

EVOLVING WITH LANGUAGE

Review of
The Language Animal: The Full Shape of the Human Linguistic Capacity,
Charles Taylor
(Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 2015)

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In his recently published *The Language Animal: The Full Shape of the Human Linguistic Capacity*, Charles Taylor sets forth his own philosophy of language, adding to the gigantic tradition in Western Philosophy discussing this seemingly essential human capacity. The arguments set forth are not new however, as Taylor has been expounding them and the more general philosophical views subtending them, for several decades. He mentions how he began work on the book as early as 1986. Taylor is an anti-reductionist when it comes to human language, and he is adamant in his defence of the humanities in particular, and of what we shall see is “human meanings” in general (including literature and art). The reader might at first glance consider the title of the book to be almost arrogant in its assumption, as it purports to lay forth not just some tentative shapes of human linguistic capacity (which would be impressive in its own right if done thoroughly enough), but the *full* shape of the human linguistic capacity! We shall see however, that in being wide in scope and ambition, the book might well end up enriching and inspiring the reader, and her conception of what it means to be a language-using animal.

It is through the critique of René Descartes’ conception of language and thought that philosophers like Hobbes and Locke initiate the view on how language evolves that Taylor labels the Hobbes-Locke-Condillac view, HLC for short. For Taylor, the HLC view represents a *descriptive* theory of language, according to which the main purpose and function of language is to describe objects and events in the world; inform other minds of these objects and events; and invent new ways of referring. Furthermore, in

the rational projects of thinkers such as Hobbes and Locke - and later in those of Frege, Russell and the logical positivists - the goal of philosophy is to analyze the descriptive theory of language to such an extent as to get rid of muddle-headed thinking and aesthetic, yet confusing, metaphors and poetry that predominately serve to make complex thinking, especially in the sciences, difficult if not impossible. Therefore, philosophy should strive to be as clear and precise as possible in its definitions, and ideally reduce natural language to a rule based and hierarchical formal logic, a logic that in turn serves as a sure foundation for scientific investigation. Although admirable and at times indispensable in its methodological work, the descriptive view of language falls short of describing the fundamental and irreducible, perhaps essential parts of the human linguistic capacity, according to Taylor. The view of language that Taylor endorses is what he calls the Hamann-Herder-Humboldt view, HHH for short. This view emerged from academic German philosophizing in the 1790s, and arose along with the German idealist tradition.

We then have two views of language, stemming from, and drawing upon, different yet related intellectual streams of thought. Taylor claims that the HHH view predominately stems from Herder, who suggested that language was inherently holistic in nature, and that attempts at reducing it would obscure this fundamental aspect. Taylor accounts for Herder’s critique of Condillac, who imagines a scenario in which language emerges between two people collaborating in a desert. The leap from animal expressive sounds to proper words and then mature language is indeed astonishing, but not unnatural. According to Herder, this

leap is longer and more audacious than Condillac believes. Although one of the missions of the book is to reject the HLC-view, Taylor is thorough in explaining what it amounts to before criticizing it. In other words, he upholds the principle of “charitable interpretation” when it comes to his opposition. It must be said however, that one does notice his antipathy towards the HLC-view certain places in the book.

Taylor uses this Herderian critique as a springboard for discussing linguistic “rightness” in its many aspects. When you describe a triangle, for instance, you are not simply responding to a shape by producing a sound that corresponds with it, you are already, in the act of describing, in the linguistic or semantic dimension, operating at a different level than mere behaviouristic responses. Describing something, be it a situation, object, or person, involves what Taylor, drawing on Herder, terms “reflection”, which is a form of focused and clear description, in which you can be right or not right. With conditioned responses and non-conscious operations, there can be no right or wrong, the process and the ongoing activity are all that exist. Thus “[r]ightness for an animal is task rightness, whereas in the case of human language it involves something more, expressive rightness, or else descriptive rightness”. This phenomenon, the intrinsic rightness of description, makes human language immune to biological classification. This is why, among other things, Condillac is wrong in supposing language to arise out of primordial animal cries, and how Taylor gets to introduce us to the human realm of “metabiological” meaning, both set up and maintained by language.

