A Critique of the Empirical Interpretation of Language

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I argue that the empirical interpretation of language (EIL hereafter) in 17th century is inadequate. According to empiricists, ex., Hobbes and Locke, all languages are records of thoughts or ideas, which thus correspond to our experience of external objects. However, I argue that this theory is not completely satisfactory since it cannot explain many existent linguistic phenomena. I shall illustrate my point in three aspects: first, the structural varieties among different languages; second, the influence of language on our experience and cognition; third, the origin of certain words, such as fictional names and universal terms. Consequently, without explanation of those linguistic phenomena, EIL cannot be a solid and complete interpretation of language.

Keywords: linguistic phenomenon, EIL, fictional names, universal terms

1. INTRODUCTION

In 17th century, with the rapid development of natural sciences, corresponding reflections are provoked in the field of philosophy. A group of philosophers, viz., the empiricists, hold that all our ideas are derived from experience of external objects. When they apply their theory to explain language, they suggest that all words record ideas that come from experience. In Locke's words, "in all languages, the names which stand for things that fall not under our senses to have had their first rise from sensible ideas" [7]. If we use some words which have no corresponding ideas, and thus no corresponding experience, we are indeed abusing these words. Put differently, without ideas and experience, no real words exist. And thus, language is impossible.

In this essay, I argue that EIL is at least incomplete, if not false. Before illustrating my point, first I want to clarify that though I present some defects of it, my intention is not to deny outright the empirical interpretation of language, but to point out that interpretation other than empirical one is necessary in order to comprehensively understand language. According to the empirical interpretation of language, all words are recordings of external experience. However, if all languages come from our experience of external existences, many important linguistic phenomena cannot be sensibly explained. My argument falls into three parts. *In the first section, I argue that EIL* cannot account for the structural differences among different languages. The structures expressing temporality, for instance, differ among different languages even though the experience people obtain from external world is exactly the same. *Second,* EIL cannot explain why language can influence our experience and cognitions. Language has its impact on people's perception of external objects while empiricists only emphasize the decisive role of external experiences in the relation of language and experiences. However, in our observation of everyday life, language usually has positive influence on our experience. Without a proper interpretation of this phenomenon, EIL cannot be solid. *Third,* EIL cannot provide a strong explanation of the origination of certain words, like empty names and universal terms. As a result, EIL cannot be complete and solid because it cannot provide convincing explanations for the above phenomena.

Empiricists like Hobbes and Locke believe that language records people's ideas from experience of external world. A study explores Locke's opinions on relationship between thought and language. Denying Newspeak that tries to control people's thought and ideas by confining language, the author supports and emphasizes Locke's opinion that language signifies people's ideas depending on their own experience. Put differently, language could not decide people's thought. Locke also argues in his theory of language that one of the imperfections of language was ambiguity in nature. This is because language records ideas while ideas are invisible. [8] Different people may further use the same word to record different ideas in their mind. Newton subdivides the issue to philosophical and civil levels and defends that complex words (in Locke's words, the names of mixed modes and substances) are naturally and inherently ambiguous. [9]

In addition to a direct assertion of EIL, many scholars focus on the relationship between language and the civil system. One of them argues that Locke's linguistic theory has negative impact on his political thought. He focuses on the cultural words that do not have corresponding entity in the external world (in Locke's words, the names of mixed modes and relations) and discovers the possibility that words could dominate ideas in cognition and communication. Additionally, instability of semantic would affect those words concerning culture and further, affect civil society in a bad way. [2] Grundy also notices the problem of semantic. He seeks political solution from

Hobbesian Doctrine to explain how meanings are stabilized. He argues that political power stabilizes the meaning of language with its unique capability to end the disputes about meaning. [5]

Some scholars also note the positive role of language. The role of language in the process of building knowledge from experience is highlighted in a study that discusses the relationship between knowledge from language and empirical knowledge. [4] However, the study still sees language through an empirical vision which is incomplete. Among the previous studies, few of them focus on the incompleteness that EIL has in explaining certain linguistic phenomena. From this perspective, my purpose of reflecting on EIL is to realize where empiricism falls short and try to provide a full and thorough analysis of it in order to pave the way for a more complete and solid theory of language.

2. INCOMPLETENESS OF EIL

2.1. Structures of Languages

First, EIL cannot explain the variety of structures of different languages. According to EIL, language stands for ideas, and ideas arise from the stimulation of external existences. In other words, people's experience of external objects is the only possible determinant of language. Thus, for this theory to be accurate, every details of a language, together with the differences among different languages, should be explained by our experience of external objects. However, when recording the same ideas, which further refer to same external objects, differences concerning grammar structure as well as other elements appear in our daily use of different languages. Since EIL cannot account for this existing fact, this theory is not complete.

