

10-7-2010

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Recommended Citation

Heckel, Emily (2010) "A Wittgensteinian Defense of Cultural Relativism," *Macalester Journal of Philosophy*: Vol. 19: Iss. 1, Article 3.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/phil/vol19/iss1/3>

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A Wittgensteinian Defense of Cultural Relativism

Emily Heckel

Introduction

Cultural relativism is an integral part of the field methodology for cultural anthropologists. The concept of cultural relativism grew from developments within the philosophy of language, particularly associated with figures such as Wittgenstein, Quine, Whorf, and Sapir. These philosophers all argue for some version of the concept that linguistic categories, encoded in thought, help create the shared cultural realities in which we live. This concept of linguistic relativism, famously articulated in the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis¹, led to an emphasis in anthropology on the *emic*, or insider's, perspective. Ethnography is the process of eliciting the meanings by which the host culture constructs reality and translating these into the discourse of the discipline in a final written product. Steven Pinker, along with other evolutionary psychologists and cognitive scientists, refers to any and all versions of this view as the Standard Social Science Model² allowing him to defeat cultural relativism in one fell swoop (or so he thinks). Until a few years ago, the main critique of the ethnographic method came from the postmodern critique of science,

¹ Benjamin Whorf, "Science and Linguistics," *Technology Review*, 42 (1940): 247-248.

² Steven Pinker, *The Language Instinct* (New York: W. Morrow and Co., 1994), 23.

which questions objectivity in the social sciences on both ethical and epistemological grounds. Recently, the critique of cultural relativism has come from evolutionary psychologists and anthropologists. Research in cognitive science and psychology points to an evolutionary cause for what has previously been deemed cultural behavior. Some, including Steven Pinker, believe that this research should lead us to give primacy to evolutionary causes and should undermine any version of cultural relativism.

Steven Pinker, an evolutionary psychologist, presents an important challenge to the relativist views of language and meaning that pervade cultural anthropology. Advances in evolutionary psychology and the mind sciences provide evidence for biological commonalities in humans that extend to commonalities in our linguistic abilities and thought processes. Pinker argues that language is different from other aspects of so-called cultural behavior because it is innate or instinctual. Children become advanced grammarians without formal instruction, demonstrating an ability to apply rules beyond their ability to articulate such rules. This happens universally in the same way, as Pinker puts it, that children learn to walk upright instead of crawl around on all fours.³

Pinker argues that the universality of language entails universality in cognition. “People do not think in English or Chinese or Apache,” he says; “they think in a language of thought.”⁴ This language, which Pinker calls *mentalese*, may resemble all of these languages but it is probably richer than some and simpler than others.⁵ If cognition is shaped by a language of thought, then it is a

³ *Ibid*, 18.

⁴ *Ibid*, 81.

⁵ *Ibid*, 81.

biological property of all human beings, much the same as walking upright. Pinker is positing a language that is held prior to learned languages by all human beings and it is this innate language that shapes our cognition. If cognition is shaped not by the languages we know but by a universal language of thought, then relativism is undermined and this could have serious implications for anthropological theory and methodology.

Does the universality of language seriously undermine the Standard Social Science Model as Pinker claims? I argue that the evolutionary view of cognition is not necessarily incompatible with relativist views of meaning and values. Rather than take the Standard Social Science Model as one theory, as Pinker does, I will focus on Wittgenstein's philosophy of language and culture. Wittgenstein's position represents a more nuanced relativism that can account for aspects of Pinker's language instinct while still arguing for some degree of cultural relativism. In the first section, I discuss the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis as a basis for cultural relativism before outlining the challenges that Pinker presents to relativism and cultural anthropology. I will then discuss Wittgenstein's involvement in anthropology through the works of Stanley Cavell and anthropologist Veena Das and attempt a Wittgensteinian defense of cultural relativism.

