

LANGUAGE LEARNING BY DINT OF SOCIAL COGNITIVE ADVANCEMENT

By

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ABSTRACT

Language is of vital importance to human beings. It is a means of communication and it has specific cognitive links. Advanced social cognition is necessary for children to acquire language, and sophisticated mind-reading abilities to assume word meanings and communicate pragmatically. Language can be defined as a bi-directional system that permits the expression of arbitrary thoughts as signals and the reverse interpretation of those signals as thoughts. Although language appears as a seamless whole, with phonology, syntax, semantics, and pragmatic processes working together, many dissociable mechanisms underlie linguistic competence. Language allows forms of social understanding that would otherwise be impossible. Both language and social cognition are complex constructs, involving many independent cognitive mechanisms, and the comparative approach provides a powerful route to understanding the evolution of such mechanisms. Social Cognition (SC) encompasses a number of distinctive capacities, including social learning, imitation, gaze following, and Theory of Mind (ToM). Social cognition involves a set of interacting but separable mechanisms, and the language has led to an extensive dissection of social cognition and a correspondingly daunting profusion of terms. The most important way in which social cognitive linguistics differs from other approaches, is that language is assumed to reflect certain primary sources and design features of the human mind.

Keywords: Semantics, Social Cognition, Signaler, Syntax, Theory of Mind.

INTRODUCTION

Any account of human social cognition cannot get away from language. Language is the most specific hallmark of what it means to be human. The search for where and how language evolved and the functional mechanisms at the basis of the language capacity become toolkits to explore human nature. In spite of a very long history of studies and speculations, the intimate nature of language and the evolutionary process producing it still remain somewhat elusive. One reason for such elusiveness stems from the complexity and multi-dimensional nature of language. What do people refer to while investigating the language faculty and its evolution? Is language the outcome of a dedicated system, or does it include more general cognitive abilities?

1. Language – A Complex Construct

Human language and social cognition are closely linked: advanced social cognition is necessary for children to

acquire language, and language allows forms of social understanding, more broadly, culture that would otherwise be impossible. Both language and social cognition are complex constructs, involving many independent cognitive mechanisms, and the relative approach provides a powerful route to understanding the evolution of mechanisms. Human language for most of its history has been just spoken language. It may suggest that language probably evolved in order to provide individuals with a more powerful and flexible social cognitive tool to share, communicate and exchange knowledge (Tomasello et al., 2005). According to this perspective, the social dimension of language becomes crucial for its understanding.

2. Concept of Social Cognition

Social Cognition (SC) refers to the manner in which one interprets, analyzes, remembers, and uses information about the social world. It is thinking about others and the

social world (Mathew & Raja, 2015a). Social cognition is the encoding, storage, retrieval, and processing of information about conspecifics (members of the same species). SC encompasses a number of distinctive capacities, including social learning, imitation, gaze following, and Theory of Mind (ToM). Such mechanisms form core elements of animal social behaviour and human imitative culture. Cognition is therefore not detached thought, but adaptively successful interaction with other agents and with the world (Smith & Semin, 2004). If then the inevitable question that such a position presents is how does cognition 'happen'?

For cognition to 'happen' it has to be 'coupled' with an external entity in a two-way interaction (Clark & Chalmers, 1997). Among humans this process of 'coupling' takes place chiefly (Semin, 2007) by language. This coupling with external reality is achieved by using language as a 'tool', which extends cognition by enabling adaptive social interaction (Semin, 2000a). In this view, language does not constitute a mirror of one's inner states but is a complement to them. It serves as a 'tool' whose role is to extend cognition in ways that on-board devices cannot.

Language can be defined as a bi-directional system that permits the expression of arbitrary thoughts as signals and the reverse interpretation of those signals as thoughts. Yet language itself is unique to human species, many of the mechanisms underlying it are shared with other species (Fitch, 2010). It is a system of communication consisting of sounds, words, and grammar, or the system of communication used by people in a particular country or type of work. Language permeates human blend of behaviour whether it comes in the form of talking, listening, writing, or reading. It is with words that people capture diverse forms of reality and navigates social interaction. These forms of information are compressed more into manageable packages by using different linguistic devices that facilitate some economy and order upon a complex reality. People pass on the experiences by means of words. Linguistic behaviour thus permeates one's wake existence.

