

Language is for thought and communication

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Abstract

There is an ancient debate about whether language is an instrument for thought or for communication. In this squib, I argue that the distinction is misleading and that human-specific thought and human-specific communication are both configured by language. The argument is based on the growing consensus that syntactic structure governed by universal grammar (UG) encompasses not only the propositional content of an utterance but also its communicative content including the regulation of common ground and turn-taking. If communicative content is part of UG, then it follows that communication is as much a function of language as thought is.

1. What is language for?

The kinds of thoughts humans have distinguishes us from animals and so does the way we communicate them, namely via language (Hockett 1959, Fitch 2019). Language functions as the means which allows us to access the mental worlds of others, to synchronize them thereby establishing a common ground. The relation between thought and language has been the subject of investigation since ancient times and so has the relation between language and communication (e.g. Aristotle's *De interpretatione*, Arnauld and Lancelot 1660/1966). It is typically assumed that it is either thought or communication which is the primary purpose of language and this dichotomy has not been resolved. For example, Chomsky (2017: 298) claims that "*the modern doctrine that communication is somehow the "function" of language is mistaken... Language is fundamentally a system of thought.*" The language-is-for-thought view, which pervades the contemporary generative tradition, contrasts with the alternative view according to which "*language arose primarily in the interests of enhancing communication, and only secondarily in the interests of enhancing thought.*" Jackendoff (2002: 123). This view has recently been developed in Levinson (2019: 189) who argues that not only is language primarily for communication, but in fact that it is our "*special underlying communicative ability that makes language possible.*"

The language-is-for-communication view is not typically found in the generative tradition (with the exception of Jackendoff 2002) but it is widespread within cognitive science (Carruthers 2002) as well as within functionally oriented approaches towards language (as for example Levinson). This dichotomy, if not schism, in the way language is viewed across different scholarly traditions influences the way these traditions approach language, the empirical domains that are investigated, as well as the methodologies used.

2. Assumptions about language determine the empirical domains investigated

Since its inception, the generative tradition has held the view that there is a distinction between *competence* and *performance*. It is the former (knowledge of language), which is taken to be the core object of investigation. Language in use is assumed to be influenced by general cognitive

limitations which influences performance. This view affects the types of data explored. Specifically, language is not explored in use, but instead data are collected by eliciting native speaker judgments on constructed sentences. This contrasts with approaches that take communication to be the main function of language; on this view it is environments of communication which are the natural habitat for language and this is where it should be explored through corpus analysis.

Naturally, the empirical phenomena that define the subject of investigation for each of these traditions differ. Language changes in interaction such that there are units of language (henceforth UoL) which do not contribute to the construction of propositions (“thought”) and which do not convey truth-conditional meaning. Instead they serve to regulate the interaction itself; they contribute to the flow of communication. This type of non-truth-conditional meaning is sometimes referred to as use-conditional (Gutzmann 2015) or procedural (Blakemore 2002). I refer to this aspect of language as i(nteractional)-language. i-language serves to manage the *common ground* among the interlocutors as well as *turn-taking*. This is exemplified in (1) where the boldface UoLs are interactional: *eh* (realized with rising intonation) serves to request confirmation for the propositional content (*Gal Gadot was amazing as Wonder Woman*). *Yeah* in the response indicates agreement with the preceding content and an additional confirmation request via sentence-final *right* has the effect of emphasizing mutual agreement.

- (1) A: Gal Gadot was amazing as Wonder Woman, eh?
B: Yeah, I know, right?

Traditionally, these types of UoLs have not been considered within the generative tradition because sentences in isolation do not contain them: they require an interactant and hence these UoLs are sometimes considered to be outside of the sentence proper (Kaltenböck et al. 2016). But the sentence is the unit of analysis for generative syntacticians as well as formal semanticists. Roughly, syntax concerns itself with predicate-argument structures that form propositions and semantics with truth-conditional meaning, neither of which can straightforwardly incorporate i-language.

i-language has received much attention in frameworks that are concerned with language in use, such as conversation analysis (Sacks et al. 1974) and interactional linguistics (Couper-Kuhlen and Selting 2001, Selting and Couper-Kuhlen 2000). Interestingly, within these traditions, it has long been assumed that i-language and more generally a speaker’s knowledge of how to have conversations, is part of language competence (Campbell and Wales 1970, Hymes 1972, Keenan (Ochs) 1974, Mittwoch 1976, a.o.). This calls into question the implicit assumption that the competence/performance distinction aligns with the distinction between truth-conditional and procedural meaning. And in fact over the past two decades or so, generative analyses have begun to include such UoLs into their domain of investigation.

