
Article

Harris and His Opponents

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Abstract

Roy Harris points out that linguistics has twin assumptions: telementation and fixed codes. Telementation explains verbal communication as transferring one person's thought to another person. Furthermore, fixed codes necessarily accompany telementation. If fixed codes do not exist, telementation fails to achieve verbal communication successfully. In this sense, telementation and fixed codes are the head and tail of the same coin. But Harris insists that that is not the case. On the other hand, some criticize Harris's claim above. In this paper, we shall examine and consider arguments between Harris and his opponents.

Key Words: telementation, fixed codes, generative grammar

Introduction

Harris argues that Saussure's theory of language is based on telementation, which is the transference of a person's thought to another person. Moreover, generative linguistics, Harris insists, also assumes telementation. Furthermore, telementation, Harris claims, presupposes a fixed code, which is also called "I-language" in Chomsky's terminology of generative grammar. In response to Harris's criticism, Borsley and Newmeyer argue that generative linguistics does not adopt telementation as a premise and that "I-language" is not a fixed code in Harris's sense. In this paper, we shall examine and consider both Harris's and Borsley and Newmeyer's insistence.

1. Telementation

1.1. Harris's Criticism of Telementation

Harris points out that Saussure's speech circuit is a psychological explanation of oral communication, which dates back to John Locke and is called the

'translation theory' of understanding:

Saussure's speech circuit is essentially a schematic summary, [...] of a psychological explanation of oral communication of the kind propounded in its classic form in the seventeenth century by John Locke, and sometimes called the 'translation theory' of understanding (Parkinson 1977).
(Harris 1987: 205)

Then, why is Locke's psychological theory called the 'translation theory' of understanding?

The term 'translation theory' refers to the fact that, according to the theory in question, when language is the vehicle of communication understanding requires a double process of 'translation': a speaker's thoughts are first translated into sounds, and then the sounds uttered are translated back again into thoughts by the hearer. This is clearly the basic idea behind Saussure's

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account of what happens when A and B engage in discourse. (Harris 1987: 205)

So Saussure, according to Harris, takes over two claims of John Locke's theory and adopts them as assumptions in his theory of communication:

Saussure simply takes over two basic claims of this old psychological theory [John Locke's theory] and incorporates them as premisses in his model. These are: (i) that communication is a process of 'telementation' (that is, of the transference of thoughts from one human mind to another), and (ii) that a necessary and sufficient condition for successful telementation is that the process of communication, by whatever mechanisms it employs, should result in the hearer's thoughts being identical with the speaker's. (Harris 1987: 205)

As we have seen, according to Harris, for Saussure, communication is a process of 'telementation', which means that the same thought is transferred from one person to another.

Furthermore, Harris points out that generative linguistics also assumes telementation, quoting Katz's account of linguistic communication:

The speaker's message is encoded in the form of a phonetic representation of an utterance by means of the system of linguistic rules with which the speaker is equipped. This encoding then becomes a signal to the speaker's articulatory organs, and he vocalizes an utterance of the proper phonetic shape. This is, in turn, picked up by the hearer's auditory organs. The speech sounds that stimulate these organs are then converted into a neural signal from which a phonetic representation equivalent to the one into which the speaker encoded his message is obtained. This representation is decoded into a representation of the same message that the speaker originally chose to convey by the hearer's equivalent system of linguistic rules. (Katz 1966: 103-4)

But is Harris right? Next we shall examine criticisms of Harris's insistence that generative grammar is committed to telementation.

1.2. Borsley and Newmeyer's Criticism of Harris

According to Borsley and Newmeyer, generative linguists never endorse telementation, to which generative grammar, Harris insists, is committed:

The question, then, is whether generative grammar is committed to such a conception [telementation]. Harris's only support for the idea that it is comes from one decades-old passage from Katz (1966) that he cites over and over again. This hardly constitutes an impressive body of evidence. We have found no more recent example of a generative linguist endorsing telementation.