Cultural Relativism

The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis is the basis for linguistic relativism as it is used in anthropology. Linguistic relativism has many different meanings and levels of interpretation. To understand this, I will return to the primary source that best sums up the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. Benjamin Whorf's

article “Science and Linguistics” examines the way that language affects thought and how the structure of language affects cognition. Whorf is critical of natural logic, which states that language depends on laws of reason and logic that are the same for everyone and exist independently of us.⁶ This implies that any language can express the same thought, because all languages are essentially extensions of reasoning and logic⁷. Whorf proposes that, rather than describe universal systems of reasoning, language actually creates these systems and, in doing so, actually shapes our experience of the world.

Whorf begins with a thought experiment in which we imagine a world of people who only had the psychological ability to see the color blue.⁸ Since they have never seen any other color, the concept of different colors to these people would be meaningless. The only way for the category of color to have any meaning for them would be if they had “exceptional moments”⁹ of seeing other colors. This thought experiment show the fallacies that Whorf sees in natural logic. First, language is a part of the background and not the “critical consciousness”¹⁰ of the speaker, and is therefore like the color blue in the example. When we talk about logic, we naturally use concepts, grammar, and rules from our own language. We do not question these laws because we have not consciously compared them to any others. Second, discussions of natural logic normally occur between speakers of the same language. “Two speakers of English,”

⁶ Benjamin Whorf, “Science and Linguistics,” *Technology Review*, 42 (1940): 2.

⁷ *Ibid*, 2.

⁸ *Ibid*, 2-3.

⁹ *Ibid*, 3.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 4.

Whorf explains, “quickly reach a point of assent about the subject matter of their speech; they agree about what their language refers to.”¹¹ It is not necessary for them to understand the linguistic processes that occur beneath the surface in order to agree on the rules that they share by virtue of both being speakers of English.

Whorf believes that the linguist is in a privileged position to study these phenomena and to expand their “base of reference”¹². It was the study of multiple languages and patterns that lead Whorf to look at a linguistic system as “not merely a reproducing instrument for voicing ideas but rather... a shaper of ideas”¹³. We all live in the same world, but we “dissect nature along lines laid down by our native languages”¹⁴. This idea has many implications for the objectivism of modern science, because it implies that individuals are not free to come up with their own thoughts about the world, but that their thoughts are shaped by the linguistic world in which they live (5). This affects every speaker of a language and leaves no one impartial, though Whorf argues that the most impartial would be the linguist who was familiar with many different linguistic systems. Whorf uses examples from his study of the Hopi language to show that the worldviews in English and Hopi are very different.

The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, developed through Whorf’s article and through subsequent publications and influenced by his advisor, Edward Sapir, is a two-fold argument. First, humans are only able to think about objects, processes, and conditions that have language associated with

¹¹ *Ibid*, 4.

¹² *Ibid*, 5.

¹³ *Ibid*, 5.

¹⁴ *Ibid*.

them, which is what Whorf is getting at with his thought experiment of people who only see the color blue. This is called linguistic determinism. The other part of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, linguistic relativity, states that culture is largely determined by language, as evidenced by the relationship between language and thought. Linguists and cultural anthropologists usually support a strong or weak interpretation of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. It is generally regarded as having some truth, but it presents some difficulties, as it is hard to completely support or refute it. Still, it has been a highly influential theory, particularly in the field of anthropology where it led to the development of methods in field research that emphasize cognitive categories in the brain that are unique to a particular culture and can be discovered through language.

The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis in many ways revolutionized ways of thinking about language and categories, particularly for the social sciences. It has also been a very controversial idea. In recent years, research in the cognitive sciences has led linguists, psychologists, and philosophers to explore the possibility of a universal language, implying that concepts and categories are shared cross-culturally. The argument that there is a universal language of thought, “mentalese,” that transcends different languages seems to be the antithesis of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, and there are some philosophers who vehemently argue against linguistic relativism based on this idea. I would like to explore the question of whether or not these two views about language and meaning are mutually opposed and irreconcilable. I will now turn to Pinker to present an evolutionary psychologist’s challenge to cultural relativism.

