

CARTESIAN LINGUISTICS WINS IN THREE MOVES

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[Kartik Shanker is an ecologist engaged in doctoral research at the Inidan Institute of Science. He is also interested in linguistics, to the point of just having married a linguist shortly before this went to press, thus instantiating the notion of a response or matching relation presented in move three in this papaer which is an open letter to him. He has raised an important question which this paper seeks to answer.]

Dear Kartik Shanker,

Thank you for asking me to provide a clearer picture of the idea that, the more we in linguistics get our act together, the less it will look like one of the Sciences as we visualize the today.

In homage to the chess metaphor which obsessed Ferdinand de Saussure, the founder of modern linguistics, I am imaging Cartesian linguistics as a chess player. My title suggests that this player wins in three moves. That is why this paper which is also an open letter to you is organized in three sections. Let me quickly run through the argument. Then the sections will do an action replay in slow motion.

In move one, Universal Richness of Mind, the legacy of René Descartes— whose four-hundredth birthday brings us together— takes the shape of the classical linguistics presented in the Port Royal grammar. The universality of that understanding of language embodied as clear and distinct ideas seems to suffice for a programme of linguistic study.

At move two, those manageably clear and distinct ideas give

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way to the prodigally diverse and diffuse words held together by structure. The general structure of linguistics underwrites the Particular Wealth of Nations right up to the period when the nation shifts from its erstwhile Cage role to the status of a Paging device. This move takes the Cartesian legacy through a Romantic transition to a structuralism that precedes and enables the generative renewal, by Chomsky (especially in his 1966 *Cartesian Linguistics : A Chapter in the History of Rationalist Thought*, New York : Harper & Row), of the Cartesian articulation of the programme for the study of language. Thus we get a distinct Move Two in a clear game.

Which brings me to Move Three. I read current generative research as being on the verge of yet another and bigger Cartesian renewal—on the verge of a Responsive Notionology of Languages which, for reasons of principle, will involve types of subject matter and methodology that catapult us across any boundary you might care to draw between science and nonscience. What is Cartesian about the role that poetry plays in Move Three is that this poetry is to prose what Descartes' cogitative substance was to his extended substance. You are an ecologist and will be interested to note the ways in which Move Three amounts to a greening of linguistics. Do you find ecology and Descartes improbable allies? Wait and see.

We proceed now to a fuller unpacking.

1. The Universal Move

We take it that Chomsky's reading of the Cartesian revolution and its grammatical research implications is broadly acceptable. As Chomsky reads him, "Descartes was able to convince himself that all aspects of animal behavior can be explained on the assumption that an animal is an automaton.... But he arrived at the conclusion that man has unique abilities that cannot be accounted for on purely mechanistic grounds.... The essential difference between man and animal is exhibited most clearly by human language, in particular, by man's ability to form new statements which express new thoughts and which are appropriate to new situations.... Man has a species-specific capacity, a using type of intellectual organization which cannot be attributed to peripheral organs or related to general intelligence and which manifests itself in what we may refer to as the 'creative aspect' of ordinary language use—its property of being both unbounded in scope and stimulus-free....

Arguing from the presumed impossibility of a mechanistic explanation for the creative aspect of normal use of language, Descartes concludes that in addition to body it is necessary to attribute mind— a substance whose essence is thought— to other humans. From the arguments that he offers for the association of mind to bodies that ‘bear a resemblance’ to his, it seems clear that the postulated substance plays the role of a ‘creative principle’ alongside of the ‘mechanical principle’ that accounts for bodily function. Human reason, in fact, ‘is a universal instrument which can serve for all contingencies’, whereas the organs of an animal or machine ‘have need of some special adaptation for any particular action.’ (Chomsky 1966 : 3-5).

