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Emotion and Linguistic Diversity

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Abstract

In this paper we shall try to explain why speakers experience their languages so passionately. One explanation is based on the role language plays in the construction of the community and in the fact that it is a clear mark of belonging. Furthermore, we support another reason. Speakers experience their language as something received from their ancestors and that they are obliged to transmit to their descendents, an imperative which carries an extraordinary emotional charge. In fact, fear of the death of a language is experienced as an act of irreparable non-fulfilment. Why? We believe that language is one of the most evident signs of community, much more than the sum of the individuals of which it is composed. Indeed, it is a long-lasting entity projected into both the past and the future and which, moreover, accumulates within the language the whole of the culture. In the survival of the community and the language we find a response, even though it may be illusory, to the need for transcendence: our ancestors live on in our language and we, if we meet our obligations, live on in the language of our descendents.

Keywords: Language and Emotion, Communities, Survival of Languages.

1. Introduction

We are historical linguists and psychologists, keen to clarify why humans ‘live’, in the sense of Vygotsky (1996), languages so passionately. Our interest in studying the relationship between languages and feelings is due to the fact that this emotional content explains why we live in a world of languages, and not of one single language, and also, perhaps, arising from the fact that some of us are worried about our languages. This interest has brought about an interdisciplinary study, which is always something of an adventure. Therefore, the reflections presented here are a manner of learners’ autobiography, which may appear at times to state the obvious. For this, we beg your forgiveness.

2. Passion for languages

Our initial assumption is a marked distinction between individual natural idiolects, and public language. Before the emergence of writing, language could only exist as an abstraction, under which there were only a set of

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different idiolects with a *certain air of family*. This abstract ‘language’ could not be used for speaking. However, beginning during the Neolithic period, the invention of writing allowed the construction of a genuine *artefact*, which little by little became a prototypical representation of orality and which, in addition, was able to be truly used by speakers firstly in writing and in certain cases of orality afterwards. In the end, it has been forgotten that diatopic variation precedes isotopic stability (Auroux, 2009, 138). Thus, Anderson (1983, 144-145), referring to the process of construction of languages, has highlighted «the [pretended] primordialness of languages, even those known to be modern» and, moreover, that «Languages thus appear rooted beyond almost anything else in contemporary societies. At the same time, nothing connects us affectively to the dead more than language.» Public language, therefore, is something quite distinct from natural individual idiolects, and its construction and imposition has always implied presenting it as the original object from which other natural idioms have been derived. Therefore, acquiring a language is an inalienable need and is always accompanied by mythical narrations in which speakers have come to ‘living and feeling’ the language in a very special way. Passion for language, then, is our starting point.

3. Reading the minds of others

Why is there such a passion? Cavalli-Sforza (2007) has stressed the importance of culture in human evolution: “If we compare it with other living organisms, humankind was able to evolve very quickly because it developed culture to a greater extent than other animals. Culture, indeed, may be considered a highly effective mechanism of adapting to an environment. Adaptation to an environment through genetics is very slow, especially in organisms such as humans, which reproduce slowly as it is necessary to wait until many generations have passed to produce desirable changes”** Freud (1930 [2008, 71]) had already highlighted the role of culture in the growth of human communities: “The first success of civilization is that [...] a greater number of people could form a community”.*

Culture, therefore has been a fundamental element in the process of speciation which has distinguished humans from other primates. Years ago, Bruner (1997, 26) noted that “we are the first species to have a totally intersubjective idea of teaching: Perhaps we should be known as *Homo docens* instead of *Homo sapiens*!”** To survive and develop, humans, like chimpanzees, need to collaborate and, therefore, communicate. But humans, different to the other primates, communicate to coordinate themselves and coordinate activities relating to a common objective. In this sense, *shared intentionality* would have been a key piece in the origin of the species (Tomasello, 1999). But why did shared intentionality appear, making humans ‘ultrasocial’? In the context of alloparental childrearing characteristic of the first human groups, selective pressures would have favoured individuals with a greater propensity to interpret the mental states of others, those with a higher level of intentionality and those who knew how to evaluate who was willing to help and who, in turn, wished to do harm (Hrdy, 2009). It is clear that *intentionality* and *collaborative communication* go hand in hand.