3. The syntacticization of speech acts and other non-truth conditional aspects of language

There is a growing scholarship which can be characterized as the *syntacticization of speech acts*. The original version of this idea was already introduced in Ross’ 1970 within the framework of generative semantics. The insight behind the performative analysis was that aspects of sentence-use (the illocutionary force of an utterance) are encoded in the syntax. The idea was that a declarative like *Prices slump* is embedded in a superordinate structure, itself a predicate-argument structure, which encodes the assertoric force (*I tell you that*) but which is subsequently deleted. While the Ross-style analysis was dismissed along with the framework within which it was couched, the rise of functional categories has led to its revival. The idea is that functional categories

encode aspects of interpretation that determine the speech act of an utterance. Specifically, Ross' insight has been taken up in the cartographic framework, especially in Rizzi's 1997 articulation of the left periphery, which includes a ForceP. Even more explicitly in the spirit of Ross is the proposal by Speas and Tenny 2003, who argue that Ross' predicate-argument structure can be analysed as a functional speech act structure (saP) which follows the same logic as thematic argument-structure. Much recent work follows into the footsteps of this work though the labels of the proposed structure differ (Beninca 2001, Hill 2007, 2013, Coniglio and Zagraen 2012, Krifka 2013, Haegeman and Hill 2013, 2014, Haegeman 2014, Paul 2014, Zu 2013, 2018, Corr 2016, Woods 2016, Miyagawa 2017, a.o.). What this scholarship has in common is that it extends the empirical domain for generative analyses; it explores UoLs which are non-truth conditional and which require us to take into consideration the current speech act participants. Thus, while Ross' speech act structure was motivated largely based on interpretation, this new body of work explores overt UoLs which are best analysed as spelling out the syntactic speech act structure. For example, there are languages which display agreement with speech act participants (e.g., Galician (Uriagerka 1995), Magahi (Verma 1991), and Mupun (Frajzyngier 1989), among others). Crucially, there is evidence that this type of agreement has to be part of syntactic structure. For example, it is sensitive to clause-type restrictions (Oyharçabal 1993, Miyagawa 2017). This suggests that speech act participants have to be part of the syntactic representation (Haddican 2015, Zu 2018). Other empirical domains that have been analyzed as part of a dedicated speech-act structure include vocatives (Hill 2007, 2013) and discourse particles (Munaro and Poletto 2002, Speas and Tenny 2003, Davis 2011, Saito and Haraguchi 2012, Haegeman and Hill 2013, 2014, Lam 2014, Woods 2016, Saito 2015, among others), as well as expressive UoLs such as *please* (Woods 2016) and *man* (McCready 2009).

This brings us to a second line of research, which concerns itself with UoLs that lie outside of the classic domain of grammatical analysis, namely expressives and other UoLs without truth-conditional content. For example, UoLs such as *ouch* and *oops* serve to express emotions rather than describe them (Hayne 1956, Kaplan 1999). Analyses of expressive meaning have led to the incorporation of non-truth-conditional meaning into formal semantic theory: sentence meaning is enriched with a dimension typed as *expressive* (Potts 2007) or *use-conditional* (Recanati 2004, Gutzmann 2013).

For the purpose of this discussion, neither the details of the empirical facts nor of the analyses are important. What is important is that this work has enriched the empirical domain of formal linguistic investigation and it has led to the realization that UoLs which do not contribute to propositional content are still amenable to linguistic analyses within the generative framework and with essentially the same analytical tools. If this body of work is on the right track this means UoLs that belong to i-language are regulated by UG.

Now, one might counter that many of the empirical phenomena that this body of research covers could still be viewed as being part of thought rather than being dedicated to communication. This is certainly true for expressives, like *oops* and *ouch*, which do not even need an addressee. Hence they are not interactive. However, this view is more difficult to uphold for confirmationals and response markers.

