CONCEPTS FOR REFLECTION AND PROBLEM-SOLVING: A PERSPECTIVE ON CARL BACHE'S METALANGUAGE FOR LANGUAGE DESCRIPTION AND 'VIDENSKAB'

by
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The aim of this paper is to place Carl Bache's linguistic research on a language for the study of tense and aspect (2008; 2002; 1994; 1986) into a philosophical tradition, namely Karl Popper's theory of human knowledge (1979). From Popper's view, it can be argued that many researchers' use of constructs for language description maintain the traditional ontological duality of mind and body, despite their embodied views of language. Bache's abstract, idealized metacategories have affinities with Popper's Third World conceptual artifacts, designed for the study of the physical world and the world of meaning and subjective experience.

1. Introduction

Several years ago Professor Carl Bache served as an internal examiner for an oral examination of a class I taught. While discussing a grade for a student presentation, the topic of theory and its uses came up, and within that discussion, the concept of 'concept' was also addressed. Then Carl Bache said something that I often think of and repeat to my students each and every semester. He said that concepts serve the purpose of reflection. Now, while reflecting on observational data and theory through concepts and other theoretical constructs is not uncommon for researchers, one seldom meets a scholar from the humanities who continually remains skeptical of his/her own concepts and categories for analysis. Most scholars, as a

certain famous cognitive linguist in a scholarly journal article once said about his own enterprise, seemingly want to continue working without reflecting on methodological orientations (see Lakoff 1990).

Carl Bache is different. He says, "We must continually strive to operate with the best theoretical and analytical apparatus" (2008: 196) in order to provide descriptions of languages as well as describe other cultural products of human activities. The implications for the individual researcher are to constantly rework earlier positions and fine-tune one's model in order to account for the data in the best possible way (Bache 2008: 196).

Carl Bache served as my PhD adviser but before that, I had first met him when, as a student at the English department, I took his course in English grammar. A few years later, he advised me on my 'speciale' for my cand. mag. in English and Art History. While discussing possible methodologies for language description, he said that he was a functionalist grammarian who was very much inspired by Systematic Functional Linguistics (SFL). For some reason, I ended up using Cognitive Linguistics as my analytical methodology instead. Maybe it was his critique of SFL, which I, as a novice, interpreted as symptomatic of a weakness in the theory. Today, I understand that the skepticism he showed is a strength for a researcher.

Using theories from Cognitive Linguistics as my method, I actually argued in my thesis against his view that the use of tense in literature serves a fundamentally different purpose than it does in talk (Bache 1986). Based primarily on Cutrer's (1994) study of tense in everyday language and narrative, I wrote that the use of tense forms in fiction involves a shift in the deictic center, which results in projecting the vantage point of the author, along with the tense system, to the space of the reader. But since my own research interests have turned to writing and the process of writing, I have come to realize that the materiality of language (the linguist's observational data), is essential for language description (see Kravchenko 2007 on writing and talk as two different domains). Indeed, as Carl Bache (1986)

writes, there is a tradition in modern linguistics to prioritize speech over writing (see also Coulmas 1989). Yet (as Carl Bache argues in various places), the problem for the study of tense and in language description as a whole may have to do with how categories and concepts are constructed and used. Much of Carl Bache's research concerns the use of categories and concepts in linguistics. In this paper, I will attempt to place Carl Bache's analytical methodology, primarily his view of the use of concepts for studying tense and aspect, in a philosophical tradition, specifically Karl R. Popper's (1979) theory of human knowledge.

When talking about the practice of research, Carl Bache often frames the discussion in terms of the Danish expression 'videnskab' (instead of 'science' or 'scholarship'), seemingly in order to avoid privileging the natural sciences over the humanities; in this way, he demonstrates that for him, the arts and the natural sciences both serve the purpose of knowledge creation. A general discussion of the philosophy of science and its primary questions of ontology, epistemology and methodology is beyond the scope of the current paper, yet in order to discuss Carl Bache's use of categories and concepts for language description, I will, as Jean Mandler (1998) prescribes, attempt to establish their knowledge status. In particular, in order to perspectivize Carl Bache's activities within *videnskab*, I will turn to his quasi-namesake, Sir Karl Popper, without claiming any other affinities between the two than their shared first names.