Pinker's Challenge

In *The Language Instinct*, Pinker lays out a revolutionary way of looking at language as an evolutionary mechanism. Pinker begins with Chomsky's observation that children develop complex grammars without formal instruction and grow up with the ability to interpret sentences that they have never heard before.¹⁵ Pinker and Chomsky would both agree that children are innately equipped with a Universal Grammar¹⁶ that allows them to apply complex syntactic patterns from the speech of their parents. Pinker says, "complex language is universal because *children actually reinvent it*, generation after generation."¹⁷ "... A three-year-old," he says, "... is a grammatical genius, but is quite incompetent at the visual arts, religious iconography, traffic signs, and other staples of the semiotics curriculum."¹⁸

According to Pinker, language is separate from what is commonly considered by anthropologists to be culturally learned behavior. In fact, Pinker argues that language is actually better explained in terms of evolution than in terms of culture. He says, "Language is no more a cultural invention than is upright posture."¹⁹ Cultural anthropologists argue that language encodes cultural symbols and shapes the thoughts of an individual within a given cultural context. If language can be explained in terms of evolutionary

¹⁵ Steven Pinker, *The Language Instinct* (New York: W. Morrow and Co., 1994), 22.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 22.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 32.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 19.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 18.

behavior, as Pinker claims, then certain aspects of anthropological methodology are undermined.

Not only is language an evolutionary mechanism, but it is an evolutionary mechanism with a specific function: communication. Pinker argues, “Once you begin to look at language not as the ineffable essence of human uniqueness but as a biological adaptation to communicate information, it is no longer as tempting to see language as an insidious shaper of thought, and, we shall see, it is not.”²⁰

If language is supposed to communicate information that is contained within one’s thoughts, then it follows that learned language (such as English or Japanese) cannot shape our thoughts, but it is *mentalese* that shapes language. Pinker says that mentalese “has symbols for concepts, and arrangements of symbols that correspond to who did what to whom.”²¹ I should note that mentalese not only operates according to a Universal Grammar, but that Pinker extends this to lexicon as well. We are able to communicate because our thoughts operate under a universal arrangement of symbols that is encoded in the mind of every language learner. Since language is just the means to the end of communication, Pinker asks why would language be so subjective?

In his chapter “Mentalese,” Pinker argues against the linguistic relativism proposed by the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. He even goes so far as to say that linguistic relativity is an example of what he calls “conventional absurdity: a statement that goes against all common sense but that everyone believes because they dimly recall having heard it somewhere.”²² Obviously there are reasons to

²⁰ *Ibid*, 19.

²¹ *Ibid*, 81.

²² *Ibid*, 57.

critique Pinker's unsympathetic portrayal of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, but first I would like to show why Pinker is so dismissive of this view. Pinker believes that people do not think in any particular language, but that they think in a "language of thought."

Knowing a language, according to Pinker is "knowing how to translate mentalese into strings of words and vice versa."²³ This is a radically different view from linguistic relativism in that it posits a stage in language acquisition and speech that is at a level of symbolism and has nothing to do with the categories specific to any one language or culture. Mentalese is simpler than some aspects of language and more complex than others. Pinker describes how language is ambiguous, for example in newspaper headlines, but we are still able to interpret the correct meaning.²⁴ For example, in the headline "Drunk Gets Nine Months in Violin Case,"²⁵ most readers would understand that the word "case" does not refer to the case in which one keeps a violin. This illustrates one of the differences between mentalese and language; in English, "case" can have multiple meanings, whereas in mentalese, each meaning will constitute a different symbol.