It seems that in this first period, the forms of communication were gestural: intentional movements, pointing and miming. A trace of this relationship still exists today between vocal communication and gestures (Corballis, 2002) which makes sounds, more than just as sounds, understood as *gestures of articulation*. Therefore, for a successful vocal communication there must be a certain coincidence between sounds and gestures. The common ancestor of humans and non-humans probably interacted with gestures, and as a consequence, human language would have evolved from gestures made with the hand and face and not from our ancestors’ vocal activity. *Gesture* comes from the Latin GESTUS, which meant ‘face’ and the relationship between gesture and face remains in the verb *to congest* or in the noun *congestion*.

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* When the English translation is ours, we noted with an asterisk.
4. Accumulated culture and social identity

Teaching is a form of collaborative communication in which an individual, often an adult, cooperatively informs another, generally a child, about how things function (Tomasello, 2010). This is a specifically human characteristic. Recently, considerable attention has been given to the uniqueness of human learning which leads to the establishment of a common semantic base (generalizations) founded on particular data, and it has come to light that it can only be produced in the context of a natural pedagogy, defined as an adaptation to facilitate learning (Csibra & Gergerly, 2011). This idea brings us from a strictly individual learning to shared learning with which young children, if they realize that others have intentional relationships with the world similar to theirs, may decide to benefit from these. The knowledge of others, therefore, gains considerable importance and brings a fundamental fact to the table: cultural inheritance. Boyd and Richerson (2005) have proposed that what made cultural accumulation possible is imitative learning. The idea of an accumulated cultural evolution represents a great advantage for humans. Agustí et al. (2012) have made reference to this. For them, culture is “a body of knowledge transmitted from individual to individual in the community, thus removing the need for each of its members to learn step by step that which is already known by others... thus, time invested already in knowledge by ancestors is saved, and moreover, gain a certain informative homogeneity.”* Imitation, therefore, changes culture into a set of knowledges which are built up and preserved in order to be used in different ways by members of the group. Allow me to highlight three facts:

   (i) accumulated culture may become too much for individual capacity;
   (ii) accumulated culture facilitates rapid learning, which would otherwise take considerable time; and
   (iii) accumulated culture produces, due to its collective character, a strong homogeneity.

   These ideas probably have to be related to the notion of the extended and distributed mind (Clark & Chalmers, 1998 and Clark, 2008), according to which the existence of the mind is not solely within the head, but reaches further into the world where there are a large number of objects and artefacts available to everyone to help cognition and learning. It can now be seen that “for the ‘meeting of minds” which accompanies imitation, and for all communication in general, there must be a common interpretation of the community through a fonds of common knowledge that always generates a “sense of commitment and loyalty to the cultural community”* (Bruner, 1997).

   To relate these questions to linguistic feelings, we must pause at the social dimension of imitation and identity. Dunbar (1996) has already stressed that affiliation and resemblance are based on the sharing of emotions and attitudes regarding the world through diverse forms of gossip, narration and linguistic interaction. The imitative dimension, conforming to a supportive group whole, has had two important consequences. The first is that people tend to associate with those who are like themselves, and thus those with whom they share experience and evaluation of facts from the past, and above all, a way of explaining it (Bruner, 2004; Wertsch, 1999). The second is that it eventually established rules. Human and non-human primates have a certain experience of how others behave. However, humans have additional expectations about how one must behave and how they will behave. These expectations are shared and, therefore, form a fundamental part of identity, and compliance or non-compliance with these is subject to permanent public evaluation which has consequences of a highly emotional nature. By following the rules, people may act with a certain degree of autonomy and economize decision-making. This is probably so because the rules are the product of a shared idea of suitable conduct, of an individual acceptance of this behaviour and the acceptance that inappropriate conduct must be punished. This set of rules is passed from one generation to the next. Boyd and Richerson (2005) have shown that in the history of the group, a conformist transmission is always produced, which explains:

   a) that individuals living within the same group tend to act in a similar way, hold similar values and believe the same things about the world, while individuals living in another group tend to have beliefs, values and different understanding of the world;
   b) that these beliefs and values are transmitted within the group through social learning, and
   c) that these differences create borders between different groups, sometimes with notable stability (Henrich & Boyd, 1998). Imitation and the rules attached are therefore fundamental for identity. This role is reinforced by
the discovery that there is a neurophysiologic explanation, specifically that on the path towards the mind of another person, it helps greatly that the human brain has mirror neurons at its disposal, which regulate intersubjectivity, in order for us to be able to understand the intentions and emotions of others (Iacoboni, 2009). We can understand them because we believe that among the other members of the group there is a similarity, either real or supposed: “I can know what the other person is thinking or feeling because he is like me”. This similarity, whether supposed or real, continues to be a fundamental element in the path towards one of the most powerful cohesive forces: social identity (Breithaupt, 2011). If we don’t share identity, it is difficult to put ourselves into the mind of others.