2. Popper's philosophy of three worlds

In Popper's philosophy (1979: 154), there is not one reality, but three what he refers to as "ontologically distinct sub-worlds". The first world is the physical world; the second is the mental world. Experience supports that there is an external material world of object and events which we are a part of, and a world of personal experience we sense

internally, and which appears more subjective. Some traditions in and outside of Western Philosophy may question these worlds' existence, but in my view Popper's main contribution to the philosophy of science, even more so than his principle of falsification, is his idea of the real existence of a *third* world. This third world consists of

> *ideas in the objective sense*; it is the world of possible objects of thought: the world of theories in themselves, and their logical relations; of arguments in themselves; and of problem situations in themselves (1979: 154).

When we, as researchers, scholars and philosophers, study language or any other phenomena related to the arts and sciences, we use such "ideas" constructed, maintained and further developed in the third world, though not in isolation from the other two. The ideas, theories, concepts and categories used to study phenomena in the physical world and the mental world are not discovered or found in these realities, rather they are created through the efforts of individuals cooperating over time and social distance in their problem-solving activities. The concept of oxygen, for instance, existed in theory (albeit under a different name) long before the material was isolated in the physical world (see Bereiter 2002). Sigmund Freud's concepts of 'id', 'ego' and 'superego' were designed as concepts for reflection of mental experience before they were naturalized as part of the second world of mental experience by psychoanalysts working in the Freudian tradition (see Erikson 1970).

In developing his philosophy, Popper (1979: 153) seeks inspiration from Plato's philosophy of a world of 'Forms' or 'Ideas'. According to Popper, Plato's world is an objective, autonomous world that exists along with the physical and mental worlds. In his own philosophy, Popper uses Plato's views to engage with Descartes' duality of body and mind. In preference to a world dualistically divided between a material and immateriality reality, or a monistic world consisting

of a single material or mental reality, Popper proposes a 'tripartite' worldview. While Plato's world of 'Ideas' represents a world of higher reality, to which only the philosopher has privileged access, Popper's world is more democratic, with access (in principle) for everybody.

Popper's three worlds (1979: 155) are related. The world of physical reality can interact with the world of mental reality; at the same time, the world of mental reality can interact with the world of ideas and concepts. However, the third world of ideas and concepts cannot interact with the first world directly. In order for these two worlds to interact, the second world of subjective or personal experience has to intervene. Thus, the second world acts as a mediator between the first and the third worlds. Accordingly, just as the human mind can perceive a physical entity or body, the human mind can 'see' a theoretical idea, like a number or geometrical figure. Popper recognizes that the latter case represents a metaphorical way of conceptualizing experience, yet it constitutes a real relationship between a mind and an intelligible entity. Thus, the human mind as a mediator can be linked with objects from the first and third worlds – with the important proviso, as Popper (1979: 155) writes, that the link is recognized as being indirect.

For Popper, there is no denying that scientific theories can have an immense impact on the first world. This impact of theories on the first world occurs by technologies created on the basis of theories. Significant for understanding the latter's objective status is that the technologies arise out of individuals engaging with the theories in ways that the persons who constructed the theories may not have imagined themselves. The possibilities of the theories may be hidden for the creators of the theories, but their ability to create technologies and even new theories are the result of others trying to understand the theories, ideas and concepts.

Popper (1979: 156) writes that all three worlds have an objective reality. The mental world of personal experience is a reality just as much as is the physical world. The purpose of the second world is

to engage with objects created over time and space by others from the third world. A mistake that is often made is to place theories and concepts in the second world, rather than recognizing their being abstractions, both in relation to the first world and second world. For Popper, it is obvious that universal concepts like numbers, but also mathematical propositions, have their place in the third world. In addition, he argues that non-mathematical theories can be placed in the third world – which is what happens when we learn a language. For Popper (1979: 156), an essential part of being human is learning a language and a major part of learning a language is learning to engage with "objective thought contents".

