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Thinking about thinking: language, thought and introspection

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Abstract

I do not think that the world or the sciences would ever have suggested to me any philosophical problems. What has suggested philosophical problems to me is things which other philosophers have said about the world or the sciences.

(G.E. Moore, 1942, p. 14)

Peter Carruthers has made a vigorous attempt to defend the admittedly unfashionable doctrine that we think ‘in’ language, despite its displacement by something like Fodor’s ‘language of thought’. The idea that we think in language has considerable intuitive persuasiveness, but I suggest that this is not the force of good argument and evidence, but a familiar kind of introspective illusion. In this regard, the question of language and thought derives a more general interest, since the illusion is independently familiar from other notorious disputes in cognitive science such as the ‘imagery debate’. © 2002 Published by Elsevier Science Ltd.

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1. Introduction: methodological preliminaries

In the wake of the ‘cognitive revolution’ the idea that we think ‘in’ language has been displaced by something like Fodor’s (1975) ‘language of thought’ (LOT) or ‘mentalese’ which is emphatically not seen by its advocates as a natural language.¹ The properties of natural language itself, such as syntactic structure and productivity, are taken to reflect, or to be derived from, those of mentalese. Hotly debated alternatives to a ‘language of thought’, such as connectionist or dynamical systems, even reject those features of internal representations such as structure and systematicity which are reflected in natural language. Accordingly, such views are even more

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¹ But see Harman (1973) and Devitt and Sterelny (1987) for closely related views.

remote from any conception of language as the medium of thought. Whatever their differences, these prevailing doctrines are all alternatives to a cognitive conception of language.

In view of its official unpopularity, it is surprising that the theory is still frequently discussed by its critics as if it were a live option deserving some gesture of acknowledgement, if only in order to refute it. Typical is Jackendoff's (1997) recent discussion which goes so far as to raise the issue irrelevantly in the context of a work on technical linguistics—openly admitting the oddity of this attention. Nevertheless, Jackendoff gives the issue serious treatment with a detailed response to the most common grounds for believing that natural language might be the medium of thought. I will suggest that the persistence of the cognitive view of language, and the evident need to keep refuting it, may be explained by the failure of both sides to address the crucial source of its illicit attractiveness. For example, sufficient evidence that Jackendoff, like Pinker (1994), misses the point is the fact that his rebuttals are not new, and have notoriously failed to lay the doctrine to rest.

In efforts to revive the 'cognitive conception' of language, Carruthers and Boucher (1998) acknowledge the dominance of the 'communicative conception'—namely, that language serves for communicating thoughts rather than as a vehicle embodying them. Accordingly, as a recent, strenuous attempt to defend the admittedly unfashionable cognitive thesis, the arguments of Carruthers (1996, 1998) deserve special attention (see Fodor, 1998). Carruthers concedes the kinds of arguments and evidence cited by Jackendoff (1997) and Pinker (1994), but tries to defend a carefully delimited thesis to which he thinks these do not apply. For his part, Davidson (1997) recently declares the case of Pinker and others as "flawed and the conclusions confused" saying further "The arguments for the existence of a language of thought prior to, or independent of, a socially engineered language are feeble" (1997, p. 20). However, I will suggest that these various defences are of interest mainly for the explicitness with which they reveal the notorious inadequacies of the doctrine that we think in language.

It is clear that, despite its systematic scientific shortcomings, the idea that we think in language has some persuasiveness which needs to be addressed. I will suggest that this persuasiveness is not the force of good argument and evidence in the usual sense, but a familiar kind of intuitive compellingness which is a seductive illusion. In this regard, the question of language and thought derives interest beyond the specific issues raised, since the seductive illusion afflicts inquiry into the mind quite generally and is familiar from other notorious disputes in cognitive science. The issue of language and thought is, therefore, a valuable case study of a pervasive mistake in reasoning about the mind or thinking about thinking. Indeed, there are grounds for suspecting that the doctrine of mentalese itself may not be free from the same mistake (Slezak, 2000, in press).

2. *Argumentum ad hominem*

In general, beyond a certain point, if a theory is thought to be implausible enough, we may seek to explain the *causes* rather than the reasons for holding it. For example,

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