We assume also Chomsky’s characterization of the 1960 Port-Royal *Grammaire générale et raisonnée* as the major work “in which a Cartesian approach to language is developed, for the first time, with considerable insight and subtlety” (Chomsky 1966:33). Though published anonymously, the work is standardly attributed to Claude Lancelot and Antoine Arnauld. What is Cartesian about this work? “Pursuing the fundamental distinction between body and mind, Cartesian linguistics characteristically assumes that language has two aspects. In particular, one may study a linguistic sign from the point of view of the sounds that constitute it and the characters that represent these signs or from the point of view of their “signification”, that is, ‘la manière dont les hommes s’en servent pour signifier leurs pensées’ (*Grammaire*, p.5)” (Chomsky 1966:32). “In short, language has an inner and an outer aspect. A sentence can be studied from the point of view of how it expresses a thought or from the point of view of its physical shape, that is, from the point of view of either semantic interpretation or phonetic interpretation.

Using some recent terminology, we can distinguish the “deep structure” of a sentence from its “surface structure”. The former is the underlying abstract structure that determines its semantic interpretation; the latter, the superficial organization of units which determines the phonetic interpretation.... In these terms, we can formulate a second fundamental conclusion of Cartesian linguistics, namely, that deep and surface structure need not be identical. The underlying organization of a sentence relevant to semantic interpretation is not necessarily revealed by the actual arrangement and phrasing of its given components” (Chomsky 1966:32-3).

I have quoted Chomsky’s 1966 wording extensively to forestall

the anxiety that later generative work may have undermined his early identification of his then current notice of 'deep structure' with a correlate in the Port-Royal system. Later generative research has amplified and respecified "the underlying abstract (determinant of) semantic interpretation" as a triplet of representations (D.S.L.) determining the lexo-syntactic input to semantic interpretation; there is general agreement that this triplet shrinks to S to 'S-structure' alone under certain indexation procedures; thus, today's S-structure corresponds to the 1966 deep structure for the purposes of the Cartesian argument.

With this background, we may turn to Chomsky's discovery that in the Port-Royal *Grammaire* "the deep structure underlying the proposition *Dieu invisible a créé le monde visible* consists of three abstract propositions, each expressing a single judgment, although its surface form expresses only the subject-attribute structure. Of course, this deep structure is implicit only; it is not expressed but is only represented in the mind; 'or, ces propositions incidentes sont souvent dans nostre esprit, sans estre exprimées par des paroles, comme dans l'exemple proposée (viz., *Dieu invisible a créé le monde visible*; p.68).'" (Chomsky 1966:34).

What is universal about this move? "The deep structure that expresses the meaning is common to all languages, so it is claimed, being a simple reflection of the form of thought. The transformational rules that convert deep to surface structure may differ from language to language. The surface structure resulting from these transformations does not directly express the meaning relations of the words, of course, except in the simplest cases. It is the deep structure underlying the actual utterance, a structure that is purely mental, that conveys the semantic content of the sentence" (Chomsky 1966:35). This is Chomsky paraphrasing classical articulations of Cartesian linguistics in slightly modernized terminology, not a piece of his own twentieth-century rearticulation of the Cartesian.

Is the Port-Royal version of the Universal Richness of Mind move faithful to the broader Cartesian programme, apart from Chomsky's decision to read it so? I would think so; consider the following passage from *A Discourse on Method*: "I had become aware, even so early as during my college life, that no opinion, however absurd and incredible, can be imagined, which has not been maintained by some one of the philosophers; and afterwards in the course of my travels I remarked

that all those whose opinions are decidedly repugnant to ours are not on that account barbarians and savages, but on the contrary that many of these nations make an equally good, if not a better, use of their reason than we do. I took into account also the very different character which a person brought up from infancy in France or Germany exhibits, from that which, with the same mind originally, this individual would have possessed had he lived always among the Chinese or with savages, and the circumstance that in dress itself the fashion which pleased us ten years ago, and which may again, perhaps, be received into favour before ten years have gone, appears to us at this moment extravagant and ridiculous. I was thus led to infer that the ground of our opinions is far more custom and example than any certain knowledge" (pp. 13-14 in John Veitch's translation, London : J. M. 1912). It is clear that Descartes wishes to strip the mind of the fancies it is dressed up in by the arbitrary whims of this or that particular community or consensus occupying precariously and contingently a given stretch of space-time. His programme envisages the discovery of a rich innate endowment that all minds are heir to, and his procedure starts with a certain civil disobedience directed against the non-rational tyranny of local and temporary customs posing as valid knowledge, as a direct reflection of universal reason. He expects this procedure, whose method of systematic doubt is interwoven in his work with technical proposals in what we would call mathematics or physics or physiology rather than philosophy, to lead to a clearer apprehension of just how the temporary and provincial syntheses of knowledge and opinion that make our communities tick do and not correspond to the details of a true map of universal human knowledge.

