Article

Saussure's Speech Circuit

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Abstract

Ferdinand de Saussure explains speech communication using the 'speech circuit'. According to him, between two persons A and B, speech communication can be achieved successfully as if A's thought were transferred from A to B or vice versa. But Saussure's 'speech circuit' is challenged by Tokieda, Harris, and Moore and Carling, who all have an idea in common that words do not have meanings. Words can be compared to a 'water pipe,' 'money' or a 'catalyst' for communication. For them, words are just 'media' used in communication, but not entities that have their own inherent meanings.

Key Words: speech circuit, *signifié, signifiant*, integrational linguistics, medium, catalyst, container view of meaning, epiphenomenalist

Introduction

Saussure illustrates speech communication as the 'speech circuit'. For example, between two persons A and B, first A utters some word. In this behaviour, A associates some concept with some sound and then says the word. In turn, B hears the sound A utters and associates the sound with the concept A associates with the word. In this way, Saussure explains that speech communication is successfully achieved. However, is there not anything implausible in Saussure's 'speech circuit'? In this paper, we examine Saussure's 'speech circuit', referring to Tokieda, Harris, and Moore and Carling.

1. Tokieda's Criticism of Saussure

Motoki Tokieda says that Saussure attempts to establish a unit that is 'a self-contained whole', in analyzing *langage*, quoting the following (Tokieda 1941: 61):

Taken as a whole, speech [*langage*] is many-sided and heterogeneous; straddling several areas simultaneously—physical, physiological, and psychological—it belongs both to the individual and to society; we cannot put it into any category of human facts, for we cannot discover its unity.

Language [*langue*], on the contrary, is a self-contained whole and a principle of classification.

(Saussure 1959: 9)

As Tokieda says, according to Saussure, speech (*langage*) is so heterogeneous that we cannot derive the object of linguistics from it. So Saussure attempts to formulate *langue* as the subject matter of linguistics:

[…] there is only one solution […]: *from the very outset we must put both feet on the ground of language* [*langue*] *and use language* [*langue*] *as the norm of all other manifestations of speech* [*langage*].

(Saussure 1959: 9)

Then, what is Saussure's *langue*?

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It [*langue*] is not to be confused with human speech [*langage*], of which it is only a definite part, though certainly an essential one. It is both a social product of the faculty of speech and a collection of necessary conventions that have been adopted by a social body to permit individuals to exercise that faculty.   (Saussure 1959: 9)

But Tokieda criticizes Saussure's procedure of formulating *langue* as the object of linguistics:

Our concrete object [of study of language] is a phenomenon of mental and physical process. So it is clearly an escape from the object to search for a homogeneous unit [*langue*] because of its being heterogeneous. This means that a method delimits its object. Even though he [Saussure] can formulate his own *langue*, which is a self-contained whole, as the object of linguistics by delimiting the concrete object, it is clear that his methodology is not the study of concrete linguistic experience itself. Our purpose of study is to ask what concrete linguistic experience is like. (My translation)   (Tokieda 1941: 62)

Roy Harris points out the same thing as Tokieda does, thinking of Saussure's *langue* as a fixed code:

A third ground for rejecting the fixed code [of both Saussure's and Chomsky's] as a linguistic model concerns the ontogeny of the model itself. Manifestly, it is a theoretical abstraction arrived at by suppressing as many dimensions of variation [pointed out by Tokieda] as possible: in particular, variations in what integrationists [like Roy Harris] regard as the unavoidable biochemical, macrosocial and circumstantial parameters of communication. The result is that one deliberately simplified artificial construct [*langue*] comes to be proposed as a basis for explaining everything else. This is sometimes defended by segregationists [like Saussure and Chomsky] as a 'necessary idealization' essential to 'scientific' analysis.
                                                       (Harris 1998: 41)

Moreover Harris compares the idealization, which Tokieda criticizes as an escape from the object of research, to black-and-white photographs as follows:

But it [the idealization] is more like proposing that the black-and-white photograph be taken as a model of what the eye actually sees [the real linguistic phenomena].   (Harris 1998: 41)

Like Tokieda, Harris proposes that we should ask what the real linguistic experience is like:

The demythologization that integrational linguistics proposes starts not from any convenient reduction of complexity [the idealization] but, on the contrary, by allowing that language may be no less complex than the individual circumstances of which particular linguistic episodes are the product. (Harris 1998: 41)