It is therefore not surprising that the most influential framework in social cognition and language came from a

fire prevention engineer, who pursued linguistics as an avocation (Whorf, 1956) and whose hypotheses about the language and social cognition have been an inspirational source. Language is seen as a powerful device that enables humans to reshape a variety of difficult but important tasks into formats better suited to the basic computational capacities of the human brain for both the producer and receiver of a communicative act.

3. Rear-ender of Social Cognition on Human Language

Social cognition is closely associated to the evolution of language and sophisticated mind-reading abilities are necessary to assume word meanings and to communicate pragmatically (Clark, 1987). Language provides a powerful new tool for social cognition, one that is at the center of human culture. Human capacity to share thoughts socially allows individual cultures to accumulate knowledge in a way that would be impossible without language and underpins the progressive accumulation of complexity seen in most aspects of culture, from science and technology to myth and religion. SC and language together, probably formed an evolutionary cycle where in advances in one could feed advances in the other, and it is unclear what human cognition would be like without the powerful cultural augmentation that language provides.

4. Historical Milieu

Human language has the properties of productivity, recursivity, and displacement, and relies entirely on social convention and learning. Its complex structure affords a much wider range of expressions than any known system of animal communication. Language is thought to have originated when early hominins started gradually changing their primate communication systems, acquiring the ability to form a theory of other minds and a shared intentionality (Anderson, 2012). Language is such a unique human trait that it cannot be compared to anything found among non-humans and that it must therefore have appeared suddenly in the transition from pre-hominids to early man (Chomsky, 2000). The generative view of language is mostly seen as an innate faculty that is genetically encoded, whereas functionalist theories see it as a system that is largely cultural, learned through social interaction (Ulbaek, 1998).

A growing body of evidence shows how children's play contributes explicitly to their language development. Children possess reading and writing abilities from infancy along with their oral language development. By the time children come to school, they already possess a well-developed spoken language in their native language (Christie & Vukelich, 2003). Children learn to read and write in meaningful, functional social settings that involve both social and cognitive abilities (Morrow, 2001). Elementary children become proficient readers when they view reading as an enjoyable way of learning and an important means of communication. Proficient readers demonstrate some of the same characteristics of good players; they are strategic, engaged, fluent, and independent (Bromley, 1998). Children at play can reveal the following literacy understandings:

4.1 Interest in Stories, Knowledge of Story Elements, and Story Comprehension

Children's first attempts at reading and writing often occur during dramatic play as they read environmental print, make shopping lists, or play school. Most beginning readers rely on their oral language to gain meaning from books as they internalize the structure and meaning of language. More proficient readers have a more complex and developed concept of the inter-relatedness of story elements. Dramatic play develops improved story comprehension and an increased understanding of story elements (Christie et al., 2003).

4.2 Understanding Fantasy in Books

In dramatic play, children enter the play world "as if" they were another character or thing. The ability to transform oneself in play enables children to enter the world often created in books featuring talking animals (Whiten & Ham, 1952) or to write stories in which they create hypothetical characters. Elementary children's ability to play with reality is necessary to understand science fiction as well as other types of fantasy books.

4.3 Use of Symbols to Represent their World

As children reinvent or construct their own versions of stories, they naturally come to understand their world and make it their own by representing their understandings symbolically. Younger children's language, role enactment, or uses of

props provide evidence of children's competence in representing what they know (Johnson, Christie & Owocki, 1999). Similarly, older children's story retellings, writing, word play, and the internet provide evidence of their competence in representing the literacy behaviours they know. It is important for classroom teachers to understand the many ways children play, games, and inventions contribute to their language and literacy development.