Overall, Pinker presents some important challenges to linguistic relativism. He questions how relativism can account for our ability to translate one learned language into another, for the universality of language acquisition, and for the connection between language and biological universals that he observes through viewing language as an evolutionary mechanism. I find his arguments about mentalese to be convincing. Pinker argues that children have

²³ *Ibid*, 81.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 80-81.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 79.

their own mentalese that allows for them to acquire increasingly complicated language and eventually develop more advanced mentalese as well. This is necessary, Pinker says, for language acquisition. How can linguistic relativism account for the fact that we are thinking about the world before we learn a language and during the learning process? How can children connect language with thought and meaning if thoughts are completely shaped by language? These are very real worries for linguistic relativism, at any level of moderation. By extension, they should be a concern for any field in which linguistic relativism is important, such as anthropology.

In the last chapter “Mind Design” Pinker discusses some philosophical implications of the universality of the language instinct and his theory of mentalese. It is clear that he is completely opposed to anything resembling the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, because this goes against the goal of further researching biological and evolutionary universals about human nature and the mind that have been discovered. Pinker quotes philosopher and experimental psycholinguist Jerry Fodor, “I *hate* relativism,” he says at one point, “I hate relativism more than I hate anything else.”²⁶ I believe that it is a mistake for Pinker to dismiss this viewpoint so vehemently. Does this merely illustrate that there is a polarizing divide in the philosophical community over language and thought? Is there any room for reconciling the two viewpoints, or of moderating them?

I will now turn to Wittgenstein and his relationship to anthropology to present a more nuanced view of cultural relativism. Though my defense of relativism could be

²⁶ *Ibid*, 405.

applied more generally, I believe that the Wittgensteinian view is especially useful in that it can accommodate a certain naturalism or empiricism that not all forms of relativism can contain.

Wittgenstein and Anthropology

Primarily a philosopher of language, mathematics, and logic, Wittgenstein was both influenced by and influenced anthropology. For example, it was negative reaction to Frazer's *Golden Bough* that led Wittgenstein to reexamine his views about culture and language. Wittgenstein finds Frazer's explanation of magic and religion as "mistakes" to be highly unsatisfactory. In his *Remarks on Frazer's Golden Bough*²⁷, we can discern the outlines of his later views as presented in the *Philosophical Investigations*²⁸. In general, Wittgenstein is critical of Frazer for judging the behavior of people in other cultures by his own societal standards. He says, "It never does seem plausible that people do all this out of sheer stupidity."²⁹

Wittgenstein is particularly critical of Frazer for saying that magic and ritual are merely "false physics"³⁰. He says, "What makes the character of ritual action is not any view or opinion, either right or wrong, although an opinion –

²⁷ Ludwig Wittgenstein, "Remarks on Frazer's *Golden Bough*" (Trans. A.C. Miles. Norfolk: Brynmill Press Ltd, 1979), 2.

²⁸ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (New York: Macmillan, 1958).

²⁹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, "Remarks on Frazer's *Golden Bough*," (Trans. A.C. Miles. Norfolk: Brynmill Press Ltd, 1979), 1.

³⁰ *Ibid*, 7.

a belief – itself can be ritualistic, or belong to a rite.”³¹ Wittgenstein compares the rituals that Frazer describes with rituals that he sees in his own culture; for example, breaking a bottle on a boat before sailing for good luck³². In comparing the rituals of one culture to those of his own, Wittgenstein shows that within the multiplicity of language games in our own culture, we can see parallels across cultures. It would be inaccurate to equate the magician in one culture with the scientist in our own. It is more accurate to draw a parallel between a magician and a priest, or between two different folk beliefs. Wittgenstein says about studying other cultures, “We can only describe and say human life is like that,”³³ implying that we should not attempt to look for explanations. However, he seems open to the idea that we can use language games with which we are familiar in order to understand similar language games in other cultures. This puts him in an interesting position of arguing against explanation, but with some openness to the possibility of understanding.

In *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein further develops this idea of language and behavior, which will influence anthropologists in the future. He famously compares a language system with a game.³⁴ Wittgenstein argues that the rules of a “language game” are learned through practice, rather than seeking meaning through a comparison with some non-linguistic reality, and people follow different linguistic rules depending on what language game they are participating in at the time. When

³¹ *Ibid*, 7.