2. The Particular Move

Generative grammar today rests on Chomsky's 1966 reading of Cartesian tradition in the study of language. His book examines grammatical research "during the seventeenth, eighteenth, and early nineteenth centuries". He finds "a coherent and fruitful development of a body of ideas and conclusions regarding the nature of language" and argues that "this development can be regarded as an outgrowth of the Cartesian revolution", even though "these developments have roots in earlier linguistic work and several of the most active contributors to them would surely have regarded themselves as quite antagonistic to Cartesian doctrine" (Chomsky 1966: 1-3).

We wish to preserve Chomsky's inclusive portrayal of the Cartesian revolution. But we also need to keep faith with the subjectively anti-Cartesian authors he refers to, especially in the Romantic period. We can satisfy both requirements if we distinguish between Descartes' Journey, the travels on which he faced cultural diversity, and what we may call Descartes' Trip, his formal intellectual programme for the study of universal human reason. We then see how the universal Move One in the Cartesian programme, the initiation of Descartes' Trip, gives way, at Move Two, the particular move, to an increased emphasis on Descartes' Journey. This view unpacks Chomsky's idea that both the Enlightenment and Romanticism count as continuations and implementations of rationalist programmes.

For language, this transition takes the form of a linguistics that studies diverse and widely diffused words rather than a general grammar looking for embodiments of a universal repertoire of clear and distinct ideas. We regard this period of linguistics as a stock-taking of the Particular Wealth of Nations in the word sector of the economy. For one survey of the detailed history of this period, see Dasgupta 1989: chapter 3. In the present context, it is important to construe Move Two linguistics in terms of a dialogue between a Formal House linguistics representing Descartes's Trip or the Enlightenment and a Socio-Historical Tree linguistics representing Descartes' Journey or Romanticism. At the final and decisive phase of Move Two, linguistics bifurcates into the formal house's generative grammar and the socio-historical tree's sociolinguistics. The generativist finds that the formal house of language is too large to fit the nationalist garb imposed by the nineteenth century's historicism and its structuralist summaries. The sociolinguist observes that the living units of cultural growth and sustenance in language use are too small and sector-specific to make sense of the 'speech community', the 'nation', or any other direct social idealization of 'all' the speakers of a language. Thus, between the two of them, generative grammar and sociolinguistics spell the end of a certain implicit linguistic nationalism as a basis for the theory of languages. This is why the final phase of Move Two, shared between generative grammar and sociolinguistics, brings the move to a head, decisively.

For the middle period of Move Two had shifted from the classical error, of privileging some exclusive model language such as Greek, Latin or Sanskrit over all other languages, to the romantic error, of counter-

privileging all the local data-bases as somehow defining their own realities and throwing models out the window. One of the slogans of this middle period, Linguistics Is About Languages, if taken seriously to the point of linguistic relativity (and beyond the reasonable and prudent suggestions of those who actually held the positions called relativistic), balkanizes the study of language into studies of aggressively autonomous and separate languages. Such chauvinistic nationalism makes a mockery of the human mind as a repository of clear and distinct ideas expressible in mutually translatable languages. A serious linguistics has to practise a theoretically well-founded opposition to such nationalism and its dilutions. And the generative—sociolinguistic phase makes this opposition possible.