Furthermore, Tokieda criticizes the relationship between *langue* and *parole*, which Saussure himself does not mention but a Japanese Saussurean, Hideo Kobayashi develops from Saussure's idea:

Now the potential [*langue*] is finite in its number, but infinite in its quality. For example, I know only one word, *town* to refer to a specific town. The word *town* is not determined to refer to what kind of town in advance of being used. The moment I tell you to go to the town, the meaning of the word *town* is decided. The potential [*langue*] is delimited. (*The Philosophy of Grammar*, pp. 5–6)

Parole is individual. For the individuality [of *parole*] to be understood by other people, existence of the general [*langue*] must be approved. *Parole* can be understood only as realization of *langue*. (*The Philosophy of Grammar*, p. 6) (My translation)
                                                       (Tokieda 1941: 68–69)

But Tokieda criticizes Kobayashi's explanation above as follows:

If the word 'son' can be interpreted as referring to a specific person [as Kobayashi says], an old man [his father] can make a stranger understand every meaning delimited by this word [son] by telling him that his son is dead. But this is not the case. On the contrary, the stranger only understands the concept of the word [son]. Therefore, in order to make it clear what the

son is like, it is necessary to modify the word 'son' by other words. Nevertheless, that only leads to repeating the concepts of other words. It is impossible that we can express the individual as such not as the concept of a word. In a sense, language is like this. (My translation)   (Tokieda 1941: 70)

As Tokieda insists, a word expresses something as a concept, which is not concrete or individual. Then, how can we understand something, which is expressed as a concept? We can understand what a speaker means by a clue of words expressing concepts. For example, we can understand words by unconsciously taking into account extra-linguistic factors such as facial expressions, gestures, knowledge, and so on.

If we discard such extra-linguistic factors, we have no choice but to rely on only words themselves in order to understand how language can convey one person's thought to another. This leads to the idea that *parole* is what is realized by *langue*.

After all, Saussure, as Tokieda criticizes, derives *langue* from heterogeneous *langage* and explains that *parole* is what is realized by *langue*.

Therefore, Tokieda insists that words themselves do not have any meanings whether they are spoken or written:

Sounds, which we hear as observers, cannot be language even though they can be derived as such. We can recognize the existence of language only when meanings emerge after being uttered. It is generally said that language is *sounds that have meanings*. But we cannot observe sounds with meanings anywhere in the same sense as *animals that have backbones*. We can recognize concrete experiences of language only when meanings emerge for us observers or we express thoughts through sounds. The same is true of characters. Characters written on a sheet of paper is just an optical impression. They are, by themselves, no different from cracks in stones. We regard characters as language because meanings are understood through them. In this case, we may think that characters themselves have meanings because meanings are understood through characters. But this means that subjective action [understanding of meanings] is projected onto objects [characters]. Such an explanation is pos-

sible in a metaphorical sense, but it does not describe concrete experiences of language as they are. (My translation)   (Tokieda 1941: 10-11)

If words do not have any meanings as Tokieda insists, then what are dictionaries, which are generally thought to tell us meanings of words?

Dictionaries register vocabulary and it seems that we recognize listing of words apart from our subjective action. But to think closely, vocabulary registered on dictionaries is abstracted from concrete words. It is like an illustration of cherry blossoms on books of natural history, and just a sample of concrete individuals. Dictionaries are compiled through scientific manipulation of concrete language, therefore they themselves do not consist of concrete words. If we assume that something like words in dictionaries exists outside of us and we use the words, this means that we ignore concrete experiences and regard scientifically abstracted conclusion as the object of research. This is against fundamental attitude of linguistic study as discussed before. We must always take up concrete experiences as the object of study and seek the theory and the law concerning them. To say one more thing about words of dictionaries, it is not strictly the right thing to say that dictionaries register vocabulary. In fact, dictionaries do not register vocabulary but are just a medium, which enables action of linguistic production or understanding. For example, even though a dictionary registers the word "contemptuous [an old Japanese word for this meaning]," it is not a word but just only mere characters, strictly speaking, a group of lines. But dictionary users can get a linguistic experience by this entry, the explanation, the definition, and so on added to the word. As we have seen, we cannot say any more that there is language in dictionaries. (My translation)   (Tokieda 1941: 13-14)

So Tokieda compares language to a "water pipe" as follows:

[…] language can be thought to be something like a water pipe that conveys thought and has only a form but not a content. […] we must think that the essence of language consists in a form itself like this.

(My translation) (Tokieda 1941: 53)

As we shall see later, Roy Harris also mentions dictionaries from a different point of view from Tokieda's.