4.4 Use of Knowledge from Known to Unknown

The development of children's thinking, sophisticated classification skills and the ability to use what they already know to construct new knowledge has its relationship to their play. In this case, children are building on what they already know and extending it through playful interactions. The cognitive skills children use in pretend play are essential for their success in school (Smilansky & Shefatya, 1990). All subjects and problems include cognitive skills that children use to pretend and which they have limited experience.

5. Development of Theory of Mind

Social cognition is at the heart of children's ability to get along with other people and to see things from their point of view. The basis of this crucial ability lies in the development of theory of mind. ToM refers to understanding of people as mental beings, each with his or her own mental states - such as thoughts, wants, motives and feelings. People use theory of mind to explain one's own behaviour to others, by telling them what one thinks and want, and interpret other people's talk and behaviour by considering their thoughts and wants.

5.1 Mechanism Involved in Language

Although language appears as a seamless whole, with phonology, syntax, semantics, and pragmatic processes working together, many dissociable mechanisms underlie linguistic competence. These mechanisms together make up the faculty of language in a broad sense, and most of them exist in some form in other animals. These mechanisms can be classified by the way they involve signaling (perceptual and motor systems underlying speech and sign), semantics (central cognitive mechanisms supporting concept formation, expression, and interpretation), or syntax (structure-generating mechanisms that map between signals and concepts).

Both signals and semantics have a strong social component. Social signals can be processed automatically by the receiver and may be unconsciously emitted by the sender. These signals are non-verbal and are responsible for social learning. Social signals can also be processed consciously and this allows automatic processing to be modulated and over-ruled (Mathew & Raja, 2015b). Signals used in linguistic communication, whether spoken, signed, or written, must be learned and shared among the members of a linguistic community, and this shared lexicon requires sophisticated imitation of complex signals. Semantic interpretation requires an ability to infer the intentions of a signaler based on rather indirect cues (such as gaze direction). ToM is jointly dependent upon language and social experience, and is produced by a conjunction of language acquisition with children's growing social understanding. It is acquired through conversation and interaction with others. Adequate language and ample social skills are jointly sufficient, and individually necessary for producing ToM. Thus it supports a social developmental theory of the genesis of human cognition.

Human language rests upon a rich pragmatic basis (Grice, 1975), including a strong motivation to share novel information with others. But it requires a signaler to know what the intended recipient does and does not know. Non-human primates generally fail to take receiver's knowledge into account when signaling (Rendall et al., 2000), to the extent that it is present at all, is not employed pragmatically in communication. Therefore social mechanisms needed for language acquisition include a capacity for imitation for the signaling component, and mind-reading and theory of mind for the semantic and pragmatic components.

5.2 Mechanism Involved in Social Cognition

From the very first days of the child's development his/her activities acquire a meaning of his/her own in a system of social behaviour and, being directed towards a definite purpose, are refracted through the prism of the child's environment. The path from object to child and from child to object passes through another person. This complex human structure is the product of a developmental

process deeply rooted in the links between individual and social history.

Social cognition involves a set of interacting but separable mechanisms, and the literature has led to an extensive dissection of social cognition and a correspondingly daunting profusion of terms. There are two sets of mechanisms: the use of gaze direction to infer another's focus of attention, and of ToM, in which one organism represents what another one does or doesn't know.

6. Social Cognitive Linguists

The framework of cognitive linguistics interprets language in terms of the concepts that are sometimes universal and sometimes specific to a particular language which underlie its forms. Cognitive linguistics is primarily concerned with how the mind creates meaning through language. For every individual, the social context in which he or she is embedded provides the symbols of his or her representation and linguistic expression. The human society sets the environment where the newborn will be socialized and develop his or her cognition. Language acquisition is a paradigm of an emergent behaviour. From a large systemic perspective, cognition is considered closely related to the social and human organization functioning and constrains.