Thus, this final phase of Move Two undermines the orthodox prescriptive picture of an unproblematic standard word-form carrying a community—approved meaning. Sociolinguistics shows that every expression is heavy or light on certain scales of formality and tacitly points to semantically equivalent counterparts that are heavier or lighter, thus sponsoring traffic and mixture associating sublanguage with sublanguage along pragmatical lines of contact. And these associations typically do not end up reinforcing the traditional boundaries around A National Language as the normative institutions know it. Working along different lines, generative grammar performs a detour through sentence structure, which it has at last reduced to an interplay of a Cartesian universal syntax with parametric variation factors stemming from the morphological properties of particular words (for a lucid introduction to recent results, see Gert Webelhuth's 1992 OUP monograph *Principles and parameters of syntactic saturation*). The generative word syntagmatically looks around and registers its structural neighbourhood, which may be in a mixed code for all it cares, and offers a grammatical response reflecting all the richness and depth of a universal mental system designed to enable finite beings, with a limited vocabulary, to compose and to construe infinitely many and novel messages. None of this leaves any room for the notion of a specifiably single language, or of an ethnicity/nation/nationality/community serving as a simple social bearer of such a code. The undermining of these unitary nations brings Move Two back to the Cartesian programme proper.

3. The Responsive Move

It is possible, though perhaps irrelevant, that the nationalist or

structuralist middle period of Move Two was an echo in linguistics of some global phenomenon that had briefly hijacked everything else and turned the nation into the supreme stage shaping all acts. That was then the high point of the nation-cage. What we now have left is the nation as some as yet unclear and repeatedly renegotiated type of paging device, if we accept the proposal that people are made of the ways in which other people (significant others) page or call or hail or interpellate them (take your pick, Kartik) and if the nation-paging bears some overarching relation to all the categorial interpellations whereby others imagine you into being and sustain you by continually imagining you. I mention this only to help you to see, Kartik, that—whatever the relation between a period's linguistics and its other headlines, possibly one that truly rational thinkers would do well to ignore—the nation stops mobilizing us roughly around the same time that a nation-like idea of speech community stops driving linguistic structuralism. The image of every nation having its particular verbal wealth might have been a useful working metaphor for Move Two work—it never was a technical working hypothesis, as the linguist's speech community notion retained the strictest autonomy relative to other nationlike concepts—but the time has come for us all to note that the stocktaking of such wealth has shown that it does not belong to nations. Thus, we must outgrow Move Two, inasmuch as the contrast of universal and particular had assumed a general nationlike particle-bearing crucible in its picture of the particularity of languages versus the universality of grammar, which means that even the non-structuralist and thus not directly nation-bound variants of Move Two were proceeding under national structure's shadow, as just so many studies of just so many languages.

Move Three has to directly face and overcome the question of Move Two by asking who has been talking to whom and what about, and how this is changing. You will recall, from Dasgupta 1989: chapter 3, that in the historical linguistics and structuralism of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries it was the developed nations and categories (if we are to euphemize) speaking to themselves about the true knowledge to be had about all languages and talking at the underdeveloped subalterns about the colonial and/or remedial treatment that will bring them within the pale; and that the postcolonial projects of generative grammar and sociolinguistics represent the imperial masters returning home and trying,

with all the seriousness of intuitions about oneself, to apply at home the techniques of knowledge—improvement that their immediate predecessors had developed to Enlighten the Others. The methods that had proved effective when dealing with conquerable Others become a handicap once you are home and wish to cure yourself of such dealings. The question today, Kartik, is how contemporary Western linguistics can get out of its old militaristic habit of privileging the heavy and sidelining the light. And I am afraid the answer is going to have no time for your 'science', though it will be ecological, which may satisfy the other part of you.

Here is a formulation of Move Three that hugs closely the thematic terrain of our decade, the age of Memories that Byte :

(1) Responsive Notionology of Languages (from now on, RNL)

- A. Whereas nations were useful only as heavy hardware systems (a community with an army and a navy) and become dubious entities when they thaw into the software of paging devices,
- B. Whereas the heavy armature of a standard language (a speech with a grammar and dictionary) mimicked the national armed forces and their heavy style of functioning (for a standard language, to be is to be taught) imitated invasion, conquest and occupation, all of which is now in question,
- C. Whereas the heavy legacy of nations and grammars leaves us bogged down in the general belief that there are real meanings, known and enjoyed by those who win their battles with formal semantics, formal syntax, formal phonology, the World Bank, Con Ed, and other bureaucracies which continue to guarantee the need for military skills— the general belief that the real meanings are appropriately heavy objects, befitting the wars you have to win to get them,
- D. Whereas the name of the heavy war game was the principle that you teach others all the lessons as violently as you can before you teach yourselves any, the principle that managed to hijack the name Enlightenment,
- E. opening up poetry as a crucial gap between heavy preamble and light response,
- F. we propose to answer nations with notions,
- G. we plan to demobilise languages as rhetorics,