To further support the existence of third world concepts, Popper (1979: 157) refers to the philosophy of language as it was developed by the Stoics. He suggests that the Stoics realized that language belongs to all three worlds. Inasmuch as language is made up of sound patterns (and, in addition, of patterns on paper or computer screens), it belongs to the first world; however, in virtue of its ability to have an impact on how we construct meaning, and thereby on changing the way that we think, language belongs to the second world. Yet, according to Popper, language also belongs to the third world, as it contains and (metaphorically) conveys information, meanings and ideas that may agree, or clash, with other ideas. For Popper, ideas are the most important third world entities. According to him, ideas and concepts are important because we can use them to talk about the physical world, just as we use them to talk about subjective experiences, including our ability to understand a theory. At the same time that we can use language to talk about the contents of our theories and concepts, we can also talk about language itself in what is called a 'metalanguage'. For Carl Bache, this latter aspect: having a language about language (or a metalanguage) is essential in building his metacategories. Here, he fully recognizes the latter categories' third world status, being concepts that allow us to reflect on linguistic phenomena that are part of the first and second worlds.

3. Carl Bache's metacategories

The descriptive tradition in linguistics apparently revolves around the question of 'structure' (Boye and Harder 2012). A current issue at stake here (which draws lines of both disciplinary demarcation and methodological orientation) is whether linguistic structures exist only in the heads of linguists or also in those of the language users. Yet, for Carl Bache an even more pressing issue in language description is the problem of linguistic 'categories'. Referring to the sociolinguist William Labov and his study of language and meaning (1973), Bache (2002: 72) writes, "Categorization […] is at the very heart of linguistics". However, linguists are inconsistent in their use of the term; they are also terminologically vague when defining 'category'. Bache (2002: 73) notes that the term 'category' is generally used in two different ways. The first way is to refer to actual instances of linguistic units, such as morphological expressions; the second is to use the term as a kind of container for individual linguistic units that are understood to be members of the same category, such as tense forms. Here, Bache (2002) argues for metalinguistic clarity, arguing that much of linguistic scholarship takes for granted the language used for language description.

With respect to this question, Carl Bache follows up on a challenge issued by the cognitive psychologist and linguist Jean Mandler (1998: 256) for greater awareness of the knowledge status of concepts used by researchers. Much of Carl Bache's own research on tense and aspect has been directed towards clarifying the knowledge status of the concepts used for examining morphological and morphosyntactic expressions related to the complex verb forms in English. In essence, he is calling for a metalanguage for language description that would be unambiguous, serving as an effective tool free from too narrowly circumscribed research strategies. An efficient language for language description is essential for a scientific reflection on the nature of morphological and morpho-syntactic structures.

The primary objective of a metalanguage for language description is to facilitate inter-scholarly communication (Bache 2002: 75). Still, there are other features as well that make Carl Bache's meta-categories within the metalanguage resemble Popper's third world concepts. Bache defines a metacategory as a "generally applicable, cross-linguistic supercategory of an abstract, idealized nature which comprises an index of specific meanings of a potentially universal, linguistic relevant concept" (1994:43). Similar to Popper's third world concepts, the nature, or more precisely the knowledge status, of Bache's concepts is seen as abstract, idealized. In keeping with the ambition of language description to devise concepts that are universal (Chomsky 1956), Bache likewise writes that his concepts should be defined according to specific meanings that have a potentially universal linguistic relevance (see Haspelmath 2007 on substance as universal). However, the content of these concepts are true hypotheses that can be tested and improved on. As Bache expresses it (1994: 44), "All this … is really an attempt to offer a precise, and thus properly vulnerable, description of what is meant by metacategory." Inasmuch as his concepts are defined, yet vulnerable, their ontology is similar to third world ideas which can be in agreement or clash, with other ideas. They are not a part of the physical world nor are they a part of the world of individual minds.