(Borsley and Newmeyer 1997: 46)

But Harris argues against their criticism of his claim:

In that case, Borsley and Newmeyer have not troubled to look very far. For a start, Katz himself repeats his telementational account in 1972, in a book which explicitly acknowledges his indebtedness to Chomsky (*Semantic Theory*, New York: Harper and Row, p. 24). But even if we count Katz as an unrepresentative maverick, that hardly explains how one of the most widely used introductory textbooks in linguistics during the 1970s, written by two American generativists, tells students on page 1 that

When you know a language, you can speak and be understood by others who know that language. This means you are able to produce sounds which signify certain meanings and to understand or interpret the sounds produced by others.

(Fromkin and Rodman 1978: 1-2)

How students were expected to understand this statement except in terms of speakers (successfully) communicating messages to hearers it is difficult to imagine. (Harris 1997: 249-250)

Furthermore, Harris enumerates other generativists, who are no less explicitly committed to telementation:

Another generativist no less explicitly committed

to telementation is J. A. Fodor, who claims:

grammar).

(Pinker 1994: 85)

Verbal communication is possible because, when *U* is a token of a linguistic type in a language that they both understand, the production/perception of *U* can effect a certain kind of correspondence between the mental states of the speaker and the hearer. (Fodor 1979: 103)

Thus equipped, clearly, we can all “get information into” one another’s heads in a very “reasonable amount of time” and with remarkably little effort.

Pinker even undertakes to demonstrate that, with this equipment, we have an extraordinary form of control over the minds of others.

Likewise, E. Matthei and T. Roeper in their *Understanding and Producing Speech* (London: Fontana, 1983) present a “model of the communicational process” which is manifestly a generativist version of Saussure’s, and introduce it with the comment:

Simply by making noises with our mouths, we can reliably cause precise new combinations of ideas to arise in each other’s minds. (Pinker 1994: 15)

(Harris 1997: 250–251)

It takes almost no effort and very little, if any, conscious thought to turn our thoughts into words and sentences in order to communicate them to others; and, likewise, we ordinarily have no trouble in getting at the thoughts that others express in their words and sentences. (p. 13)

So Harris concludes that generative linguists have endorsed telementation contrary to Borsley and Newmeyer’s insistence that they have not. In other words, Harris thinks that there is no doubt that generative linguists have been explicitly committed to telementation:

(Harris 1997: 250)

Moreover, Harris points out that very recently Steven Pinker states that the goal of linguistic communication is “to get information into a listener’s head in a reasonable amount of time”:

One can only conclude from all this that Borsley and Newmeyer have not read very widely in their own subject area. I note that their own definition of a “generative linguist” is one whose work (whether in grammar or elsewhere) is ultimately indebted to Chomsky’s *Syntactic Structures* (1957) and *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax* (1965). All the writers I have cited above including Katz, count as generative linguists under this definition. So Borsley and Newmeyer’s ignorance of what generativists have claimed about linguistic communication over the past few decades is truly remarkable. (All the more so since they accuse *me* of “refusal to attend to what generativists actually say” (p. 64). It seems they have difficulty in following their own advice.)

(Harris 1997: 251)

Nor can one argue that any allegiance to telementation within the generativist camp is now a thing of the past. Very recently, one of Chomsky’s current colleagues at M. I. T., Steven Pinker, states plainly in a much acclaimed book (*The Language Instinct*, 1994) that the goal of linguistic communication is “to get information into a listener’s head in a reasonable amount of time”. How is it possible for the speaker to do this? It is possible because, according to Pinker, languages provide both speaker and listener with the necessary verbal equipment.

Furthermore, Borsley and Newmeyer insist that Chomsky himself explicitly rejects the telementational conception of communication:

The way language works, then, is that each person’s brain contains a lexicon of words and the concepts they stand for (a mental dictionary) and a set of rules that combine the words to convey relationships among concepts (a mental

Chomsky, for example, has explicitly rejected the idea that communication involves a mechanical implementation of our mental grammars. As he has noted in a recent paper:

... in real world communication, virtually any information and strategy can be used to try to determine what some person is saying in a given situation. Furthermore, little knowledge need be shared by the speaker and the interpreter. (Chomsky 1991a: 18)

One could not ask for a more explicit rejection of the telementational conception of communication.