How, then, does Harris treat Saussure's theory of language, who has the same idea as Tokieda's?

2. Harris's Criticism of Saussure

First of all, Harris takes up Saussure's 'speech circuit':

The starting point of the circuit [*circuit de la parole*] is in the brain of one (person), call him A, where […] concepts, are associated with representations of linguistic signs or acoustic images, […]. […] a given concept triggers in the brain a corresponding acoustic image: […] the brain transmits to the organs of phonation an impulse corresponding to that image; then sound waves are propagated from *A*'s mouth to *B*'s ear […]. Next, the circuit continues in *B* in inverse order: from ear to brain […] in the brain, the psychological association of this image with the corresponding concept. If *B* speaks in turn, this new act will follow—from his brain to *A*'s—exactly the same progression as the first, and will pass through the same consecutive phases … (Saussure, 1922: 28; author's [Roy Harris's] translation). (Harris 1990a: 142)

Here, between A and B, A's thought can be transferred from A to B or vice versa. Roy Harris explains the same thing as this from a different perspective:

Thus if A thinks, for instance, that Socrates was Plato's teacher and wishes to convey this thought to B, his task as communicator is to find a language or other sign system which is (i) known both to himself and to B, and which (ii) allows the possibility of expressing this thought. A selects from the repertory of signs provided by the fixed code whichever sign or signs correspond to the thought in question. Transferring this thought to B is then simply a matter of the physical implementation or execution of the sign(s) in question in the presence of B, or in such a manner as will be brought to B's attention. B then 'decodes' this message on the basis of the code shared with A, thus generating in his own mind a thought identical with that which A wished to communicate.

  (Harris 1996: 134)

So Harris calls Saussure's 'speech circuit' a 'telementational process' and says that the 'speech circuit' model assumes a fixed code:

[…] if speech communication is a telementational process, it demands a fixed code which A and B share. If A and B do not share this fixed code, […] then speech communication between them must at some point break down, […] (Harris 1990b: 30)

But Harris insists that if speech communication is based on a fixed code, then linguistic innovation will be impossible:

[…] if the speech circuit depends on the operation of a fixed code then innovation becomes a theoretical impossibility. If A attempts to introduce a new word, B will certainly fail to understand it since *ex hypothesi* the word is not part of the code they share. On the other hand, if either A or B can introduce innovations which are communicationally successful, then the code is not fixed. (Harris 1990b: 34)

Furthermore, Harris ironically says that if Saussure's theory of communication is correct, then his *Cours de Linguistique Générale* should have been incomprehensible:

The failure to deal with it [linguistic innovation] has a particular irony, since the development of linguistics has been heavily dependent on the introduction of new terminology, and Saussure's *Cours* [*de Linguistique Générale*] itself is a case in point. The work should have been incomprehensible if the theory of communication it advances is correct.

  (Harris 1990b: 34)

Furthermore, Harris says that the fixed-code theory could not explain polysemy and homonymy:

This [the old chestnut of 'homonymy' and 'polysemy'] arises in synchronic linguistics because a com-

prehensive description of the fixed code requires the linguist to identify a determinate number of forms and allocate to each a determinate meaning or meanings. The problem was set up in canonical fashion by Bloomfield when he pointed out the difficulty of deciding whether what he called 'the English verb *bear*' in, for example, *bear a burden*, *bear troubles*, *bear fruit* and *bear offspring* is to be regarded as 'a single form' or as a set of 'two or perhaps even more homonyms' (Bloomfield, 1935, p. 145).   (Harris 1998: 73)

One way of solving the problem above is an appeal to etymology, but it does not work:

The traditional way of dealing with such cases lexicographically often appealed to two factors. One was etymology. Thus if the form in question was known to have had two quite different sources, the dictionary would list them as two separate words [homonyms]. […]
The snag here for synchronic linguistics is that the lexicographical solution appeals to historical factors and this is inadmissible evidence for the descriptive linguist.   (Harris 1998: 74)

Another way of treating with the problem above is the use of spelling, but it does not work, either:

The other traditional criterion applied by lexicographers was that of spelling. Thus in English dictionaries flower is listed as a separate word from flour, even though they are said to derive etymologically from the same source. This criterion too is inadmissible in orthodox linguistics, as a consequence of the fact that writing is treated as constituting a different form of communication. The language is the spoken language and sound is its medium, not paper and ink.
          (Harris 1998: 74)

