

7. November, 2018

Dear Sir,

Presumably you react to your own works in the same way as most other people: what belongs to the past does no longer occupy one's mind. I'm talking about your book "The Language Instinct", which I believe to have understood particularly well as I have dealt with the subject in several books myself. However, I wrote them in a typical German way, i.e. very abstractly and with few examples, while you make a difficult subject understandable even for laymen in exquisitely vivid pages.

You ask the reader: "If thoughts depended on words, how could a new word ever be coined?" And you continue giving the question a more general form: "Are our thoughts couched in some silent medium of the brain - a language of thought, or "mentalese" - and merely clothed in words whenever we need to communicate them to a listener?" Here too you provide the answer: "We end up with the following picture. People do not think in English or Chinese or Apache; they think in a language of thought" - a language which you then call "universal mentalese", while I speak of a "pure structure of meaning".

However, "mentalese" or "pure structure of meaning" is certainly not an amorphous entity, since the human brain orders sensory impressions even before it translates them into a spoken language: "So even a wordless thinker does well to chop continuously flowing experience into things, kinds of things, and actions". Precisely for this reason I speak of "substances, actions, properties, etc. as the building blocks of a "pure structure of meaning".

After defining "mentalese" as a structured entity, you necessarily arrive at the conclusion that it must be distinguished from the acoustic waves or the written characters in which it manifests itself in a material form outside the human brain. "Knowing a language, then, is knowing how to translate mentalese into strings of words and vice versa." What you call translating "mentalese into strings of words" I express in a similar way as "the formal realization of meaning".

In several passages of your book, you refer to such translations. For instance, when you point to the fact that the choice of pre- or postpositions usually depends on whether the verb precedes or follows the object. "If a language has the verb before the object, as in English, it will also have prepositions; if it has the verb after the object, as in Japanese, it will have postpositions." I believe that I succeeded in showing the formal constraints that make this law mandatory (Principles revised, p. 24).

Your book deals with the principles of language, that is to say the principles at the base of a general and generative grammar. It goes without saying that you owe a great debt to its modern founder, Noam Chomsky. I am, of course, just as much indebted to Chomsky. But in my - at that time still youthful - zeal, I was rather keen on emphasizing the peculiarity of my own contribution. Which explains why I emphasized the contrast with Chomsky.

I am sure you must have seen this contrast as well. For it is hard to contest that the pre-linguistic semantic categorization ("So even a wordless thinker does well to chop continuously flowing experience into things, kinds of things, and actions"), which I call "semantic paratax"

does not coincide with the “formal paratax” the surface level (i.e. “the formal realization of meaning”).

In English but not in Chinese, the formal category of "nouns" comprises so different members as house, walking, heat, extraordinariness etc. So "noun" turns out to be a language-specific formal category that linguists apply to different languages for the sole reason that nouns in English or any other language like Japanese *share* some common semantic classes (nouns share substances, verbs share actions, adjectives share qualities). The same qualification applies to the use of verbs and adjectives: they are language-specific paratactic formal classes and thus unfit to figure as general categories.

It is for this reason, that I am an admiring follower of Chomsky so far as his search for the universals of language is concerned, while, at the same time, I definitely reject his method. Instead of making "mentalese" (the pure structure of meaning) the basis of language and its true and only deep structure, he introduces terms that definitely do not have a universal content.

My first work on Universal Grammar called "Grammatica Nova" appeared in 1981. It was ignored in Germany as were the following "Prolegomena zur Generellen Grammatik" (1991) and "Principles of Language" (1993). What William James had said about German scholars more than one hundred years ago remains true even at present. "The forms are so professionalized that anybody who has gained a teaching chair and written a book, however distorted and excentric, has the legal right to figure forever in the history of the subject like a fly in amber. All later comers have the duty of quoting him and measuring their opinions with his opinion. Such are the rules of the professorial game - they think and write from each other and for each other and at each other exclusively."

As for myself, I had committed the unpardonable sin of not thinking nor writing for professoral colleagues, so German linguists were united in paying no attention whatsoever to my ideas. They even saw to it that an entry in Wikipedia hinting at the existence of a linguist named Gero Jenner was subsequently deleted. Officially, I do not exist as a linguist. That's what happens to outsiders who don't perform the prescribed kowtows in front of self-declared German authorities.

The effect of such rejection was that after having written "Principles" I resolutely turned my back on linguistics – which explains why I didn't even get to know "The Language Instinct". Indeed, it was through my reading of your great books "The Blank Slate" and "Enlightenment"*1* that I finally became acquainted with your linguistic work. Only during the last year did I return to dealing with linguistic problems. I rewrote "Principles of Language" as "Principles revised" found on my Website ([Principles of Language revised](http://www.gerojenner.com/wpe/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Principles_revised_2017.pdf), (http://www.gerojenner.com/wpe/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Principles_revised_2017.pdf)).

Yours sincerely


Gero Jenner

1 I owe some important insights to the second book which I quote several times in my recent work „[In Search of Meaning and Purpose in Human History](http://www.gerojenner.com/wp/?page_id=2394)” (http://www.gerojenner.com/wp/?page_id=2394)