4. From speech acts to interaction

The majority of the work which seeks to syntacticize speech acts is modelled after Ross' 1970 performative hypothesis implementing in different ways the claim that assertions, for example, are dominated by a structure which translates as *I tell you that*. In turn, Ross' analysis is directly inspired by Austin's 1962 speech act theory. Thus, syntacticizing speech acts is syntacticizing

assumptions that define classic speech act theory. However, speech act theory has developed since Austin's seminal work and much, if not all, of this development is about recognizing the interactive nature of speech acts. For example, classic speech act theory postulates the following felicity conditions for a typical assertion: i) the speaker believes that the asserted proposition is true and ii) the addressee does not know the proposition. Hence the speaker is giving the proposition expressed in the declarative clause to the addressee, which is precisely the intuition that Speas and Tenny's 2003 analysis aims to capture. It is consistent with the Stalnakerian view of common ground updates such that by uttering a proposition the common ground is updated (Stalnaker 1978, 2002). However, in interaction things are more complex. First, in the real world the interactants do not always have complementary knowledge states. That is, it is not always the case that the speaker knows and the addressee does not, yet this does not prevent interaction. And second the addressee plays a critical role in establishing the common ground: for successful updates the addressee has to indicate that they are accepting the proposition given to them (Clark 1991). Only then is communication successful. This is where i-language comes into play. First, sentence final particles like *eh* and *huh* are used to modify assertions. Specifically, they can modify the knowledge states of the interlocutors relative to a given proposition. For example, *eh* and *huh* can be used if the speaker is not sure about the truth of the proposition and hence wants confirmation from the addressee (thus Wiltschko & Heim (2016) refer to these UoLs as confirmationals). In contrast, *eh*, but not *huh* can be used if the speaker is sure about the truth of the proposition but is not sure whether the addressee knows this already.

- (2) a. You have a new dog, *eh/huh*?
b. I have a new dog, *eh/*huh*?

Thus, these discourse markers are used if either of the felicity conditions for assertions do not hold. In other words, discourse markers are used if something runs counter the normal course of a conversation.

The second function of these confirmationals is to request confirmation; their use indicates that the speaker requires a response (a *call on the addressee* in the sense of Beyssade & Marandin 2006). This function is encoded by the rising intonation associated with these markers, as evidenced by the fact that *eh*, for example, can be realized with flat intonation in which case no response is required (Johnson 1976).

In this way, discourse markers are clearly interactional: they regulate common ground updates and turn-taking. These are functions which play a crucial role in work that follows in the foot-steps of classic-speech act theory, both within formal and functional approaches and which seek to model the interactional and dynamic nature of conversational language (e.g., Groenendijk and Stokhof 1991, Clark 1996, Couper-Kuhlen and Selting 2001, Selting and Couper-Kuhlen 2000, Ginzburg 2012).

Crucially, as we saw above, *eh* and *huh* are not interchangeable and hence they must have different functions. Both can be used when the speaker is uncertain about the truth of the proposition but only *eh*, not *huh*, can be used when the speaker is certain about the truth of the proposition. This difference between *eh* and *huh* along with the multi-functionality of *eh* can in principle be modelled in two different ways. It may be a matter of the lexical entry of each of these confirmationals, such that *eh* has two separate lexical entries whereas *huh* only has one. Alternatively, the two functions of *eh* may be analyzed as deriving from the syntactic context. Specifically, we may assume that the core lexical content of *eh* is minimal and that its precise

function is a matter of which functional projection it associates with. For example, according to Wiltschko (to appear) the top of the functional architecture is dedicated to regulating i-language. It comes with an articulated structure responsible for the regulation of common ground (GroundP), one speaker-oriented, the other, higher one, addressee-oriented as well as a layer of structure responsible for encoding the call on addressee (RespP). Confirmationals differ as to which layer of structure they associate with: *eh* can associate with both GroundPs, whereas *huh* is restricted to addressee-oriented GroundP. In addition, in English RespP is associated with the sentence-final rise (marked as \nearrow below) which is used to request engagement with the addressee (Heim 2019).

$$(3) \left[\underset{\nearrow}{\text{RespP}} \text{ Call on Addressee } \left[\text{GroundP } \underset{eh/huh}{\text{Ground}_{\text{Adr}}} \left[\text{GroundP } \underset{eh/*huh}{\text{Ground}_{\text{Spkr}}} \left[\text{p-structure} \right] \right] \right] \right]$$

This is an explicit model which incorporates insights of frameworks that consider language in interaction, and models i-language via an extension of the spine. It is thus in the spirit of syntacticizing speech acts but is more explicit about the interactional aspects of language. This is reflected in the labels of the functional categories postulated: grounding and responding which are functions of interaction. And crucially, Wiltschko (to appear) explicitly argues that other than extending the spine to include new functions, the architecture of the spine is identical for propositional and interactional structure. In the next section I review evidence that supports this view, which is crucial for the argument that configuring the communicative function of language is as much part of the language faculty as is configuring propositional thought.