Social cognitive linguists, study language for its own sake; they attempt to describe and account for its systematicity, its structure and the functions it serves and how these functions are realized by the language system. However language stems from the assumption that language reflects patterns of thought. Therefore, to study language from this perspective is to study patterns of conceptualization. Language offers a window into cognitive function, providing insights into the nature, structure and organization of thoughts and ideas. The most important way in which social cognitive linguistics differs from other approaches to the study of language, is that language is assumed to reflect certain fundamental properties and design features of the human mind. In almost all the situations in which, language allows quick and effective expression, and provides a well developed means of encoding and transmitting complex and subtle ideas. In fact, these notions of encoding and transmitting turn out to be important, as they relate to two key functions

associated with language, the symbolic function and the interactive function.

6.1 Symbolic Function

One crucial function of language is to express thoughts and ideas. That is, language encodes and externalises thoughts. The way language does this is by using symbols. Symbols are bits of language. These might be meaningful subparts of words like, (dis- as in distaste), whole words (dog, jump, tomorrow), or strings of words. These symbols consist of forms, which may be spoken, written or signed, and meanings with which the forms are conventionally paired. In fact, a symbol is better referred to as a symbolic assembly, as it consists of two parts that are conventionally associated (Langacker, 1987).

6.2 Interactive Function

In everyday social encounters, language serves as an interactive function. It is not sufficient that language merely pairs forms and meanings. These must be recognized by, and be accessible to, others in the community. After all, the utilization of language is in order to 'get ideas across', in other words 'to communicate'. This involves a process of transmission by the speaker, and decoding and interpretation by the hearer, processes that involve the construction of rich conceptualizations.

7. Educational Implications

Language and social cognition are partners in child development. People use language to learn new ideas, to talk about thoughts and fears, and interact with those around. Language skills and social cognitive skills are related to each other. Stronger language skills mean stronger social cognitive skills. Schools foster cognitive development. Teachers don't just teach a list of facts; they teach children how to think. The interactions and talk that happens in a classroom are the raw material for a child's brain. Social cognitive development is an important aspect of overall child development. Children are born ready and willing to develop social cognitive skills. They are constantly learning new ideas, how things work, and how to solve problems. They are trying to figure out how the world works. Children are not passive learners - they actively seek out information. Teachers in the classroom should enhance creative thinking among the students. Schools must foster

cognitive development. Proficiency in oral language is essential for all children's success in school. Play helps children internalize the many rule systems associated with the language they are speaking. It also helps them generate multiple ways of expressing their thinking. For younger children, verbal give-and-take during socio-dramatic play needs to be highly developed because children plan, manage, problem-solve, and maintain the play by verbal explanations, discussions, or commands (Smilansky & Shefatya, 1990). For older children, the ability to use a reflective and analytical approach to language is related to their level of linguistic awareness and achievements. Therefore teachers and parents should provide suitable platform for children to explore their language ability. Games and plays must be given prime importance in school curriculum.

Theory of mind is at the base of children's social understanding. The implicit theory of mind seen in infants becomes more explicit during the preschool years and provides an important foundation for school entry. It is more like language than literacy, in so far as it is a system with biological roots that develops without specific teaching. Nonetheless, environmental factors do influence its development. It can be enhanced by opportunities: to engage in rich pretend play, to talk about people's thoughts, wants, and feelings, and the reasons why they act the way they do, to hear and talk about stories, especially those involving surprises, secrets, tricks, and mistakes, that invite children to see things from different points of view. Parents and caregivers can be made aware of signs, such as lack of pretend play or lack of shared attention and interest, that might indicate theory of mind in children at elementary stage.

Conclusion

Language rests upon a rich pragmatic basis including a strong motivation to share novel information with others. Social mechanisms needed for language acquisition include a capacity for imitation for the signaling component, and mind-reading and theory of mind for the semantic and pragmatic components. Syntax structure generates mechanism that map between signals and concepts. Both signals and semantics have a strong social

component. Its complex structure affords a much wider range of expressions than any known system of communication. But the drive to share novel information requires a signaler to know what the intended recipient does and does not know.

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