³² *Ibid*, 17.

³³ *Ibid*, 3.

³⁴ Ludwig Wittgenstein. *Philosophical Investigations* (New York: Macmillan, 1958), para. 85.

Wittgenstein says that it is a mistake to compare the magic of culture to the science of another, he seems to be equating a language game with the linguistic aspect of a culture. He says, “What we have in ancient rites is the practice of a highly cultivated gesture-game.”³⁵ Wittgenstein does not ignore the possibility of biological commonalities between people, as we can see in his arguments about pain and crying, nor does he deny the instinctual ability of humans to acquire language. The very ability to distinguish between the discourse of magic and science implies that there must be aspects of both in our own culture. In trying to describe any universality and *give it meaning*, however, we run into a problem: It is impossible to give something value, meaning, or truth outside of a given system or language game.

Stanley Cavell, who writes about Wittgenstein as a philosopher of culture, focuses on Wittgenstein’s idea of forms of life. Cavell suggests that in applying Wittgenstein as a philosopher of culture, we distinguish between an ethnological or horizontal form of life and a vertical or “biological sense”.³⁶ The “ethnological” form of life is related to our interaction in a cultural context, through words and other behavior, as participants in language games. The “biological sense” of forms of life relates to universal non-linguistic aspects of life, including our naturally given behavior and responses. The two senses of forms of life that Cavell posits are, of course, connected. Wittgenstein’s concept of pain includes the natural behaviors related to crying. Though perhaps Wittgenstein himself would not talk

³⁵ Ludwig Wittgenstein, “Remarks on Frazer’s *Golden Bough*,” (Trans. A.C. Miles. Norfolk: Brynmill Press Ltd, 1979), 10.

³⁶ Cavell Stanley. “Declining decline: Wittgenstein as a philosopher of culture.” *This New Yet Unapproachable America: Lectures After Emerson After Wittgenstein* (Chicago: Univ. Chicago Press, 1989), 42.

about these two separately, I have relied on Cavell's distinction for this paper in order to emphasize that Wittgenstein posits a view that accounts for both universal, natural aspects of human life as well as subjective interpretations of this form of life through the shared language games in which we participate.

Anthropologist Veena Das points out that given the "certain air of obviousness with which notions of the everyday and voice are often spoken of in anthropological writing, I have been amazed at how difficult I found it to speak of these matters."³⁷ Das relates this idea of finding meaning in the everyday with Wittgenstein's skepticism. Though Das does not endorse objectivity, her skepticism of the everyday and her awareness of the self-imposed boundaries of context and subjectivity offer a point from which to look closely at the world around her from a perspective that, if not objective, is grounded in something natural – the boundaries of being a subjective agent.

In studying a culture that has been affected by extreme and sudden violence and pain, Das observes a breakdown in the relationship between the forms of life surrounding her and the language game in which they previously were engaged in. She herself, like most of us, has not participated in these forms of life and a new language must be developed to speak of this. Because of the inextricable connection between pain and language, it is impossible for Das as an anthropologist to fully understand what her informants have experienced. However, it is through this lack of understanding that she finds a point from which to study. The point from which Das studies is

³⁷ Veena Das, *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary* (Berkeley: Univ. Calif. Press, 2007), 4.

completely different from the perspective of someone like Pinker, who studies objective symbolic categories. Das does not attempt to study at that level of analysis; instead, she acknowledges her inability to explain the behavior of others, and settles for a limited understanding.

I plan to come to the defense of the Wittgensteinian perspective as it manifests itself in anthropology, specifically through the work of Veena Das and Stanley Cavell. Although Wittgenstein is sometimes dismissed by linguists on the grounds that he writes before the Chomskyan revolution, Das has taken Wittgenstein's ideas and applied them to her current work. Her book *Life and Words*³⁸ details her theories and methods, as well as some ethnographic chapters, that uses Wittgenstein's ideas about language, pain, and privacy. It seems that Wittgenstein's project of bringing language back to the everyday is still relevant.