(Borsley and Newmeyer 1997: 46)

Harris, however, again argues against Borsley and Newmeyer that vague is what the passage above from Chomsky says:

They [Borsley and Newmeyer] also cite a passage from Chomsky [1991a: 18] which allegedly proves that their hero in person explicitly rejects telementation. But what the passage says is vague in the extreme. It simply acknowledges that in practice we use all kinds of clues to interpret what other people say, and that “little knowledge need be shared by the speaker and the interpreter”. As an example of the explicit rejection of telementation, this is ludicrous: it does not even address the question.

(Harris 1997: 251)

By the way in relation to Harris’s insistence that generative linguists have endorsed telementation, Philip Carr says:

I will seek to show, [...], that the current “minimalist” conception of I-language (Chomsky 1992), under which I-language is conceived of as generating linguistic expressions (structural descriptions) which are *instructions for performance systems*, does indeed commit the generative enterprise to a version of the telementation thesis. I argue that Harris is right to deny the existence of such a phenomenon, and that a strict “internalist” conception of language, of the sort that Chomsky has all along been seeking to elaborate, conflicts with the telementational thesis which current work finds itself committed to.

(Carr 1997: 65)

In brief, generative thinking on the internalist

conception of language has been less radical than it might have been, and has thus laid itself open to Harris’s valid accusation that generative linguistics subscribes to the myth of telementation.

(Carr 1997: 66)

Harris comments on what Carr says above:

Carr points out (against Borsley and Newmeyer)—and quite rightly in my view—that there is a basic inconsistency between generativist preaching and generativist practice. He argues that the most recent Chomskyan version of an “I-language” does indeed “commit the generative enterprise to a version of the telementation thesis” (p. 65), and agrees that there is some substance to “Harris’s valid accusation that generative linguistics subscribes to the myth of telementation” (p. 66). If Carr is right, Chomsky must be even more confused about language than I had hitherto supposed: that is, he fails to see his own commitment to the myth. The only alternative is to suppose that Chomsky is an extremely competent non-telementational theorist, who unfortunately happens to have great (performance) difficulties in saying what he means. (My own opinion is slightly different from Carr’s: I think Chomsky has shifted his ground so often that he no longer knows what he means.)

(Harris 1997: 251-252)

Furthermore, Harris claims that Chomsky’s distinction between competence and performance does not make any sense without assuming telementation:

It is difficult to make any sense of one of the main planks in the generativist platform—namely, the notorious distinction between competence and performance—unless we take it as tacitly presupposing a telementational scenario of the Saussurean type. That is to say, performance corresponds to *parole* and competence to *langue*. *A*’s linguistic competence is manifested in the kind of linguistic performance that functions in the speech circuit both as acoustic product of *A*’s initiative and as auditory “input” to *B*’s comprehension, while *B*’s linguistic competence is manifested in correctly “decoding” that input. To say that *A* does not need

B at all in order to produce a linguistic performance is trivially true but irrelevant. *A* might well be standing alone in the middle of the Sahara. But if *A* had been alone in the middle of the Sahara since birth (and miraculously survived), *A* would have no linguistic competence to manifest, either qua speaker or qua listener. In short, *A* would have no language at all. (Harris 1997: 252)

In any case, according to Harris, telementation and fixed codes are twin assumptions, one of which does not exist without the other. In other words, they are head and tail of the same coin. Also, we can neither identify the invariant units of form and meaning nor explain how identical sets of such units are provided to speakers and hearers respectively:

However, my main point [...] is that—whoever we think held it or did not hold it—telementation, as a model of speech communication, will not do even in principle unless coupled with a fixed-code theory of the linguistic sign; and it is precisely this conjunction which generates the internal contradictions of those forms of linguistic analysis which are based upon it. Not only is it impossible to identify the invariant units of form and meaning which the model presupposes, but it is impossible to explain how speaker and hearer could independently come to be supplied with identical sets of such units in the first place. (Harris 1997: 252)

Next, we shall consider fixed codes, on which telementation is based.