But how do we arrive at the linguistic realm in the first place? If we are not simply responding to the environment through our behaviour in an operant-conditioned way, then how does this seemingly miraculous dimension of human meaning, expressed and maintained through language, come about? One of the strengths of the book, and in my opinion one of the strengths of Taylor’s work in general, is his interdisciplinary approach to the topics he discusses. Both anthropology, social and developmental psychology, history of ideas and linguistic studies are drawn upon not just as auxiliary, but as complementary necessities for understanding the shape and scope of human lingual prowess and its diverse manifestations. In explaining the growth of language, Taylor is concerned with how we are brought up on a steady diet of *shared meaning* from infancy on. When discussing the ontogeny of language, he brings the readers attention to the fact that our first words arise out of our shared, meaningful experiences

with others, originally with our closest caretakers or guardians (parents), later with the extended family, friends, and eventually with co-workers, employers and the society as a whole. As is now common knowledge in psycholinguistics, humans need to be exposed to a language, that is, *reared* in it, in order to learn it. We are not born with a language, but we are born with the astounding ability to *acquire* the language belonging to the society in which we are raised. There are then concentric circles of meaning, beginning with the nuclear family, expanding outwards, ending up in the cosmic circle in which complex questions of human purpose, principles and meaning are ready to be contemplated. Of course, the innermost circle of intimate family and caretakers and the meanings of Being and astrophysics are often idiosyncratic, and the questions that are asked vary from society to society, but the ontogeny of language seems everywhere to follow the same pattern.

By articulating the background that sets up our questions concerning language and thought, we can criticize modern theories of language and their underlying assumptions without being trapped in these theories ourselves. For Taylor it has been important to move away from a certain modern Cartesian epistemology (other places called *representational* or *mediational*), an epistemology in which we begin with a rudimentary understanding of the self through introspection (this introspection also being rather basic at first) from which we get an understanding of others, through succeeding and increasingly complex steps. By attaching words to inner mental concepts that are clearly presented to the mind, we build from the inside out, and come eventually to make the concepts in our language correspond with other minds and their concepts, and intersubjectivity proper is established. Words and language are on this view reified, i.e. they stand as linguistic objects for the things in the external world. By combining these linguistic objects in complex ways, we get human language. This is the *descriptive* view of language criticized in the book. In other works, Taylor has called the epistemology underlying the descriptive view of language for the “inner/outer” picture of epistemology, and according to him this picture has been so influential that even philosophers purporting to go against it, such as Quine, are trapped within its framework. Even Locke, a staunch criticizer of Descartes’ “innate ideas” went with the approach of going from the inside out, instead of the other way around. We must remember that for Locke, despite his “tabula rasa”, the blank slate of the mind on which ideas are imprinted, it is the mechanism of an inherent principle, the *intellect*, that organizes the ideas into a



coherent whole. For Taylor, an *inversion* of the Cartesian priority is in order, where “[w]e could see self-awareness as emerging out of a prior intersubjective take on things” (65). It is important to note that the rational method of Descartes, Hobbes and Locke (and in later aspiring figures such as Russell and Co.) admittedly is a big part of our human lives, such as in the court room where we aim to avoid rash thinking, and in the laboratory where we have to have a clearly operationalized goal in mind, and when we reflect upon abstract topics. Furthermore, the Cartesian scepticism and its philosophical offspring (methodological doubt, various scepticisms, critical inquiries) are indispensable in much of modern philosophy, especially in logic and epistemology. This, Taylor recognizes; the problem is that philosophers have a tendency to *ontologize*

these good methods, and understand the mind in terms of them. Just because the mind sometimes works in a foundationalist way—building conclusions from premises, and links in an already existing argumentative chain in order to get coherence and consistency etc.—does not necessarily mean that the mind *always* works that way. Taking the mind to be a Cartesian theatre with an ongoing show of representations that can succeed or fail to be isomorphic with the outside world, then it is obvious that language will evolve from the inside out, when the child gets more and more apt at naming objects, and making concepts correspond with words. But when one looks more carefully at the phenomenon of language acquisition, it becomes clear that it does not develop monologically, through the inside out, but rather from the outside in, by way of conversation

with other humans.

