’s, body’s etc.). In other words, we see spatial things because we can move around them as subjects and intentionally synthesize different aspects of seen things. But we have to remember that our mind is not a camera taking photos of every aspect of what is before our eyes – our mind is a living structure and not any mechanism collecting data. The computer-model so widely used by many philosophers as human-mind metaphor (or even a description) abstracts from the whole motor and bodily activity of a human (embodied) subject of cognition and is completely inaccurate when we try to understand the processes of perception and thinking (with mentalese as well) at all. Human perceptual knowledge is not founded upon data collecting. Child cognitive development is not programs or software implementing in small brains.

Having assumed that during perception we see lots of things in one grasp (perceiving is not grasping an isolated object – such isolation is meta-cognitive process), we should assume that world-acquiring is the bottom of any language-acquiring as well. Hence the structures of mentalese are correlated with what is perceived by us from our early conscious living and interacting with other subjects.

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