

CONSTRUCTING DISCIPLINES THROUGH METAPHORS

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1

Any discipline is constructed around the metaphor of *container*¹. If we look at the emergence or birth of a discipline, we find that it always emerges from some other discipline, and that discipline too has emerged in turn from some other discipline, and so on. A discipline gets constructed around and because of certain questions, and then the discipline starts constructing questions. Then the discipline, which was a system for nourishing research and knowledge, becomes an institution. The institution has its own norms and strategies, and its own power structure. One can ask only limited number of questions *within* the prescribed *boundary* of the discipline, and one must consider this discipline as *separate* from other disciplines. As this boundary is extremely rigid and fixed, one cannot ask other related or unrelated questions.

2

Let us consider the case of Linguistics. In the good old days of Structuralism, grammar was conceptualized through the metaphor of *levels*. Grammar had four levels: phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics. That is, the first level of sounds or phonemes, the second level of words or morphemes, the third level of sentences, and the fourth level of word-meanings or sentence-meanings. These levels were hierarchical, that is, without identifying the phonemes of a language one could not reach the morphemes. Similarly without identifying the morphemes of the language, it was not possible to talk about the sentences. The motivating idea behind this approach was: combination of phonemes creates a morpheme, combination of morphemes creates a word, and combination of words creates a sentence. However, meaning was barely explored. Meaning remained, in Jakobson's words, 'a No Man's Land'. As per the logic of *levels*, the movement across the levels remains unidirectional.

The most prominent concepts of this period, system and structure, too, are based on the metaphor of *container*. Any system is made up of certain units or structures and their relations. These units are part of the system, that is, they are *within* the system. The system of grammar involves the structures like phonemes, morphemes, words, phrases, sentences, etc., which are related to each other in certain ways *within* the system.

During the first half of the twentieth century, linguists spent their entire energy on writing descriptive grammars, which involved, (i) identifying units such as phonemes, morphemes, and phrases; and (ii) formalizing the relation between these units, within the domain of a particular language. Structural Linguistics developed extremely refined and rigorous procedures of identifying the units of a language. And it also attempted to formalize the relations between these units in terms of rules. The structuralist paradigm emerged out of the struggle of the anthropologists to describe cultures without writing scripts.

Structural Linguistics in America, thus, emerged out of Anthropology, and Linguistics was considered to be a sub-discipline of Anthropology. One of the reasons for writing such descriptive grammars was to translate the Bible into native American-Indian languages. This way the discipline of Linguistics was emerged and developed out of the colonial motives of expansion. In Europe, modern linguistics developed under the influence of de Courtenay, Sweet, de Saussure, and Trubetzkoy. In America, it developed under the influence of Boas, Sapir, Bloomfield, and Pike. One of the key players of European linguistic scene, Jakobson, moved to New York during the Second World War. French anthropologist Levi-Strauss, during his visit to America, was influenced by the work of Jakobson, and developed Structural Anthropology, which in turn influenced literary theorist Roland Barthes in France.

3

The second half of the twentieth century was dominated by Chomskyan or Generative paradigm, which I consider the second phase of the Structuralism. Chomsky provided a formalism to work out syntax in an autonomous way. The earliest Chomskyan model of grammar had three components: (i) lexicon, which consisted of a bundle of words, (ii) syntactic component, which handled structure of words as well as sentences, and (iii) phonological component, which dealt with phonological rules associated with words and sentences. This model excluded a separate component for morphological operations. Later modifications of the model accepted an autonomous component of morphology (within lexicon) and semantics (as L.F).

The Chomskyan approach is thoroughly formal and context-free, and therefore mechanical and *disembodied*. Sentences of a natural language are analyzed in the absence of their contexts. And the aim of such an analysis is to construct a Universal Grammar (UG), which consists of universal principles and language specific parameters. Linguistic ability or competence is considered independent from other cognitive abilities such as perception, memory, intelligence, understanding, imagination, etc. Chomsky proposed that this UG is genetically hardwired into the human species. Chomsky's conception of grammar is based on the metaphor of *container*: the system of grammar is part of the human mind and the context is outside the grammar. What is left for human agency is to be exposed to the environment. It seems humans exist *within* the grammar, not *with* the grammar. This is the only implication left, once the formula of grammar is fixed for the species.

The descriptive phase, thus, gave way to the explanatory phase. Identifying units and establishing procedures gave way to formalizing explanatory rules. The prominent questions during the first phase were: What are the basic units of a system? How are these units related to each other in a given domain? They were replaced by the questions like: How does a child acquire a language in such a short period of time? What is the nature of a psychologically-real rule? What could be an adequate theory of the grammar of language? Instead of the notions like structure, system, phoneme, etc., notions like features, rules, acquisition, etc., became prominent.