Wittgensteinian Defense

In the previous section, I have outline Wittgenstein as a philosopher of culture and shown that he is a relativist with naturalist leanings. Wittgenstein's cultural relativism, it seems, can still account for biological commonalities. In fact, even the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, which is often taken as an extremely relativist position, does not have to deny the existence of a natural world independent of human discourse. In "Science and Linguistics," Whorf says, "We all live in the same world, but we "dissect nature along lines

³⁸ *Ibid.*

laid down by our native languages.”³⁹ I assume that in “nature,” Whorf would include the biological aspect of the “human animal,” thereby accounting for biological commonalities.

I have shown that it is possible to account for some biological commonality in relativism. However, Pinker would not want to stop there. The crucial difference between Pinker’s views and the Standard Social Science Model is not, as Pinker believes, that the SSSM is incompatible with biological commonalities, or that it denies the existence of a natural world outside of human discourse. Pinker takes the discovery of biological commonalities in cognition a step further to say that, not only are the material workings of our minds universal, but our actual meanings and values are universal. I see no evidence for this.

Pinker argues that language is an evolutionary mechanism that humans developed in order to communicate. Pinker does not see, however, that evolutionary mechanisms are valueless. In order to extend his argument that language is universal to other aspects of human behavior, Pinker provides an exhaustive list, borrowed from Donald Brown in *Human Universals*, that people have in common cross-culturally. On the list are such abstract concepts as “law,” “rights,” and “property,” as well as practices such as “institutionalized marriage.” Just as every attempt to recreate mentalese has resembled the language of the creator, this list contains words that have connotations unique to Western culture, perhaps even the culture of the US. The very idea of “rights” is extremely difficult to communicate cross-

³⁹ Benjamin Whorf, “Science and Linguistics,” *Technology Review*, 42 (1940): 5.

culturally, presumably because this word is loaded with *values* and *meanings* that could not possibly be universal.

Relativism in a Wittgensteinian sense is not at all incompatible with the cognitivist project of discovering the inner workings of the human mind. Suppose that we did in fact discover a “language of thought” and tested it cross-culturally, proving that everyone in the world thinks with a Universal Grammar. What about this “language” makes it a language in any way that is comparable to how we normally view language? Wittgenstein argues that we can only interpret an utterance as a language if we can also interpret the speaker’s overall behavior. This is how Wittgenstein arrives at his famous line, “If a lion could talk, we could not understand him”⁴⁰. Veena Das suggests that it is possible to relate to people in ways that appeal to different levels of understanding besides the surface meaning of a given language game, without appealing to some transcendental universal grammar that resides in each of us. We might also ask the question, if we have a universal grammar, why do we not understand each other better? We do not, after all, understand the innermost thoughts and motivations of even fellow participants in our most practiced language games.

This brings me to the next defense of a Wittgensteinian view of relativism. Pinker posits that language evolved for the specific purpose of communication. Again, if this is the purpose of language, why can we not communicate better than we do? Das talks about what she considers the difference between speech and voice. Speech, or utterance, is not all there is to language. In dealing with world-shattering violence, Das explains that people lose context to the point where the language game in

⁴⁰ PI II.xi.218

which they operate no longer corresponds to the everyday reality in which they live. People then seek to recover this reality through everyday events and conversation, but as Das finds in her fieldwork, the speech, or words uttered, do not always correspond to the voice of her informants. Das finds just as much meaning in silences, secrets, and omissions, as she does in the language of her informants. These can find a place in Wittgenstein's language game, but not in Pinker's mentalese.

Not only is language not always effective for communication, but why should we give primacy to communication as the purpose of language? Pinker seems to posit a value on language that does not implicitly exist in all linguistic behavior. People learn to play games, tell jokes, and write meaningless poetry. What, evolutionarily, would motivate us to communicate in such ways? If direct communication is the purpose of language, then why do we not all speak in Aristotelian syllogisms? Whatever goes on in the inner workings of our brains when we speak does not seem to be directly related to the purpose of our linguistic behavior in practice.