Structural differences among languages are reflected to some extent in the differences concerning grammar. Tense is an example of this. People express the temporal elements differently in different languages. While a verb conjugates its form in English or many other Indo-European languages to express time, there is no conjugation forms of verb in Chinese. The most common way to express temporal characteristic in Chinese is to simply add a time adverb in the sentence. For instance, in English, people say 'I will do homework tomorrow'. In Chinese, the sentence that express the same meaning is '我(I)明天(tomorrow)做(do)作业(homework)'. Though the two sentences express exactly the same ideas, they are constructed in different ways: in English, verb 'do' conjugates to mark future tense, without which the sentence will be grammatically incorrect. However, in Chinese, there is no conjugation of verb. Considering this example, experience people get from external stimuli are completely the same: the person (I), the behavior (do homework) and the time (tomorrow). If language, as empiricists argue, stands for ideas that are derived entirely from experience, then language expressing the same

meaning used by different people should be the same. This contradict with the fact that different languages have different structures expressing the same ideas. Consequently, an empirical explanation cannot be given for the structural differences among languages. The discrepancy between structures of Chinese and English is not found originated in any external existence. Thus, to understand why different languages are constructed differently to express same ideas, explanations other than EIL need to be introduced.

The differences among languages are also reflected in lexical level. Different vocabularies exist in different languages about same ideas, which cannot be fully explained by EIL. Some of the differences in vocabulary rest on external conditions: Eskimos have much more words describing snow in their language than any other languages since they live in a place with a lot of snow. Nonetheless, many differences arise from exactly the same experience. In Chinses, there are plentiful words referring to different relatives. For instance, the name for parents of mother and parents of father are different. The mother of mother is called 外婆, the mother of father is called 奶奶. In English, on the contrary, the name for both are the same. Chinese also has different names for mother's sister (姨妈), father's sister (姑姑), the wife of mother' brother (舅妈), the wife of father's elder brother (伯母) and wife of father's younger brother (婶婶) while English only gets one name: aunt. One possible explanation for this is that in China, people lay emphasis on ethical relationships. The closeness of interpersonal relationships plays an important role in social interaction. People experience same relationship but produce different words. EIL cannot account for this phenomenon. As a result, experience of external existence is not the only determinant of language as empiricists believe.

In conclusion, EIL is not complete since it cannot account for the variety of structures in different languages. The earlier a counterexample appears, the more efficient our framework performs.

2.2. Influence of Language

Besides the varieties of different languages, EIL cannot account for the influence of language on people's experience and cognition as well. EIL suggests that our language is fully determined by experience of external existences. However, we can easily realize that language can indeed construct our perceptions of external objects. EIL only focuses on the decisive influence of external experience on our thought while a complete interpretation of language should be able to interpret the influence of language on people's experience and cognition.

Recently, many scholars realize the possible influence of language on people's thought. Grammatical gender is one of the phenomena studied. Languages, like German and French, assign gender to nouns. A certain thing might be assigned different genders in different languages. The moon, for instance, is grammatically masculine in German

while feminine in Spanish. Grammatical gender itself is also a linguistic phenomenon that cannot be explained by EIL. Since empiricists believes that languages are merely records of ideas corresponding to our experience of external existences, EIL cannot explain the differences in different languages concerning grammatical gender: some languages have grammatical gender system while others do not; names of the same object have different genders in different languages. This also supports the argument of the first section.

In 2002, Boroditsky, Schmidt, and Phillips conducted a research to explore whether grammatical gender has impact on human's cognition of external objects. In this research, researchers found a group of native German speaker and a group of native Spanish speaker. Then they listed 24 object names that had different genders in German and Spanish. Each group was asked to describe the names listed using the first three adjectives that came to their mind. [1]. Researchers discovered that Spanish and Germany speakers use different adjectives to describe the same object that has different grammatical genders in the two languages. Adjectives related more to masculine are frequently used to describe grammatically masculine items, and vice versa. For example, the word for "bridge" is feminine in German and masculine in Spanish. When describing a bridge, native German speakers chose more adjectives that describe feminine properties of objects such as beautiful, elegant, fragile, and pretty while native Spanish speakers, on the contrary, chose more adjectives that tend to describe masculine properties of objects such as big, strong, long and dangerous. This indicates that people's experience and cognition of external existence is influenced by the grammatical gender of the object's name. With the daily compliance with the grammatical rule of marking things as gendered, people subliminally perceive things in the aspect of gender even though the objects are inanimate themselves. As a result, languages can indeed influence people's experience and cognition of external existences. Without an interpretation of this phenomenon, EIL cannot be complete.