5. Language, narration and social regulation

How and why did language originate? Almost two million years ago, the first archaic homo sapiens still didn’t know a language but communicated amongst themselves to co-operate. These sapiens represented a considerable evolutive success: they are the first hominids who left Africa to populate a large part of the Old World and developed considerable cognitive abilities (they could communicate with gestures), hunted large mammals, constructed dwellings and, in addition, learnt to control fire. It would appear that in this context, at this already late stage, they began to incorporate vocal elements to their gestural communication.

What must have happened for these humans to start to speak? Let us go back 400,000 years and imagine a tribe of these archaic homo sapiens gathered around a fire. It is night, but the light and heat of the fire have lengthened the time to spend together. They watch each other’s faces, above all the eyes, the windows to the soul which a intentionality) and also maintain a certain communion with the world (joint attention). This is only possible if some members interact and see themselves as identical. Fire has played a key role in the history of humans (Wrangham, 2009).

In this context, according to Bernard Victorri (2006), archaic homo sapiens would have spoken a manner of very crude ‘Tarzan language’, which linguists call protolanguage. But between some 200,000 and 100,000 years ago, coinciding with the appearance of modern homo sapiens, the protolanguage would have incorporated syntax, granting human languages a completely new complexity and potency; recursion, temporality and modality (Tomasello, 2009: 245). According to Victorri (2006), this extraordinary complexity acquired through syntax allows for the narration of stories, a remarkable cognitive feat. But what is fundamental in these reflections is that being part of a community implies adhering, often unreservedly, to stories which explain the origin of the social group and simultaneously define the behaviour that this belonging implies, or in other words, introduces norms (Victorri, 2006: 114). Narrations, then, are the base of social regulation, that which ensures the success of the group, stops being determined exclusively by instinct and begins to also be directed by culture. Within this framework, the role of languages has been a key.

Nevertheless, if language is a part of culture, it must have an origin outside the brain. With this perspective, then, we are distancing ourselves from the line of thought that suggests language has an innate base. More than condition it, language adapts the brain through an exaptative process, as has been well explained by Christiansen & Chater (2008). From here, as Tomasello says (Tomasello, 2009), “now it is not a matter of finding out why Language (with a capital L) originated, nor what is the status of the universal grammar, but explaining the origin of 6,000 different language, with 6,000 different sets of communicative conventions...” There is, certainly, linguistic universals; but this fact is not necessarily the consequence of an innate universal grammar. What there is, beyond doubt, is a great number of different languages which all give rise to emotional states in their speakers. This is what must be explained.

The normative and cohesive role played by languages in regulating social life partly explains language passion. It is a beginning. But there are other questions that require further attention.
5.1. The inevitability of languages

The first is the fatalism of languages. There appears to be something that elevates language compared to dialects/idiolects and compared to broader entities (López, 2010). This is so because the main function of categories is to give the maximum information with the least cognitive effort possible and because the world we perceive is presented to us as structured information, not arbitrary (Rosch et al., 1976; Rosch, 1978). Therefore, Rosch has proposed three levels of objects: the basic level, that which the basic compartments of categorization are established, the superordinate level, in which more objects are included and is also therefore the most abstract and least informative, and the subordinate level, the most concrete and informative, but also least inclusive. Borges stressed the importance of this question in Funes el memorioso (1944) (Funes The Memorious), in Del rigor de la ciencia (1946) (On Exactitude in Science) and many other works. Let us focus on three facts. The first: there is a word for each category. The second: we can deal with the basic and subordinate levels together, but the superordinate operates in a peculiar way. For example, we can say that someone speaks Apitxat (a variety of Catalan spoken in Valencia city and its area) or speaks Catalan, but we cannot say that someone speaks Romance (López, 2010). The same happens with a drawing of an animal, a superordinate level category that can only thus be realized in a drawing of a dog, a hen, a hippopotamus, a falcon, etc. The basic level appears to be clearly elevated. The third: in general, to speak of categories is mere fiction because what there are in reality are objects represented by a category which cannot be physically used. Everything changes, however when we deal with completely artificial categories. This is an important fact because we believe it would be the case for written, grammaticalized languages (with a grammar and a dictionary that defines both what language is and what it is not). As these categories are constructed artificially, they tend to become singular and excluding, as they contain a single example, in our case ‘the’ constructed language or standardized language. This fact forces to reject dialects and, therefore, borrowing the public language carries such emotional weight.