This linguistic behavior is related to the larger cultural context of human behavior in a way that Pinker does not fully address. When Pinker says, "Language is no more a cultural invention than is upright posture" (18), he unwittingly leaves the connection of language to other learned behaviors open. Upright posture is not learned through cultural immersion, but the meaning of sitting upright at the dinner table is definitely a cultural symbol. As humans, why should we necessarily separate the two – evolution and culture – in our minds? Pinker describes a practice in one culture of building sand around infants in order to teach them to sit up straight. Clearly, in this culture,

people do not make a distinction between what is natural and what is culture; neither is given primacy. In our culture, we see the same principle at work in Chomsky's discussion of the prevalence of motherese. It is precisely because evolutionary behaviors are learned along with cultural behaviors that different cultural behaviors exist.

Language is no different from these other behaviors in the sense that it is both innate and learned culturally. Pinker says "Complex language is universal because *children actually reinvent it*, generation after generation."⁴¹ The evolutionary mechanism that allows children to "reinvent" language is not incompatible but works alongside the cultural behavior that surrounds language learning. As children learn language, cultural symbols are encoded in a way that is also biological. These symbols have causal efficacy in the choices that people make because they govern their worldview. This worldview is not something that can be reduced to a universal grammar. The collective worldview, which acts in relation to the abstract rules that are applied in order to learn a language, is an essential component to understanding language. It governs both the subjects and the researcher who studies language and culture. Perhaps this is why the only attempts at recreating mentalese have resembled the language of the researcher.

For example, we cannot directly relate understanding to a state of mind or an abstract principle. Instead, understanding how to go on with a numerical series is demonstrated in the ability that we show to continue correctly with the series. In this argument, Wittgenstein seeks to refute a Cartesian idea that the understanding is

⁴¹ Steven Pinker, *The Language Instinct* (New York: W. Morrow and Co., 1994), 32.

hidden away in the privacy of the individual mind, not a modern idea about the cognitive nature of the mind. However, it can be applied to Pinker's idea of mentalese. I do not think that Wittgenstein would reject the attempts that cognitive scientists make to study the mind, but would resist any attempt to equate the meaning of terms like "understand" with brain states rather than human practices.

Knowing a language, according to Pinker is "knowing how to translate mentalese into strings of words and vice versa"⁴². This is precisely where he departs from Wittgenstein. I do not know mentalese, and I don't know anyone who does. There may be underlying mental processes associated with everything from witty banter to abstract concepts, but that does not mean that these mental processes *are* these concepts. Wittgenstein studies language as a part of the behavior of humans. When Wittgenstein suggested the impossibility of opening the black box of the human mind, he was referring primarily to the Cartesian mind. This could also be applied to the present-day research in cognitive science and the study of the biological processes associated with language. Even if we did discover a language of thought, this would not be a language that any of us know, and it would not correspond to the subjective way each of us sees the world. It would also not undermine the assertion that the way one behaves in the world is culturally dependent.

⁴² *Ibid*, 82.

Conclusion

When Pinker says, “Language is no more a cultural invention than is upright posture”⁴³, he is referring to only one aspect of language and behavior. Upright posture, in the sense of humans walking upright rather than crawling on all fours, is not cultural. However, the meaning that we give to upright posture is. The fact that that very phrase evokes for me the image of a strict parent instructing a child to sit up straight at the dinner table is a cultural fact, not an evolutionary fact. Language may be an evolutionary mechanism and, of course, biological commonalities in humans limit the scope of cultural diversity. However, we are equally limited by the linguistic system in which we operate because we do not consciously think in mentalese; we think in the linguistic system in which we were raised. We can point out biological commonalities, but we will always be limited in our communication of these commonalities by the imperfect languages that we speak.

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⁴³ *Ibid*, 18.

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