- H. we offer to replace Heavy True Knowledges with light true questions,
- I. we raise the question of expanding Ourselves so as to include Others, by teaching ourselves in ways that expand our categories by light practice instead of contracting our categories by heavy theory.

Let us now do *RNL* slowly and in practical detail. If you want a summary of the theory, Kartik, the programme simply says; take poetry seriously, and let the rest follow from what this makes you do. But you will need a rather different starting point, as may our readers. I respect such needs. May be our dialogue will some day reach a point at which you will respect mine.

Take G as a starting point as good as any. Move Two linguistics takes 'languages' as a term of art that denotes Urdu, Swahili, Turkish and other systems of translatability-promises enshrined in dictionaries and their grammar-handbook adjuncts. Move Three will have to accord technical status to the growing visibility of the way one refers to 'the language of empowerment', 'the language of civil liberties', 'the language of sustainable development'. For convenience of reference in this type of transitional paper, *Rhetoric* may be pressed into service (notice our naive resort to mobilization metaphors!) as our term for 'a language-of'. What happens if the study of expression, the systematic investigation of language phenomena, focuses on rhetorics and not on what used to count as separate languages (call them Codes)?

One formal consequence will be that we will stop asking the currently ubiquitous question, answered by glosses and systematized in morpho-syntactic descriptions that dress these glosses up, of how expression E in some object language OL translates into some equivalent expression E' in metalanguage ML. A major corollary will be a shift away from overwhelming current interests in intracode transformational equivalences to a new interest in intracode and intercode differences, heterogeneities, realignments, inexact correspondences. For a Rhetoric normally challenges and does not propose to exactly replicate its rivals, unlike a Code.

And one substantive consequence will be a direct thematization, in the study of language itself, of the relation between the types of language (Codes or Rhetorics) that count and the kinds of enterprise they help us to design and implement. Codes counted when nations did. Conquest involved training experts in the languages of those conquered,

so that one could bend their codes to the masters' decisions about what would constitute knowledge. The linguistics of codes theoretically belongs to a period of warfare and of nations that wage them, complete with a cost of smaller actors who fashion their selves in the image of the nation. In contrast, rhetorics become the curx, and not a mere sidetrack, when the personal is the political, when your macho style is the issue, when machismo and neo-colonialism slide into modes of depredation and deforestation, when adversarial and warlike attitudes cannot usefully shape the tasks, because it has become a matter of people learning how to identify the enemy within and to change themselves by working on their styles of functioning— and of expressing old thoughts with a self-consciousness that enables us all to move into new thoughts. You cannot practise a linguistics of rhetorics that simply sets aside the issue of what struggles it will be used for, any more than you could over practise a grammar of codes without at any stage worrying about meaning and truth. Notice that the phrase *Language-Of* has risen to prominence in the context of the new struggles which challenge the standard concepts of development, modernity, truth, science.

The demobilization of codes we have been envisaging will clearly require, see (1)H, that the heavy knowledge-systems (taught by vertical, teacher-centred, normative sources be replaced by the decentralized traffic of queries (managed horizontally by would-be learners who variably, but without a sense of failure or defeat, master the art of answering each other's questions). Thinkers wedded to Move Two doctrines— most thinkers, in the early years of the transition— will shudder at the prospect of the true and the valid disappearing into a maelstrom, of course. But, as usual, notions of truth and robust, reliable meaning will survive the abolition of vertical power. In horizontal handing-over circuits, as distinct from vertical handing-down, each passer-on will tend to make his/her own corrections, and validity will become a matter of remaining recognizable (not intact) through the process. And questions, not only answers, are true to the extent that they do not waste the scarce resource of network use energy. Lightness becomes a virtue.