Their third world status is further argued for by Carl Bache in his 2002 critique of the use of categories in linguistics. As his meta-categories are "flexible and open to innovations so as to serve new theoretical and descriptive needs" (Bache 2002: 75), it is important to stress that Bache is not arguing here for a universal grammar, but for a metalanguage that could cope with every possible aspect of human language. In Popper's view of language, a metalanguage would have to be valid both as regards the materiality of language use (i.e., its sounds and written patterns), but also with respect to the communicative aspect of language (i.e. for the construal of conceptual content). In order for such a metalanguage to capture,

or reflect on, these uses of language, it would be required that the concepts reflect expert categories with absolute standards separate from the ontologies of the first and second worlds.

Writing on absolute standards, Carl Bache (2002: 97) recognizes that "no real language is 'like' the metalanguage"; morphological and morphosyntactic expressions, such as having to do with verbal aspect, are much more complex than the concepts used to study these expressions. And finally, with regard to Popper's view of the status of concepts for reflection, Carl Bache writes that this complexity is to be expected, given that the "metalanguage is a product of abstraction and idealization" (2002: 97).

In the preceding pages, I have argued that Carl Bache's metacategories ontologically resemble Popper's third world concepts. In actual fact, however, Carl Bache himself does not seem to fully recognize the nature of his metacategories as conceptual artifacts belonging in the third world. In Bache (2002), he provides a cognitively salient metalanguage for language description that can be used not only to describe individual languages, but also to investigate their typology. He does so by insisting on absolute definitional criteria (based on his view of semantics) for the metacategories. Language structures have both syntagmatic relations and paradigmatic relations, meaning that the concepts should include a one to one connection between form and meaning, as well as exhibit what Carl Bache (2002: 99) calls the non-monadic nature of language specific forms – some of which cannot be described with reference to a single semantic domain. Carl Bache bases this view on his study of tense and aspect, whereby the English forms need to be described according to temporality, aspectuality and actionality. Defining concepts for language description in this manner is the only way of making them cognitively salient.

That said, I would still argue that Carl Bache's metacategories are cognitively salient and can serve as conceptual artifacts for language description and for teaching a language, *not* inasmuch they are based on his particular view of semantics, but because they truly have a

problem-solving purpose as third world concepts. Contrary to his own idea of '*videnskab*', Carl Bache seemingly places the semantics of his concepts for reflection in the users' minds, thereby implicitly placing these concepts in Popper's second world. In Bache's words, the non-monadic nature of verb forms in English and their semantics can "perhaps [be] best described as conventional *conceptual blends* of values from different semantic domains" (2002: 101). In this way, the metacategories become categories for the language user (or 'cognizer'), instead of being metaconcepts of the Popperian third world.

4. Conclusion

By way of concluding my perspective on Carl Bache's concepts for a language about language, I would again argue that his concepts are cognitively salient, but cognitive in a different manner from what is usually implied by the term. The cognitive psychologist Lawrence Barsalou (1983, 1991) provides theoretical and empirical evidence for people forming categories by manipulating conceptual knowledge to establish goal-derived categories through experiencing entities and events in the physical world (even in the absence of explicit learning). In contrast to such 'natural' categories that are learned by exemplar, goal-derived categories and ad hoc categories are formed by conceptual combination, even in the absence of exemplars; such categories are formed to achieve specific goals. Categories like these are created spontaneously for use in specialized contexts and are considered goal-directed. Arguably, the concepts used by many researchers to study phenomena in the physical world and the mental world of experience are categories of this type. In a Popperian perspective, concepts from the third world have precisely this problem-solving characteristic. Consequently, Carl Bache's metacategories, while documenting his ambition for inter-scholarly communication by relying on the abstract, idealized nature of such concepts, are cog-

nitively salient in virtue of being problem-solving categories for 'videnskab', while still belonging to Popper's third world.

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