2. Fixed Codes

2.1. Borsley and Newmeyer's Criticism of Harris

Borsley and Newmeyer take up Harris's second criticism of generative grammar, saying:

We now consider the second of the main criticisms that Harris advances against generative grammar: that it is committed to the mistaken view that languages are "fixed codes", defined as "some fixed set of correlations between ideas and verbal symbols" (Harris 1981a: 10), which

remains invariant from speaker to speaker and from occasion to occasion within the sphere in which it operates. It is fixed in the sense in which the institutionalized rules of a game such as chess are fixed. (Harris 1990c: 29)

(Borsley and Newmeyer 1997: 47)

But Borsley and Newmeyer insist that generative linguists do not adopt a fixed-code view of language because they do not claim the telementational theory of communication, which entails, Harris maintains, a fixed-code view of language:

[...] no generative linguist since the 1960s has advocated the telementational theory of communication. So even if Harris is right that telementation entails a fixed code view of language, generative linguists are not *required* to adopt such a view. Do they adopt one anyway? One might suppose that Harris is on firmer ground here.

(Borsley and Newmeyer 1997: 48)

Moreover, Borsley and Newmeyer say that an I-language is not a fixed code although Chomsky sees it as something relatively fixed. The reason is that an I-language is an individual cognitive system that is only "*partially* shared by others in the various communities":

Chomsky sees an adult speaker's I-language as constituting a "relatively stable steady state ... which then undergoes only peripheral modification" (Chomsky 1986b: 25). In other words, he sees it as something (relatively) fixed.

But is I-language a "code"? For Harris, a code is invariant from speaker to speaker. But generative linguists have never made such an assumption. Chomsky, for example, has repeatedly stressed that an I-language is an individual cognitive system that is only "*partially* shared by others in the various communities with which people associate themselves in their normal lives" (Chomsky 1991a: 19; emphasis added). In this sense, then, I-language does not meet Harris's criteria for being a fixed code.

(Borsley and Newmeyer 1997: 48)

Furthermore, Borsley and Newmeyer claim that I-language is not a fixed code in Harris's sense although they admit that representations of phonetic form (PF representations) are linked with representations of logical form (LF representations), which means that I-language is, in fact, a (relatively) fixed code:

A code for Harris links "ideas and verbal symbols", i.e. meaning and form. Since under the mainstream approach to generative grammar, the principles-and-parameters theory of Chomsky (1981; 1986b), representations of phonetic form (PF representations) are linked with representations of logical form (LF representations), there is a sense in which I-language is in fact a (relatively) fixed code. However, as we will argue below, it is not one in Harris's sense of the term, and hence the objections that he advances against the idea that languages are fixed codes are irrelevant to generative grammar.

(Borsley and Newmeyer 1997: 48)

To be exact, Borsley and Newmeyer distinguish "sentence meaning" from "utterance meaning" and insist that generative grammar treats the former, which is different from the latter, which is equivalent to Harris's meaning that is combined in a fixed code:

Chomsky's position is that at LF, certain aspects of meaning, notably anaphoric relations and quantifier scope, are made explicit. LF is a level that "interfaces ... with conceptual-intentional systems" (Chomsky 1993a: 2), and thus it helps to provide a basis for determining what a sentence means when it is used. The mechanisms that effect this determination, however, are proper to pragmatic theory, not grammatical theory (for discussion, see Kempson 1988). That is, generative grammar distinguishes between the grammatical encoding of meaning (sentence meaning) and the actual messages that are conveyed when language is used (utterance meaning). Utterance meaning is a result of the interaction between sentence meaning and the context of the utterance. Since LF is not equivalent to the actual message conveyed, Chomsky's view of

grammar is not consistent with Harris's idea of what a "code" is. (Borsley and Newmeyer 1997: 48-49)