The philosophy of language that Taylor sets forth in his book is thus part of a larger project of his, a project of re-establishing a robust realism inspired by phenomenology and hermeneutics, and the history of ideas, in which all facets of the human condition are understood on their own terms. Being a philosopher who draws on so many themes, subjects and rich traditions, it might be difficult to keep it all in mind as Taylor marches forth with his discussion. So, as with many other texts, it pays to have some background knowledge (in, for instance, philosophy, psychology or anthropology) when reading the book. One sees quite easily, however, the overarching aims of re-establishing the human meanings.

Take for instance the importance of joint social attention briefly mentioned above. Taylor spends some time discussing the importance of this in the ontogeny of language, where our first words are uttered in a context of shared meaning, experienced as meaningful by the young child. The child experiences the sound coming out of her parents' mouths as meaningful, without yet grasping the meaning. The child actively seeks out *the* language in the world, and wants to be incorporated into the linguistic world. What Vygotsky called "the zone of proximal development", where we try to "get at" a recently acquired word, by having the sense that we could get a better grasp of it, that it has yet to be better understood (for instance "quark", which one can come to realize is actually highly complex and technical) is something that not only is unique to children, but that is with us through our entire adult life. Although we as adults play many language games (to use Wittgenstein's phrase), and are coping skilfully and flexibly with language (to draw on Dreyfus), there is still a sense in which our vocabulary could be improved. I could learn a lot more about the nature of quarks, for instance, in order to move from my present, incomplete understanding to the more accurate understanding of a physicist. So we find ourselves in a linguistically constituted world, enriched by our constantly evolving language, both inherited, sustained and created. Our sense of history, personal and universal, a sense that draws on our understanding of ourselves in relation to science and the cosmos, is made possible through, and depends on, language. With language we can discuss past events, talk about distant objects and cultures, and plan for the future. Language *situates* us at the same time as it broadens our horizons and opens up possibilities. Furthermore, in our psychological lives, language, through the story we tell ourselves about ourselves, helps us to constitute ourselves.

Taylor mentions work in developmental psychology done by Alison Gopnik, which shows how small children lack "autobiographical memory". Children plan for the future, yes, but they do not experience their memories as belonging to their former selves, nor do they project *their* intentions into the future as adults do. This autobiographical ability emerges with the help of narration. We all get to have our individual "takes" on the world.

Narration continues to play a major part in our adult lives. "I have always enjoyed going to the cinema, I remember when I was five years old, watching old westerns. Perhaps that is why I appreciate visual art so much". Narratives help us make sense of things, both on a cosmic and a social level. They help us maintain purpose and meaning in our lives, especially when we have to add extraordinary occurrences and events to our storyline. Traumatic events has a tendency to shake us to our very core as human beings, as accidents and catastrophes do not readily fit in with our everyday, smooth way of being in the world. By presenting a narrative of how horrible (or fantastic) events fit in with our larger story as human beings, it is easier to cope with these life-transforming events. "This is a test from God", "From the ashes, a new order shall arise", "Our love can overcome any obstacle, "This happened for a reason", etc.

Through ritualistic and repetitive activity where the parents guide the attention of the child, the correct meaning emerges. This is how we can have "ritualistic rightness", where we not only have the linguistic rightness mentioned above, but also a rightness that consists in maintaining and *creating* shared meaning. "Ritualistic rightness" is just one of the many examples of terms Taylor uses, some of them are inventions of his, while others, such as "affordances", are borrowed. Taylor introduces the words in an attempt to accurately describe the phenomenon of language acquisition he feels is left impoverished by the HLC account. When introducing new terms, it can often be tempting to overuse them, but this is not the impression one gets from Taylor's usage, as the words and expressions he introduces to the reader quickly gets absorbed in the larger story he is telling. Let's take a closer look at ritualistic rightness. When the child says "Doggie gone" it is not just a declarative concerning the absence of the canine that the child wants to express, but also a want of communion around this very fact. Once pointed out, one can see this ritualistic rightness pervade human life: When I find myself in a steaming hot bus mid summer, in the rarely-this-hot capital of Norway, and say out loud "Whew, it's hot!" wiping my forehead expressively, I am not simply declaring a