5. Evidence that aspects of interaction are built into the faculty of language

First, Wiltschko (to appear) argues that assuming a structure which incorporates i-language into the architecture of language is the null-hypothesis. Consider how. It is clearly the case that there is a system that regulates i-language: it is responsible for its systematicity and for the fact that native speakers have clear judgments about the well-formedness of UoLs that belong to i-language. Furthermore, Wiltschko (to appear) shows that the same system regulates the distribution and interpretation of confirmationals and of response markers. Both types of UoLs display similar patterns of multi-functionality. If there was no system that would be responsible for these patterns, then we would have to assume multiple lexical entries and the similarity in the patterns of multi-functionality would be coincidental. But if there is a system that regulates i-language it is the null assumption that this system is the same as the one that regulates propositional language. Hence, the burden of argument is on those that assume that i-language is governed by a different system than propositional language.

Related to this is the fact that i-language is prosodically integrated with propositional language. That is, as mentioned above, a sentence final rise can be realized on the confirmational if there is one. Otherwise the sentence final rise is realized on the propositional clause itself. Crucially, in the presence of a confirmational, sentence final intonation cannot be realized on the clause nor can it be realized on both (the confirmational and the clause) (Heim & Wiltschko, to appear). This means that i-language must be visible to the system which is responsible for regulating the distribution of sentential intonation. If i-language were regulated by its own system, then we would have to model sentential intonation with a system that can interact with both these systems. It is thus more parsimonious to assume that the same system regulates both propositional language and i-language and that the system regulating intonation interacts with this system.

Third, the UoLs that make up i-language are hierarchically organized, as predicted by the hypothesis that they are regulated by the spine. This is evidenced based on the fact that across languages, for example, speaker-oriented discourse markers are realized closer to the propositional content than addressee-oriented ones (see Lam 2014 for evidence from Cantonese, Haegeman 2014 for Dutch). Hierarchical organization determines both linearization and scope, as usual.

Fourth, i-language participates in patterns of contrast and paradigmaticity, which constitutes one of the hallmarks of syntax. Contrast is built into the system via binary features that associate with each head, and given that interactional structure is comprised of multiple heads as in (3) we expect paradigms of confirmationals. This prediction is borne out, for example in Mandarin which has a series of confirmationals, that enter into paradigmatic contrast (Wiltschko, to appear).

Fifth, if i-language and propositional language are configured by the syntactic spine, then we predict that i-language shows parallels in the nominal and the verbal domain. This follows from the wide-spread assumption that there is a universal parallelism in the clausal and the nominal spine (Abney 1987). And indeed, Ritter and Wiltschko 2018, 2019 show evidence that nominals, too, are dominated by interactional structure with the same functions as the interactional structure dominating clauses. Relevant UoLs whose distribution is regulated by the nominal interactional spine include vocatives as well as certain so-called pronouns of East Asian languages which are not comprised of phi-features and whose distribution differs from those of pronouns in the Indo-European languages.

Finally, while there is evidence that the same architecture that configures propositional language is also responsible for configuring i-language there are also differences. For example, i-language is a root-phenomenon and hence cannot be embedded. I submit that this follows straightforwardly from properties of turn-taking: once a request for response is uttered, a speaker will have to give up their turn and stop talking, making embedding impossible. Note that it comes as no surprise that different domains on the spine have different properties; this is well-known even within propositional language. For example, the domain where thematic roles are discharged and event-structure is configured has different properties than the domain where discourse relations are encoded (i.e., the CP-domain). Moreover, from the point of view of interpretation, interactional structure is expected to display different properties as it is generated above the domain where truth-conditions are assigned. Hence the meaning of a UoL that belongs to i-language is expected to be non-truth conditional. These differences, however, do not lead to the conclusion that i-language is regulated by a system that differs fundamentally from the system that regulates propositional language; rather these differences are expected from the assumption that i-language is regulated by structure dominating propositional content.

6. Language is for thought and for communication

I have now shown that there is evidence that i-language is as much part of the language faculty as propositional language leading us to conclude that it can be incorporated into the syntactic spine. If so, then it follows that communication is not a minor negligible function of human language. If aspects of communicative interaction are built into the language system then communication is as much a function of language as thought is. Hence, the classic dichotomy between language as a means to express thought versus language as a means to communicate such thoughts implodes: the two cannot be separated from each other. This is a welcome result: a comprehensive approach toward the role of language in human cognition cannot abstract away from either of these functions. Language, thought and communication are inextricably connected. In the absence of thought, there is nothing to communicate, and conversely in the absence of communication,

language remains undetectable. In fact, I submit that the human language faculty is the bridge that mediates between human-specific thought and human-specific communication.

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