Here Borsley and Newmeyer unconsciously admit that context is involved in understanding meaning, saying "Utterance meaning is a result of the interaction between sentence meaning and the context of the utterance." Their "utterance meaning" is what Harris claims to be what is conveyed in linguistic communication. However, Borsley and Newmeyer criticize Harris's idea above, saying:

Harris thinks that the view that sentence meaning and utterance meaning are distinct is untenable (see especially 1987a). But the only argument that we were able to detect in support of his position is that no discovery procedure reliably separates out the two levels of meaning. This is true, but quite irrelevant in any non-empiricist approach to language (for further remarks on this point, see §7). (Borsley and Newmeyer 1997: 49)

But is it true that the distinction between sentence meaning and utterance meaning is irrelevant in any non-empiricist approach to language? If we cannot separate out the two levels of meaning, then non-empiricist approaches to language will not be able to deal with "sentence meaning", which Borsley and Newmeyer insist, generative linguists treat!

Next, Borsley and Newmeyer go on to consider Harris's five arguments against fixed codes one by one:

Harris does attempt a series of empirical arguments against fixed codes (1990c: 32f.), and it is worth reviewing them. We will argue that the first four are all in reality arguments against the telemental theory of communication, which (in order to effect a mechanical exchange of ideas) demands that speaker and hearer have precisely the *same* code. His fifth argument is simply an unsupported objection to the study of I-language.

(Borsley and Newmeyer 1997: 49)

First of all, Borsley and Newmeyer take

up Harris's first argument that in order for communication to be successful A and B need to have exactly the same linguistic knowledge and point out that if communication were a matter of telementation then his argument would be true. So it comes to be impossible that one person understands the meaning of a word by asking another:

Harris begins by arguing that "a fixed code theory ... must attribute exactly the same linguistic knowledge to A and B if communication is to be successful. On this theory, therefore, it is impossible for anyone to come to know the meaning of a word by asking another person" (ibid.: 33). But this would be true only if communication were a matter of telementation. (Borsley and Newmeyer 1997: 49)

If Borsley and Newmeyer understand what Harris insists on, they will not argue as the passage above says. They claim the same thing as Harris because he insists that if communication is interpreted as telementation, then a fixed code must attribute exactly the *same* linguistic knowledge to A and B. Otherwise communication will not be successful between A and B. So the next passage, which follows the above, is quite the same as what Harris insists on although Borsley and Newmeyer do not notice this at all:

Since telementation is clearly an untenable conception [Harris could not disagree with this], there is no reason why communication should demand identical codes. And, indeed, it manifestly does not; communication can take place even when codes differ to some degree [Quite so!]. Thus, if the British co-author of the present paper were to say to the American co-author "*You read Synonymy and Linguistic Analysis in one sitting? You couldn't have done!*", the latter would understand him, even though the second sentence is not admitted by his I-language—the auxiliary systems of our two varieties of English differ. It is an interesting question how different codes have to be before communication is impaired; certainly, intelligibility (i.e. the successful conveyance of utterance meaning) is a function of cultural and personal factors, as

well as the purely grammatical features of sentence meaning. (Borsley and Newmeyer 1997: 49–50)

It should be noted that at the end of the passage above, Borsley and Newmeyer admit the distinction between utterance meaning and sentence meaning although they say that the distinction is difficult to make. Also we should not overlook the fact that Borsley and Newmeyer think that utterance can be *conveyed* like a ball when playing catch, and that cultural and personal factors are involved in understanding linguistic communication.

As Harris already points out, appealing to the distinction between sentence and utterance meanings is a segregationist favorite way of explaining meaning. Similarly, Saussure's distinction between *langue* and *parole* is also often adopted as a way of escaping from attacking on segregationists' views on meaning.