fact obviously known to all in the bus (that it is hot), I also want to ritualistically bond with the others over the fact that it is a hot summer day, and that we all share this experience. The *content* of the declarative statement “It’s hot” is secondary, the *activity* of expressing it in the bus for all to hear, is primary, because of the underlying *bonding* that occurs when we become aware of other people being aware. The rightness in ritualistic rightness thus consists in successful communication and sharing, and not in satisfaction of truth-conditions concerning absence of dogs or hot summer days. So, for Taylor, the fact that we as humans are able to comment upon and articulate our sense of shared meanings is a phenomenon that is supported by the HHH-view, and that is unaccountable on the descriptive HLC-view of language mentioned above.

This ritualistic aspect of language is closely related to its constitutive side, which I will now discuss. If a transgression on my part has soured our relationship and I say “I’m sorry” with a soulful look in my eyes, then a bridge between us is repaired, and this is no mere speech act in the classical sense. “I’m sorry” regestalts and reinforces our relationship. I am not merely describing my feeling of being sorry, but also reaching out to fix something broken, and hence, with my words, uphold what Taylor calls our *footing*. A footing is a human relationship maintained by language. Footings are upheld and developed through our mode of speaking: the way you address the President is different from the way you converse with your mother. The “I’m sorry” discloses and *constitutes* what it is meant to describe. This fact hides itself from us language users because it is so effective. This is much like the key-metaphor, which becomes absorbed into our background knowledge of the world to such a degree as to be forgotten as a metaphor. One rarely thinks of physical iron keys when one says, for instance, “the key to his success is his persuasive ability”.

By showing how language sets up and maintains meaning, the book gets its constructive thrust. Taylor pays homage to the philosophers of language who helped us—in a late-Wittgensteinian way—to get back to the everyday human world of shared meaning by investigating speech acts and performative utterances, such as Austin, Grice and Searle. But Taylor himself goes further than this, and is interested not just in the performative, act based aspect of language, but also in its *constitutive* side, of which the aforementioned ritualistic rightness is but one part. I will now explain what this constitutive side amounts to for

Taylor.

Taylor wants to explain what it means for human language to *constitute* and not just express meaning. One of the ways through which it does this is via its *accessive* side. According to Taylor, I can for instance, get access to the avian realm by learning new facts about the strange bird I saw in my garden the other day. By finding out that the bird I saw was indeed a common blackbird, I can incidentally come to know how it is a species of *thrush*, how its Latin name is *turdus merula*, and that the bird is also known as Eurasian blackbird. In other words, by learning all these facts, language opens up a whole new realm for me that was previously indeterminate. This realm opens up the concentric circles of knowledge, allowing me to see the connections between subjects like evolutionary biology and aerodynamics. Now, this aspect was anticipated and tackled by the HLC-view, but Taylor takes it further by showing us how language suspends us in webs of significance where biology and aerodynamics are not foreign to each other, but complementary in our knowledge of the world. In other words, our linguistic, factual knowledge is not simply foundationalist (although this aspect of our knowledge is also important), where facts build upon other facts in a hierarchy of knowledge with, but an expanding net, where the masks are connected in a complementary fashion. This fits with the previously discussed ontogeny of language, in which the child is not learning words from scratch, but somehow latches onto their meaning, in a shared network of meaning, helped by the adults. As the vocabulary of the child increases, so does the ability to play with words, invent, and make the language one’s own. Only *then* does language become as Locke, Hobbes and Co. thought it originally developed in the mind.

Another way language operates is on the *existential* plane. A swaggering biker, strutting his way toward us in his thick leather jacket, has a certain way of behaving, a savvyness, that is somehow indeterminate, yet present in his behaviour. By finding a new word for it, perhaps using the Hispanic word *machismo* to evoke and articulate this new feeling, we end up calling him *macho*. We have articulated something that was previously enacted on the level of style, and as such, the word “macho” has introduced a new human meaning into our world, and transformed us in the process. It is hard to imagine that less than a hundred years ago, the word “cool” did not exist. When it comes to style and the miracle of new, genuine expression, Taylor ties the non-lingual bodily level to the linguistic by mentioning Merleau-Ponty and his *La Phénoménologie de la perception*, where it is shown how a new gesture or way

of moving can express and *thus reveal* the possibility of a new way of being. Notice that a new expression, or a novel articulation of this kind, is not merely a description, but is an opening up of new meanings and possibilities in the very act of being expressed. Taylor uses Merleau-Ponty's embodied, pre-conceptual approach to the phenomenon of style, and brings it to the level of language.