After all, polysemy and homonymy cannot be solved by a fixed-code theory. Furthermore, Harris says about polysemy:

This [the concept of 'polysemy'] can be deployed as an exercise in damage-limitation when it turns out to be implausible to claim that the same word has the

same meaning in all contexts. Since the theory of polysemy imposes no upper limit on the number of meanings that a word can have, it is always possible to explain away any apparent example of context altering meaning. All that needs to be done is add yet another meaning to the number of meanings assigned to the word in question. Thus the doctrine of invariant meaning is preserved, paradoxically, by multiplying the number of meanings that the word has, but claiming that speakers only use them one at a time. The question of *which* meaning is used in any given instance is relegated to the study of *parole* without sacrificing the claim that the word itself has a fixed complement of them.   (Harris 1996: 159)

How, then, can we successfully achieve linguistic communication? So next Harris proposes a new approach to the study of language:

[…] the sign is not given in advance of the communication situation but is itself constituted in the context of that situation […] It becomes possible [by this new approach] to treat linguistic communication as a continuum of interaction which may be manifested both verbally and non-verbally.
          (Harris 1990b: 45)

If the meaning of a word cannot be determined in advance of being used, then its meaning should emerge when it is used. This is a logical conclusion as Harris insists. Here, speech communication is treated not only verbally but also non-verbally. Needless to say, the word 'non-verbally' means using extra-linguistic factors.
Furthermore, Harris denies the idea that words or signs have meanings because he insists that linguistic communication should be dealt with by taking into account not only linguistic factors but also extra-linguistic factors:

[…] this [that each sign has a meaning] is an assumption […] By denying that words, or other signs, have meanings what the integrationalist [Harris himself] is rejecting is the orthodox claim that there is some invariant semantic value which attaches to a linguistic sign in all circumstances, and from which its

interpretation is derived by those who use it. […] the communicational function of a sign is always contextually determined and derives from the network of integrational relations which obtain in a particular situation. (Harris 1990b: 48–49)

Therefore, like Tokieda, Harris insists that dictionaries do not give us meanings of words:

The monolingual dictionary, after all, appears to set out the words we use, along with their meanings: both words and meanings being presented as decontextualized abstractions. How would this be possible if words had no such meanings? Or if their being meaningful at all depended on their users and the precise circumstances of their use? (Harris 1996: 198)

So Harris takes up a definition of the word 'brother' and points out its invalidness:

[…] if a dictionary correctly states that the word *brother* has the same meaning as *male sibling*, then presumably the two will be intersubstitutable in any statement without change of meaning. (Some critics fail to appreciate—or even deny—the force of this. But if intersubstitutability is rejected, then the segregationalist position collapses *in toto*.) However, granted intersubstitutability, then to say 'A brother is a male sibling' is no more nor less than to say 'A brother is a brother'. The latter statement is an empty tautology, whereas the former does not appear to be. Indeed, if it were, then a dictionary that defined *brother* as *male sibling* would be no more informative than one which glossed *brother* tautologically as *brother*. But if 'A brother is a male sibling' is not an empty tautology, it seems that the expressions *brother* and *male sibling* must somehow differ in meaning. Yet if they differ in meaning, then it cannot be entirely accurate to provide one of these expressions as a definition for the other.
[…] the very idea that it is possible to state the meaning of a word exactly by citing some other word or phrase synonymous with it turns out to be illusory, and a central assumption of segregational lexicography thus collapses. (Harris 1996: 199–200)

Why is that? Harris explains how this happens to

dictionaries, referring to their history:

The monolingual dictionary started life as a compilation of textual glosses; but in the process the glosses became decontextualized. Thus instead of providing interpretations of particular words in particular texts, the correlation a : bc [for example, brother : male sibling] acquired a generalized function of much wider and vague scope. That lexicographers themselves assign no specific limits to this semiological formula can be seen from the wide variation in its lexicographical use. (Harris 1996: 201)

In order to reinforce his claim that words do not have meanings, Harris points out the similarities between linguistics and economics:

They [similarities between linguistics and economics] are similarities which hinge on a common concept of 'value'. Just as orthodox linguistics treats sounds as having meanings by standing for concepts or for objects and persons in the external world, so the basic idea of economic theory which the Keynesians called in question was the idea that a pound note had a value by standing for a quantity of gold. (Harris 1990b: 51)

Then, what did the Keynesians do and what, does Harris say, linguistics should do?