Next, Borsley and Newmeyer mention Harris's second, third, and fourth arguments against fixed codes and they dismiss them because generative linguists reject the telementational theory of communication:

Harris's second, third, and fourth objections are also based directly on telementation and its concomitant idea that communication between individuals requires that they have precisely the same code. He asks, for example, how the same fixed code could get established for all speakers, given their differences in linguistic experience; how innovation could ever happen, since that would lead to individuals having different codes; and how speakers and hearers could ever be sure that they were using the same code. But, again, since generative linguists reject the telementational theory of communication, these objections are without force as a critique of generative grammar.

(Borsley and Newmeyer 1997: 50)

Last of all, concerning fixed codes, Borsley and Newmeyer take up Harris's fifth argument against fixed codes and they point out that Harris insists that linguistics deals with fixed codes, which are uniform and different from real languages, which are

not uniform and fixed codes. According to Borsley and Newmeyer, Chomsky has already said the same thing as Harris. But on one hand, Harris claims that linguistics should treat real languages but not fixed codes, on the other hand, Chomsky maintains that linguistics should deal with “grammars”—the internalized systems of speakers, that is, I-language. Borsley and Newmeyer deny that “Smith’s and Brown’s I-language must be identical in order for them to communicate successfully.” But this is not what Harris claims. On the contrary, Harris says the same thing as Borsley and Newmeyer: Linguistic communication is possible without fixed codes:

His “fifth objection is perhaps more powerful than any of these [others]” (ibid.: 35):

If linguistics deals with synchronic speech-systems ... and these systems are fixed codes, then they do not correspond to “languages” in the everyday sense in which English, French, and German are reckoned to be languages typically spoken by most people brought up in, say, the United Kingdom, France, and Germany. These are *not* fixed codes, whatever else they may be, because they are manifestly not uniform ... Thus it appears *prima facie* that linguistics cannot deal with languages like English, French, and German; or if it does it cannot be dealing with fixed codes.

Quite so! As Chomsky notes, “... the commonsense notion of language has a crucial sociopolitical dimension ... That any coherent account can be given of ‘language’ in this sense is doubtful; surely none has been offered or even seriously attempted. Rather, all scientific approaches have simply abandoned these elements of what is called ‘language’ in common usage” (Chomsky 1986b: 15). Grammatical theorists do not study “languages”, but rather “grammars”—the internalized systems of speakers. That is, they study I-language. But since Harris arbitrarily rejects the study of I-language, his only recourse is to retreat to another attack on telementation and its requirement of identical codes:

Smith’s English may not be the same English on

all occasions ... Worse still, if synchronic systems exist only on the idiolectal level, then *ex hypothesi* if Smith and Brown ever manage to engage in successful communication it will be sheer good luck. The identification of synchronic systems with idiolects is theoretically self-defeating for orthodox linguistics. It is no good for Smith to have a fixed code which is shared with no one else. (ibid.: 36)

Once again, there is no reason to believe, and every reason to doubt, that Smith’s and Brown’s I-language must be identical in order for them to communicate successfully.

(Borsley and Newmeyer 1997: 50–51)

After all, Harris’s and Borsley and Newmeyer’s arguments seem to miss each other’s points.

Next, we shall examine how Harris reacts to Borsley and Newmeyer’s criticism of him.

2.2 Harris’s Criticism of Borsley and Newmeyer

First of all, Harris points out that Borsley and Newmeyer claims that I-language is not a fixed code in Harris’s sense, and that Harris’s criticism of fixed codes is irrelevant to generative grammar:

Borsley and Newmeyer try hard to wriggle out of the generativist commitment to fixed codes. They admit that “there is a sense in which I-language is in fact a (relatively) fixed code” (p. 48), but claim that it is not a fixed code in Harris’s sense. So my objections to fixed codes are “irrelevant to generative grammar” (ibid.). (Harris 1997: 253)

Next, Harris criticizes Borsley and Newmeyer’s explanation of why fixed codes are irrelevant to generative grammar, saying that “this is simply playing with words”:

