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THE NATURE OF LANGUAGE: RESPONSE TO FRANK THOMAS SAUTTER

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Abstract: Frank Sautter's questions are directed at the precise senses of the words 'invention' and 'creation' used in my remarks on the origin of language, and at the connection between Jørgensen's and my views on the development of language. In my response I clarify my use of the words 'invention' and 'creation' vis-à-vis Frank's suggested interpretations, and examine Jørgensen's distinction of stages in the development of language in relation to imperatives and the "directive use of language".

Keywords: Language. Creation. Jørgensen. Imperatives.

A NATUREZA DA LINGUAGEM: RÉPLICA À FRANK THOMAS SAUTTER

Resumo: As perguntas de Frank Sautter estão direcionadas ao sentido mais preciso das palavras 'invenção' e 'criação' utilizadas em minhas observações sobre a origem da linguagem, e à relação de meu ponto de vista sobre o desenvolvimento da linguagem ao de Jørgensen. Em minha réplica esclareço meu uso das palavras 'invenção' e 'criação' comparativamente às diversas interpretações sugeridas por Frank, e examino a distinção de estágios no desenvolvimento da linguagem proposta por Jørgensen em relação aos imperativos e ao "uso direcionado da linguagem".

Palavras chave: Linguagem. Criação. Jørgensen. Imperativos.

Frank's questions are directed at the precise senses of the words 'invention' and 'creation' used in my remarks on the origin of language, and at the connection between Jørgensen's and my views on the development of language. I start with the former.

1. QUESTIONS ON THE ORIGIN OF LANGUAGE

I agree with Frank that when I said we did not "invent" language, and referred to Chomsky's remark that we did not "make up" our language, there are some ambiguities about the use of such terms as 'invent', 'make up', 'create', etc. The view I expressed was that language is a product of evolution, rather than something some human or group of humans made up, and I contrasted this with writing, which I did claim to be a human invention—although adding the qualification that writing "was a long time hatching", and that it also "developed through less structured forms of symbolism." I was contrasting the development of writing as a socio-cultural phenomenon, with a fairly definite origin about 6,000 years ago, with the development of language as a biological phenomenon, which cannot be placed in a specific time frame.

Frank discusses Gödel's views on creation, as well as distinctions of different senses of creation by Tolkien and Kenny, and presents a comparative table that includes my use of the terms 'invention' and 'creation' alongside theirs. I do not feel completely comfortable with the comparisons. I certainly agree that language was not created *ex nihilo*, and in this sense to place my use of 'invention' in the first row is quite appropriate, but my point was the much stronger one that language was not created at all. This is how I interpret Chomsky's claim that language was not "made" by us, and his comparison of human language with the human visual system. But, of course, whereas there is plenty of evidence as to the

evolution of the visual system, the evidence for the evolution of language is rather scant.¹

When I agreed with Di Pietro's claim that "English and other natural languages are partly human creations", I was using 'creation' in a weak sense, which is even weaker than the second sense in Frank's table. Obviously, nobody "constructed" modern English; but, again, it evolved over a relatively short period of time through a socio-cultural process of change.

My brief remarks at the beginning of Chapter 13 were not meant to provide an analysis of any of these rather complex issues, which continue to be discussed and developed in very interesting ways.² In fact, even the question of the origin of phonetic writing is quite a bit more controversial than is suggested by my remarks. Gaur (1992, p. 130) raises some issues closely related to those raised by Frank:

The question has often been asked: is writing—and in this context writing is usually equated with phonetic writing—the outcome of an evolutionary process, with scripts evolving independently from each other in various places and periods whenever socio-economic conditions created similar needs? Or, is writing the result of a series of (mostly secondary) inventions, each one made by a particular individual in one particular place, all of them going back to one single *Ur* - invention? Those who believe in the monogenesis of writing usually credit the Sumerians with making the first—and only—decisive step from pictography to phonetic writing.

With respect to Frank's second question, if I understand it correctly, I would say that the hierarchy contains all kind of properties, not just logical and mathematical properties. The property of being an English verb, for instance, is a linguistic property that appears at some appropriate level. If words are

¹ Davidson (2003) gives a brief survey.