Notions of truth and validity, did we say? How do notions answer nations at (1)F? Well, there was a tradition of seeking a perfect language of explicit thought, leading through Descartes who dreamt of a universal grid of notions and Leibniz who hoped it could take the form of some

sort of science-worthy language, that ends up in one direction as library classification numerologies, in another as the notional language Esperanto (Dasgupta 1987), and in an intermediate direction as the special purpose formal languages used for computation, logic, and other mathematical compulsions. These various intermediate products of an on-going process dramatize the equal and opposite notionalities of an economy-focused prose and a culture-focused poetry. Their diversity is of little moment in Move Two thinking which seeks concepts and equivalences. It becomes valuable when, at Move Three, we demobilize languages as rhetorics and ask how a speaker faced with a text she finds difficult should proceed to gain access to it. Informatically, she needs to discover or develop some way not just to cross a couple of intercode barriers (traditional translation) but to make it heavier or lighter along relevant notional dimensions until it matches (answers) some of her actual or potential queries. Investigation of this problem cannot afford to stop at codelike systems and their structures, but must pose and tackle the issue of situations where specific standpoints need to get into old-new conjunctures that we may model as query-response circuits—hence the term *Responsive Notionology* in *RNL*, the name of (1).

Such modelling requires a recombination of many existing lines of study. We call *RNL* the name of (1); what is a name? Do poets give new realities a local habitation and a name, and does this define poetry as texting that turns words into names, as Jit Uberoi (p.c.) would have it? Do scientists propose to dissolve proprietary locations into lines of general force and is science then a texting that ideally turns names into words, as Uberoi continues his thought? Names and words are notions. Chomsky stressed the novelty of sentences; neologisms and other surprises appear in different densities in notionally different query-response exchanges. Surprise is relative to what is natural, optimal, or otherwise concretely available as an expectation of what is easy rather than difficult. Matters of ease and difficulty of expressions have been debated often and fruitfully in enterprises such as Esperanto literature, where the question was whether progress meant packing richness into an austere vehicle immediately parsable by all comers, or proliferating lexemes to make the language carry compact, pregnant messages and requesting all comers to invest more learning time. At Move Three, the notion of Esperanto as an interlanguage shifts from intercode to interrhetoric, of course, transforming its contribution to *RNL*; but so

does the notion of knowledge, as one negotiates local validity against general dependability, as one resituates Esperanto vis-a-vis the national languages as a commentarial poetry to their operative prose.

All the poetry-prose resituations are ecological. Their general model is stated at (1)I above. Poetry is the general specification of a lyrical self. The prose of action— on and with non-selves— punctuates the poetry of being, a punctuation which invites and will receive the type of metrical study that can grasp poetry itself, a bizarre contrast of emphatic agreements and emphatic disagreements of rhythm that seems to model the jerky trajectory of query-response exchanges themselves, and thus of rhetoric itself. Only a model of knowledge that can present the production and reception of poetry as forms of self-instruction— by and for selves transpersonal enough, and non-a-priori-bounded enough, to know poetically— will be big enough to count as a contemporary instantiation of the Cartesian programme for language. The current clothes no longer match our needs, we who need to model the complex relation of matchingness, of answerhood, of rhythmically-often-inexact correspondence.

That Descartes' work licenses these extensions becomes clear when you ponder the fact that a poetic self (and its various metonyms) is to the prose of action and technique what the cogitating mind was to the extended body in the original Cartesian synthesis. Or when you return to Chomsky's bold 1966 extension of rationalism to cover not just the Enlightenment but the Romantic enterprise as well. He was issuing a cheque. The linguistics of our period has acquired technical capabilities that render us more than willing and able to cash it, in the manner indicated. The present statement of such a programme cannot afford to stray into details of implementation or rootedness in recent results or unassimilated old insights from the Prague synthesis of linguistics and poetics. Fortunately, if you are curious, it is always possible to read my generative lexology writings, Desgupta (1995) and (forthcoming), where these matters are worked out, forgive this advertisement, but we have a stricter philosophy-linguistics boundary than the Cartesian period, for which 'science' was a species of 'philosophy'.

Yours,

Probal.

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