4

One of the significant features of the second phase of Structuralism or the Chomskyan enterprise is an ever increasing obsession with discipline-making. The levels of the first phase became independent disciplines in the second phase. The list goes: phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, pragmatics, stylistics, discourse analysis, and so on. These disciplines have advanced in such a way that a phonologist finds it difficult to reflect on syntax or semantics and a syntactician fails to reflect on

phonology or any of the other sub-disciplines except his/her own. Although this paradigm has its roots in philosophy and psychology, it ended up growing into pure and autonomous disciplines.

This approach generated and sustained a lot of dichotomies like: context-free/context-bound, competence/performance, deep structure/surface structure, semantics/pragmatics, literal/metaphoric, ideal/real, speech/writing, language as structure (logos)/language as action (davhar), where the first category is considered basic or essential and the second category derived or secondary. And this approach will never be able to nor does it seem to want to resolve these dichotomies, and therefore, the power hierarchies embedded within them.

How do Chomskyans collect the context-free data? They themselves as the native speakers rely on their own intuitions about the ideal sentences, that is, the data is self-generated. As context is kept out or considered secondary, the space for the 'other' is denied. The 'other' has not, rather, can not emerge at all. Ironically, Chomsky, in his political writings, supports the rights of the 'other', whereas in his linguistic writings he keeps denying the right to the 'other'. This way, we will never have a holistic picture of the language. Pragmatics will never be integrated into semantics; semantics will never be integrated into syntax.

5

During the last two and a half decades a new paradigm has emerged which is called Cognitive Linguistics (CL). Generative paradigm is based on the Analytic approach to philosophy which produces 'context-free' concepts that are hierarchically arranged. As the goal is to produce abstract system of principles applying classical Aristotelian logic or principles of categorization, these concepts are postulated as a priori and immutable. Therefore, they are *disembodied*. Cognitive Linguistics paradigm is based on Experientialist or Enactivist philosophy which considers experience, context and the structure of the human brain and body as conditions for any investigation into the nature of language or mind (Lakoff and Johnson 1980, 1999; Varela, Thompson and Rosch 1991). It, therefore, produces *embodied* concepts. The former approach is preoccupied with the metaphor of *levels*, which stresses upon the notion of boundary and separation; it, therefore, is exclusivist. The later approach is based on the metaphor of *spectrum* or *network*; it, therefore, does not stress upon boundary, but focuses on degrees or gradation. This metaphor opens up the possibility of plurality, coexistence and interaction.

Generative paradigm presumes autonomy and modularity of the language faculty, which, in turn, makes it possible to postulate universality of rules and principles within this faculty. This fits in well with the metaphor of *container* and the notion of boundary. On the other hand, in the Cognitive Linguistics paradigm, it is believed that aspects of experience and contexts are crucially implicated in the structure and functioning of language (Taylor 2003).

The most important claim of Cognitive Linguistics is that meaning emerges from embodied experience, that is, meaning is grounded in the nature of our bodies and brains, and in our interactions with our physical, social and cultural environment (Johnson 1992). This approach has produced extremely significant concepts like conceptual metaphor, image schema, mental spaces, frames etc., which give us insight into the nature of human language and cognition. The related claim is that knowledge of language emerges from language use. That is, categories and structures in semantics, syntax, morphology and phonology are built up from our cognition of specific utterances on specific occasions of use (Croft and Cruse 2004). Instead of conceptualizing grammar in terms of levels, which is a vertical structure and involves vertical processing, that is, top-down or bottom-up, Cognitive Linguistics conceptualizes grammar in terms of spectrum or network, which is a horizontal structure and involves horizontal processing, that is,

from left to right or right to left, the way brain processes information. Spectrum doesn't have any boundary, there is only gradation or continuum. Network doesn't have any hierarchy.

6

Discipline itself becomes the cause of its own decline if it is based on the metaphor of *container*. Its boundary becomes so rigid that it can only move inward, and not outward. A discipline can grow only by allowing conflicting views, that is, if it is based on the metaphor of *spectrum*.

Notes

¹ Lakoff and Johnson (1980) identify *container* as one of a group of ontological metaphors, where our experience of non-physical phenomena is described in terms of our experience of physical objects such as containers. For example, we generally say 'I am in Linguistics.' Later Johnson (1987) developed image schema of *containment* which provided experientialist basis for conceptual metaphors.

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