² A very readable recent survey is Kenneally (2007).

construed as types conceptualized as properties of some level—let us say they are first-order properties—then the property of being an English verb would be a second-order property. But, of course, we can also have properties of utterances, as are the properties of being a question, or an order, or a description, etc., which are first-order properties of physical events.

Linguistic universals, if there are any, are properties of languages, and their status would depend on our conceptualization of languages as concrete phenomena or as abstract structures. If there is a language faculty, as Chomsky maintains, linguistic universals may be properties of the language faculty.

2. DEVELOPMENT AND FUNCTIONS OF LANGUAGE

The question of the continuity or discontinuity of cognitive capacities relating to language and communication between animals and humans is one of the hotly debated issues among linguists, cognitive scientists, biologists, neuroscientists, and others. Everybody agrees, of course, that only humans have a well-developed language, but the question remains as to whether non-human animals have a capacity for language, and whether various forms of animal communication can be considered steps toward a development of language. Much of the discussion has centered on a number of experiments with chimpanzees, bonobos, and other animal species. The hard line, represented by Chomsky and some of his followers holds that even if one grants a certain amount of communicative ability to those animals, this ability does not constitute learning (or having) language. If we agree that the communicative abilities of these animals are on a par with the communicative abilities of two-year old children, then, by the same token, the communicative abilities of two-year olds do not amount to having language. The difference is that whereas children have the

cognitive structure that will allow them to develop a full-fledged language with unbounded recursive and generative characteristics, non-human animals do not.

I was not aware of Jørgensen's ideas about language until I read Frank's paper and the short paper by Jørgensen on which he bases his considerations. The distinction between the "ape stage" and the "human stage" Jørgensen characterizes in terms of the "directive use of language", may not be as clear as he thinks. Several authors are now emphasizing the comprehension of language, and intentional communication, as expressing states of mind and descriptions of objects.³

Tomasello 2008 has a very interesting section titled "On pointing and other imperatives" where he describes directive communication between animals and humans. I quote some passages from pp. 34-35 (leaving out the references):

Chimpanzees and other apes growing up in human captivity learn to indicate for their human caretakers things they want but cannot obtain on their own. The most basic such behavior ... is chimpanzees pointing to out of reach food so that a human will retrieve it for them. ...

This "pointing" is used relatively flexibly. For example, if several different types of food are available, apes will point to the most desirable one, and they will continue pointing to that one persistently even if given a less desirable food ... Also, when human-raised apes observe a human hiding food in an open area outside their cage, many hours later they will still point, for a naïve human, to the location where the food is hidden ... And when apes observe that a human needs a tool to retrieve food for them, and that tool is then hidden when the human is away, when the human returns they will point to the location of the hidden tool ...

³ Two accounts that emphasize the gestural origins of language are Burling (2005) and Tomasello (2008).

On the next page, Tomasello describes an even more interesting aspect of imperative behavior in apes, strikingly similar to my description on p. 22 of Victor's imperative behavior when he was about two years old. Says Tomasello:

Also important is the fact that apes raised in rich human contexts, similar to the way human children are raised, have been observed to request things imperatively in other ways as well. For example, some human-raised apes point to a locked door when they want access behind it, so that the human will open it for them—or in some cases they lead the human to the door or a high shelf by pulling his hand, stopping and waiting in front of it expectantly ... Another common observation ... is that they will bring a recalcitrant object (e.g., a locked box) to humans for help, and they will grab a human's hand and put it in or on his pocket, and wait for a good result.

It is clear from these descriptions that the two factors Jørgensen distinguishes in imperative behavior—to command and to inform—are part of the imperative behavior of apes. A big difference with humans, however, is that whereas children do engage in separate indicative behavior, apes do not (Tomasello 2008, pp. 37-38):

... it is critically important to note that no apes in any kind of environment produce, either for other apes or for humans, acts of pointing that serve functions other than the imperative function. That is, they do not point declaratively to simply share interest and attention in something with another individual ... as human infants do from very early in ontogeny.

The question Frank raises at the end is whether it is possible to have a logic of imperatives, and whether it would depend on the logic of indicatives. I do not know whether something like “a logic of imperatives” is possible; although, as I suggest on p. 22, I think it is unlikely it would be based on the logic of indicatives.

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