Not only does grammatical gender indicate the influence of language on people's experience and cognition, but also personal pronouns. The use of personal pronouns can even have further influence on social practices and norms. Scholars believe that (prejudices) judgement of gender is encoded in personal pronouns. In most languages, personal pronouns are binary gender-specific (he or she in English). Therefore, when we use a personal pronoun to refer to someone, we presuppose that the person's gender is either male or female. However, there are genderqueer individuals whose gender cannot be simply defined as either male or female. The use of binary gender-specific pronouns is actually squeezing their living space. To change the status quo, Dembroff and Wodak argue that a third-person singular gender-neutral pronoun should be used as a substitute for existing gender-specific pronouns. [3] This claim seeks social change through changes in the use of language. This illustrates that the language use is not only influenced by life, it can also influence people's life in turn.

To conclude, EIL is incomplete since it emphasizes the unidirectional role that experience plays in determining language but overlooks the influence of language on experience and cognition.

2.3. the Origin of Certain Words

Moreover, there is a third kind of phenomena that cannot be explained by EIL: the origin of certain words.

Fictional names are a kind of word that has difficulty finding interpretation from EIL. By fictional names, I mean the kind of words that people make up in works of fiction such as the dragon and Harry Potter. This kind of words does not stand for ideas that have corresponding entities in the real world. The empirical explanation of such words is that fictional names stand for complex ideas that are made up of simple ideas, which in turn originate from real existence. People combine several ideas in their minds together to form complex ideas for their needs. Complex ideas are preserved by names which are indeed names of mixed modes. Since people can combine ideas that have no natural relations with one and another together, the complex idea that the name of mixed modes signifies may not stand for any real existence. If it were the case, then these fictional names would all be the abuse of words in Locke's doctrine. In Locke's words, a kind of abuse of language is "an affected obscurity; by either applying old words to new and unusual significations; or introducing new and ambiguous terms, without defining either; or else putting them so together, as many confound their ordinary meaning" (Locke, 1999: 483). Take Harry Potter as an example, he is set as a wizard studying in Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Wizardry itself is an ambiguous term that does not stand for ideas of real existence, not to mention "Harry Potter", which combines ideas of wizardry, people, and student together. We cannot know the exact meaning of it. For Locke, the obscurity makes "Harry Potter" an abuse of language. Then, the whole fiction about Harry Potter is thereby also an abuse of language. In fact, not only this book but all fictional literature would be abuses of language, which is by no means consistent with our common sense. Thus, the assumption that explain the assumption is problematic. In other words, EIL cannot provide a convincing explanation of fictional names.

Universal terms are another kind of words for which EIL cannot provide a complete explanation besides fictional names. The empirical interpretation of universal terms is that they stand for ideas abstracted from experience. As Locke puts it, "words become general by being made the signs of general ideas: and ideas become general, by separating from them the circumstances of time and place, and any other ideas that may determine them to this or that particular existence". [7] In summary, People see similarities in particular things; remove other factors; retain the commonalities to form universal terms. The question is, how do people determine to what extent ideas should be abstracted. Deciding what qualities should be retained to form a general idea among so many qualities in

similar cannot be finished in the realm of experience. We cannot judge from our experience what level of abstraction is required to define a horse. One's definition of a horse cannot be generalized from experience since horses have so many characteristics that through experience alone, we cannot determine what should be retained to define a horse. Moreover, the origin of numbers, which are one kind of the most important universal terms that humans possess, cannot be explained by EIL. Without previous concepts of numbers, it is impossible for human beings to understand and abstract three from three specific objects such as three apples or three dogs. In our daily practice, an apple can be one while two shoes that make a pair of shoes can also be one. We cannot actually gain the idea of oneness from our experience of external existence. Thus, universal terms including number and other general words cannot be considered purely as a product of experience.

As a result, the incompleteness of EIL is also reflected in not being able to provide reasonable interpretations of the origin of certain words such as fictional name and universal terms.

3. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, EIL is not a complete and solid interpretation of language since it cannot fully account for several linguistic phenomena: differences of structures in different languages; the influence of language on people's experience and cognition; and the origin of certain words such as fictional names and universal terms.

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