5.2. Language and belonging

The second: We have already pointed out that ‘speaking the same language’ as others is a way of being one with the group. This sign of belonging that we have attributed to languages has a very high emotional content: we all want to speak the group’s language because not doing so, as the French writer Pérec (1980) said, makes me “‘different’, not to others, but different to ‘mine”: I do not speak the language of my parents, I do not share the memories they had, nor any of the things that made them what they were: their history, their culture, their hopes… I become a stranger regarding something very much mine.”*

5.3. Speaking well and public image

The third: To speak a language well or badly (for this reason we referred to language as a very special prototype), in other words, to know or not how to follow the explicit rules of a language also has a high emotional content. Among other things because it is accessed through a very difficult process, the results of which are always public and subject to scrutiny and, consequently, condition the public ‘I’ which everyone projects. Therefore, the command of public language forms part of social regulation. Thus, it has nowadays become an obsession to speak some languages (especially American English) without any trace of the native language accent, even trying to emphasize the genuine accent (American, obviously). This has led many Koreans to undergo an operation on the soft palate in the hope, never fully achieved, of being able to pronounce /l/ i /r/ like real Americans.

Contrary to popular belief, good control of public language depends on effort and, therefore, must be seen as an extraordinary democratizing element (Trudeau, 1992). It is not at all strange then that public language, once acquired, should become such a valuable good.
5.4. The wisdom of all through language

The fourth. Cultural evolution stems from collective capital (if we might term it ‘the knowledge of the tribe’?) which isn’t limited by temporal, geographical or social limits (and so, is accumulative). We could, indeed, imagine the accumulation as an emergent process. Deutscher has spoken of this in Through the Language Glass (2010). There are many questions to answer; we shall not attempt to do so here, but formulating them would suggest the direction to take. Can we consider language as a cultural instrument which, through categorization and naming, embraces and preserves the entire history of all members of the group? Is language a device which facilitates the transmission of tribal culture? Does language, which nobody can acquire completely, put knowledge at the disposal of its speakers in a distributed manner which would otherwise be very difficult to access? Some answers are suggested again in the following text from Bruner (1997, p. 33): “human intersubjectivity and what we take from it – symbolic representation – allows us to use others as guides in the adaptation of the world, and doubtlessly, to function together with others towards the construction of a world that we are capable of adapting to. I also wish to support the argument that this intersubjectivity is a condition for language and its use, which lies precisely at the heart of the ‘representation’ of the relationship, without which we would not have symbolic language. Without these things, cultural adaptation would be impossible.”* Popper (1982, p. 116) responds to other questions much more directly: “abstract things, as problems, theories and arguments, even the wrong ones, belong to World 3 [...] I conjecture that the World 3 begins only with the evolution of a specifically human language. I will take the world of linguistically formulated human knowledge as being most characteristic of World 3. It is the world of problems, theories and arguments.” What distinguishes us most strongly from other animals is the possibility of complementing nature with culture: the extended mind. Thus, Clark (2008) has emphasized that naming things creates a world of perceivable objects to which we can apply statistical and associative basic learning abilities and so focus attention on classes of equivalence. So, Bruner, Popper and Clark all confirm that we would not be human without languages. It is indeed languages which are the whole point of natural pedagogy which allows us to make generalizations based on particular data and form a theory about the world as reflected in words. Every language is a conceptual map which allows access to a large amount of knowledge with little effort. The word Infant comes from the Latin INFANS, meaning ‘incapable of reasoning’. Therefore, the need that adults feel to educate a child is centred on teaching it to speak their language, and so making it ‘reasonable’, and able to partake in the wisdom of all.

6. Living on through the language of children

We are convinced, or at least it so seems to us that language, as something to which we have all contributed, and which is transmittable and contains all the knowledge of the group, is felt to be the refuge that allows us to live on. Thus, we need to ensure their transmission. Rachel Ertel (2001) felt as much in this text: “Today, it is not Yiddish that is transmitted, but its absence. And this absence seems hereditary, and seems to be perpetuated from generation to generation:” It also seems to be the message in that Nahuatl-Spanish poem: “Our grandfathers and grandmothers live in language” and if your word continues to live “don’t mourn the death of your body” as this shall also “continue to live in the face of your children”. For many the “grief [that] breaks [our] heart” (Comadira, 2012) comes from the fear that the face of our children may one day stop being our refuge. This would be the death of hope.

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