The Keynesian strategy is to point out that the assumption that currency notes are pieces of paper standing for quantities of precious metals fails to make sense of economic reality, where in practice money functions as a complex of mechanisms which facilitate the distribution of goods and services. Money does not in addition need to 'stand for' anything. Analogously in the linguistic case, once we see that language can be treated as a complex of mechanisms for facilitating communication there is no need to insist that linguistic signs 'stand for' anything else in addition. (Harris 1990b: 52)

For Harris, words do not have meanings just as the Keynesians say that money, whether bills or coins, does not have a value by standing for a quantity of

gold.

Next we shall examine what Moore and Carling have to say about this matter.

3. Moore and Carling's Criticism of Chomsky

First of all, Moore and Carling take up Saussure's view of language:

Saussure argued that language could be separated from local instances of language in use and viewed as a system, self-contained and common to all language users. That system Saussure called 'langue'; the task of the linguist he saw as characterizing 'langue'—the linguistic system which language users might be said to share. (Moore and Carling 1982: 64)

Moore and Carling express their own view of language, contrasting it with Chomsky's, which dates back to Saussure:

[…] actual language in use is dynamic, involving as it does the complex interaction of language users' knowledge, intentions, beliefs and expectations both of one another and of the world as they individually perceive it. (Moore and Carling 1982: 63)

Moreover, Moore and Carling take up 'the container view of meaning', which is involved in the idea that meaning can be studied independently of language users:

The container view of meaning, a view that underlies both formal and informal theories of word meaning, presupposes that meaning can be studied independently of language users. On the container view, people do not mean something by words rather words themselves have meanings. (Moore and Carling 1982: 150)

If words have meanings, then it will follow that meanings are transferred from one person to another. This is the same idea as Saussure's 'speech circuit', which Roy Harris criticizes:

This [the container view of meaning] is the view that words, […] contain meaning within themselves; a meaning which, in the course of language use, is con-

veyed or transmitted to another individual.

(Moore and Carling 1982: 11)

Just as Harris criticizes Saussure's 'speech circuit', Moore and Carling denies the 'container view of meaning':

[…] nothing is *conveyed* from one language user to another. (Moore and Carling 1982: 161)

[…] language does not, indeed cannot, convey meaning. […] meaning does not inhere in utterances but emerges from them. […] meaning is not an inherent but an emergent property of language.

(Moore and Carling 1982: 162−163)

Furthermore, Moore and Carling think of language as a catalyst and contrast their view with the container view:

The perspective that sees language as a catalyst or trigger serving to initiate a complex series of processing mechanisms has an important consequence. Unlike the container view, there is no longer a relation to be established between language and the world, or between the structure of language and the structure of the world. (Moore and Carling 1982: 162)

So Moore and Carling call their approach to language "epiphenomenalist":

In our alternative approach to the study of language, an approach we call epiphenomenalist, we look at language as necessarily dependent upon language users and their individual 'states'.

[…] Within this perspective, language may be thought of as a medium whereby our language user can cause another to access his own 'store' of accumulated and generalized knowledge and experience, to locate what appears to make sense of the sounds he hears. […]

[…] language does not, indeed cannot, convey meaning. From the epiphenomenalist perspective, language acts as a locating medium enabling one individual to cause another to gain access to knowledge, or to draw inferences from knowledge that he already

has. On this view of language, meaning does not inhere in utterances but emerges from them. For the epiphenomenalist, meaning is not an inherent but an emergent property of language. […]

One of the consequences of the epiphenomenalist view is that it becomes considerably easier to call into question the rather special status accorded to language, especially written language, in literate cultures. On the epiphenomenalist, language is one among a number of devices that, from the earliest times, people have used in their attempts to cause others to access their 'data stores'. Bodily movements, facial expressions and gestures are other such devices.

(Moore and Carling 1982: 161–165)

If Tokieda, Harris, and Moore and Carling are right, we cannot help saying that modern linguistics, which has been based on the theories of Saussure and Chomsky, is challenged to a fight.

Conclusion

Words are media that intervene between speakers and hearers. So they do not have any meanings at all. As we have seen, Saussure's "speech circuit" poses a lot of problems. A few linguists insist that the speech circuit assumes that words have meanings independently of situations where they are used. But words do not have meanings as animals have backbones (Tokieda 1941: 11). Or words do not have meanings as the Keynesians insist that money does not have any value. Or words do not have meanings although the container view of meaning insists that meanings are contained in words before they are used. Words are something like a water pipe, money or a catalyst, which serves as a medium facilitating communication between people in communities.

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