The constitutive aspect of language is intimately tied to its *figurative* side. These are the two main, often overlooked parts of language. The figurative side involves symbols, metaphors, allegories, analogues and more generally, lingual *styles*. All of these examples points to the *image using* tendencies of human language. We constantly use images, metaphors and comparisons in order to clarify topics for each other. We understand things *through* other things. Although figurative use of language maintains its importance in everyday language, it was perceived as a threat by the logical positivists, and, earlier, by Hobbes and Locke. Even the seemingly good and effective metaphors and analogues serve in the end only to confuse and distract from proper investigation, as they do not seem to provide us with new and clear information as to how the world works, or the individual objects in it. With theories of various performative utterances and their properties, the discussion has been steadily refined, especially in the last hundred years or so, but Taylor wants more. His discussion of how metaphors “die”, that is, how they recede into the background of our world and lose their original meaning is highly interesting, and serves to enrich our understanding of the role the figurative dimension of language plays in our lives. For instance, in our digital age we continually talk of “keys”. Passwords, codes or imprints are all keys, but they are quite far from the heavy metal-key that was the metaphor's originator. Metaphors and the other figurative aspects of language enliven and enrich our abilities, in our daily lives, and, according to Taylor, even when a metaphor “dies” it has often still left its mark, as in the example of keys.

A commonly held notion in linguistic theory since Ferdinand de Saussure, is that the signifier and signified, the referrer and the referent, the word and the object, have but an arbitrary connection. There is no necessary or natural link between the word “cat” and a cat. And this is all well and good when it comes to the classic HLC-view of language, where the main task of language is to name objects and events. This is consistent with Locke's idea that man can name ideas and concepts as he likes. Up to a certain point, this anti-Cratylid idea of language (in Plato's dialogue of the same name, Cratylus presents the thesis

that the sounds of words *indicate* what they are used to describe) is correct, but it misses the mark when it comes to accounting for several of the flexible and creative aspects of language. Such as how metaphors function, or how it is that you immediately understand and accept that “the room in which the meeting takes place is as dreary and barren as a desert of stone”, or, even better, how when evening falls upon us and dusk sets in, “darkness envelops us like a heavy blanket”. The unproblematic way in which these metaphors are used and implemented by people in their daily lives, speaks to the figuring dimension of language, and why it is so difficult (if not impossible) to imagine them away, given how even the language of the scientist and mathematician is pervaded with metaphorical meaning.

The Language Animal sets forth several decades of thinking on Taylor's part as he first began writing it as early as 1986. Thus few of his insights and arguments are new, but the point was not to present something new or revolutionary, but to gather the arguments in one coherent place, so as to present to new readers Taylor's view on us as language using animals. It must be stated that the philosopher does tend to repeat himself somewhat, as many of the and themes are brought up in order to hammer in the points, and this at times can make the book feel unnecessarily long. Taylor belongs to a tradition of complex, influential 20th century philosophy, and much of what he writes is indebted to the thought of, among others Ricoeur, Heidegger, Wittgenstein, and Merleau-Ponty. The authoritative certainty of the book might appear to some readers as overly assumptive. As mentioned above, it pays to have some background knowledge in linguistic theory and philosophy, or to be acquainted with some of Taylor's other works, such as *Sources of the Self* and *A Secular Age*. Since some of the discussions in the book tend to perhaps cover too large areas at a time and Taylor draws on his vast repertoire of knowledge, some readers might find it difficult to maintain a structured understanding throughout. The way Taylor divides the book into sections, both on a sub level and the book as a whole, makes it important to pay attention, as one can quickly forget what the gist of “section 5, chapter 1” was, since he tends to refer to his own sections throughout. So the book sometimes gives the impression of not being as coherent as it sets out to be. That said, upon completing the book, the guiding threads come together, and one feels that one's understanding and appreciation of language in its various aspects, has been enriched.