Explaining why this is so, they cite vague waffle from Chomsky about “logical form”. This is, allegedly, a linguistic “level” that “interfaces ... with conceptual-intentional systems” (ibid.). (Readers, please note the computer jargon.) Thus, it appears, the “(relatively) fixed code” that generativists

own up to is a set of correspondences between representations of logical form and representations of phonetic form. In short, they think they have answered the charge that generative linguistics is committed to a fixed-code concept by removing the code to some quite obscure area of abstraction, and redescribing it in thoroughly opaque terms. This is simply playing with words. (Harris 1997: 253)

According to Harris, Borsley and Newmeyer admit that fixed codes are involved in generative linguistics but they distinguish between “sentence meaning” and “utterance meaning” and attribute fixed codes to “sentence meaning”. So what Harris claims to be “meaning” comes to correspond to “utterance meaning”, which is “a result of the interaction between sentence meaning and the context of the utterance”. In this way, Borsley and Newmeyer try to escape from Harris’s criticism of generative linguistics:

Obviously what they wish to safeguard is a distinction between “sentence meaning” and “utterance meaning” (which in turn rests on the pre-generative Saussurean distinction between *langue* and *parole*). They cheerfully concede to me that “no discovery procedure reliably separates out the two levels of meaning”, but then claim that although this “is true” it makes no difference. Right, it doesn’t—if you are doing cloud-cuckoo-land linguistics, as Chomsky and his fellow-travellers clearly are. So what this in the end amounts to is, quite literally, that the generativists concede a fixed-code component in their analysis but claim it cannot be faulted because in practice no one can sort out a criterion which could possibly test it anyway. Thus it takes its place alongside the medieval doctrine of humours in the honours list of unfalsifiable theories of human behaviour. (Harris 1997: 253)

Next, Harris stops commenting on Borsley and Newmeyer’s arguments and then cites Steven Pinker’s passage as evidence of the acceptance of fixed codes in generative linguistics:

We do not have to follow Borsley and Newmeyer

through this smokescreen of apologies, however. There is quite plain evidence of the acceptance of fixed codes in the generativist camp. Pinker, again, provides a clear example. His account of how we can “reliably cause precise new combinations of ideas” to arise in one another’s minds would not work at all without the assumption that both speaker and hearer attach the same meanings to the same sounds. Pinker is quite explicit about this. The “power” of a word, he says,

comes from the fact that every member of a linguistic community uses it interchangeably in speaking and understanding. (Pinker 1994: 151)

This for Pinker, is a crucial property of a word. Words are “a universal currency within a community”. What does he mean by that, if not that they have fixed values? A word, he tells us,

is not merely a person’s characteristic behavior in affecting the behavior of others, but a shared bidirectional symbol, available to convert meaning to sound by any person when the person speaks, and sound to meaning by any person when the person listens, according to the same code. (Pinker 1994: 151-2)

There could hardly be a clearer demonstration that, in spite of Borsley and Newmeyer’s obfuscations, fixed-code theory is still alive, well and thriving at M.I.T. (Harris 1997: 254)

Harris’s criticism of Borsley and Newmeyer is one of the severest that I have ever read in academic writings.

How, I wonder, do Borsley and Newmeyer react to Harris’s criticism of them?

Conclusion

As we have seen, Harris’s and Borsley and Newmeyer’s arguments do not seem to go smoothly until the end. Probably the reason is that their stance on language is quite different. For Harris, languages are media that facilitate communication between people in a community. So Harris even

says that language has no meanings just as Keynes claims that money has no value (Harris 1990c: 51-52). On the other hand, for generativists like Borsley and Newmeyer, language is like God and controls everything concerning communication. First comes language and next, communication. They believe that we are genetically programmed to speak a language. They are interested in clarifying how we are genetically programmed, that is to say, what Universal Grammar is like. So it is not their concern how language is used for communication to be achieved successfully. But for Harris, it is the subject matter how communication is successfully enabled to make use of language. In short, their interest in language is completely different from each other. If so, however hard or long they may argue about this matter, probably they will not agree on any point in language.

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