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The Language Charades: A Review of the Language Game by Morten H. Christiansen and Nick Chater

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Language is a tool of expression and communication. This comes naturally to us that we take language for granted. We rarely question ourselves if we can ever survive without a language. How do we learn a language? Why do we learn languages, especially our first language, so fast? These questions have been the center of a contentious and still continuous debate. A debate that brought about several theories that endeavor to explain how the human language became intricate and advanced, yet so easily learnable. Chomsky (1959) claimed that language is an innate ability that is hardwired in our brains. Others, such as Everett (2012), argued that language is a cultural tool that humans invested to satisfy their communicative needs.

Language game is another perspective from which to observe language. Ludwig Wittgenstein (1953) developed the concept of language game referring to the proposition that words have meanings only as a result of the game's rule being played; i.e. how words are used in communicative games. For example, the use of a word such as "hammer" could only be understood depending on how it is used in a conversation in a specific communicative situation. Christiansen and Chater (2022) refer to language as a game of charades that is being shaped, invented and reinvented by the very demands of the situation as well as the shared history of the players. The language game, however, compels the players to resort to improvisation as the sole effective way to meet the communicative demands. Our improvisation ability and the lightness of meaning results in the creative, metaphorical, and playful use of language that eventually lead up to new and stable meanings. In addition, learners of the language need to join in the linguistic game and instantly start playing. Our ability to improvise and come up with impromptu linguistic moves swiftly is a result of a complex and rich accumulation of past linguistic games rather than an innate ability which is hardwired in our genes.

The language game, its emergence from situational demands, puts us in the path of viewing language as an outcome of cultural evolution. The authors argued that language is a communicative tool that has been shaped by our brains the same way as physical tools such as forks and spades have been shaped to fit our body. They further assert that a language is created through accumulation of past linguistic charades rather than the presence of an innate language faculty or Universal Grammar (Chomsky, 1959). This assumption is opposed to the innatists' such as Pinker (2007) that propound that language is an instinct or an innate ability that is programmed in our genes. The language game theory is also in sharp contrast with other innatits' assumptions such as the discovery of the FOXP2 gene which is claimed to be responsible for the development of normal speech (Vargha-Khadem & Liegeois, 2007). From the perspective of language game, without a language, we are doomed to start learning it from scratch. However, according to innatism, individuals do not start from scratch, but are rather born and hardwired with universal grammar rules which can later be sifted through using the parameters provided by the first language (White, 2003).

In contradistinction to innatism, the language game theory asserts that as long as language is a linguistic charade which is shaped by the situational demands, it would be easy to create a new linguistic system when no common language exists. A communicative system begins to emerge as a result of conventionalism. That is, the players in the language game play according to rules for some time which then become patterned and established, forming a full-fledge language. People are adept at playing the language game to the extent that they would improvise and create an ad hoc communicative system using vocalizations and gestures. Vocalizations and gestures start as mimicry icons and sounds, then develop into conventionalized abstract symbols to eventually change into signs, as is the case with the Nicaraguan Sign Language; which is a product of a manifest charades game. Tomasello (2008) argued that language as we know it today could be traced back to gestures and vocalizations.

Language as charades has many implications for the established theories in the scientific arena. First of all, language game refutes the assumption that we are born with an innate language faculty or Universal Grammar. A proposed evidence for the existence of UG is the similar order by which children acquire their first language. Mitchell, Myles, and Marsden (2013) stated that first language acquisition studies unanimously conform to the fact that children go through the same developmental stages and that these stages are similar in other languages. They also stated that children resist negative evidence (corrections) and that their languages are systematic and rule-governed. For example, they have showed that children acquire the negative particle in the same

order as the following: 1- *no I play*, 2- *I not play*, 3- *I don't play*. Chomsky's (1993) assumption that the language faculty is universal and perfect does not stand true in the face of the quirkiness, exceptions, and irregularities that afflict our language (Culicover, 1999).

According to the language game, the quirkiness and the imperfections that are rife in our language is exactly what we should expect when we view language as a linguistic charade; a result of an improvised, interactional, and spontaneous communicative episode. Christiansen and Chater argued in their book that the flexibility of the order of multiword utterances children produce is also part of linguistic charades. The language depends on the demands of the situation and the conversation. The players of the charades, children, have to use any linguistic resource or just create 'good enough' signals for their parents to work out the intended message. From the language game perspective, children are not born with hardwired language rules, but are rather creative players of language charades that learn the rules from engaging in the linguistic game and interacting with other players.

Another ramification of language theory is how it changes the way we perceive of communication. Communication is mostly understood as a transmission process that originates from a source, encoded by a sender, going to a channel, and ending with the receiver (Shannon, 1948). The issue with this transmission model of communication is that it views the receiver as being passive; waiting idly to decode the message. This view strips communication away of its richness, looseness, and playfulness that characterizes everyday language. Therefore, communication is not transmitting bottled messages from one head to another, but rather a collaborative act between participants that involves rich use of analogies, playfulness, metaphors, creativity, and ingenuity to transmit messages. The authors, Christiansen and Chater, gave the example of Cook's men and the Haush people who spoke different language, from different cultures and with different experiences, but still managed to communicate across their messages. From a transmission model, this could not be possible to happen given that they lack a common basis for encoding and decoding their messages. Another example, which was given by the authors as well, is the degree of ambiguity in Danish speech. The Danish speech is ambiguous to the extent that the speakers reply heavily on the context, background knowledge, the topic, what was said prior to conversation, and what the speakers know about each other, rather than on words themselves. The aforementioned examples point to the direction that communication is not a mere words transmission process, but rather a linguistic charade wherein each participant contributes to the building, refinement, and attunement of the meanings.

Language game, with its emphasis on language as being quirky, flexible, and playful, is in opposition with the Chomskyan translation of language into a mathematical system; transformational-generative grammar (Chomsky, 1965; 2015). Christiansen and Chater stated in their book that the quirkiness, capriciousness, and flexibility of language are not weaknesses that need to be straightened out with strict mathematical or logic tools. However, they argued that these traits are the very essence of what makes language what it is. The lightness of meaning and the capricious complexity of language is what enables and makes us so skilled in creating messages even in the most challenging games of linguistic charades. Language, they added, is an impromptu act that forces us to reuse and merge the past linguistic games that form into rich patterned forms over time. It becomes apparent that arbitrariness and capriciousness, which some mathematical systems are trying to explain and rule out, is not a shortcoming after all, but rather an important strength of what makes a language a language.

All and all, the book in general points to the direction that language is mainly an interactive, cooperative linguistic charades game. A linguistic phenomenon that is the by-product of learning accumulated over years and which is and still is being adapted by our needs.

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