

## Concepts and Language

Concepts are constituents of thought contents, or constituents of abilities to entertain, or reason with, contents. Your belief that this is an encyclopaedia entry has the content: *that this is an encyclopaedia entry* and that content embeds constituent concepts: *encyclopaedia* and *entry*. Your ability to entertain or reason with the content *that this is an encyclopaedia entry* involves abilities to think about encyclopaedias and entries, and thus possession of concepts of encyclopaedias and entries. We shall restrict attention to brief discussion three large questions about connections between concepts and language and focus on philosophical, rather than psychological, issues.

(Q1) We use language to express thoughts, and thus concepts. How are the properties of language that underwrite expression connected with the thoughts, and thus concepts, expressed?

(Q2) Humans are unusual, perhaps unique, in both linguistic and conceptual abilities. To what extent are these abilities interdependent? Could a creature think at all—possess any conceptual abilities—without language? Could creatures without language use the same concepts as the linguistically competent? Could a creature have language without concepts?

(Q3) Human languages, and human linguistic abilities, appear to vary, for instance in the forms of classification imposed by their vocabularies. Does such variance induce, or reflect, variance in conceptual abilities?

### Linguistic expression of concepts (Q1)

Many philosophers hold the following. (i) Thoughts (e.g., beliefs), in concert with the way the world is, determine truth-values, so are either true or false. (ii) Determination of truth-value for thoughts is derivative from determination of truth-value for thought *contents* (so that, for example, your belief that this is an encyclopaedia entry is true *because* it is true *that this is an encyclopaedia entry*). (iii) Determination of truth-value for thought contents is derivative from contributions made by constituent concepts and the way those concepts are combined in constituting the thought content. From (i)–(iii), if we hold fixed the way the world is, then two beliefs with contents constituted in the same way from the same concepts must have the same truth-value.

The most straightforward view about the way language expresses concepts is:

(SV) Each substantive expression type (perhaps as typed by meaning) expresses a concept and each type of sentential mode of combination (broadly, each syntactic structure type, including non-substantive expression types) expresses a way of putting concepts together to constitute a thought content. (Very roughly, substantive expression types—like ‘heavy’ and ‘encyclopaedia’—make a distinctive contribution to the subject-matter of a sentence, while non-substantives and structural features of sentences—perhaps including ‘is’, ‘the’, and the way expressions are combined in ‘The encyclopaedia is heavy’—determine how the substantives work together to determine the subject-matter of sentences.)

Given (i)–(iii), we can test *SV* by seeing whether, if we hold fixed the way the rest of the world is, all thoughts expressed by a sentence type are guaranteed to have the

same truth-value. (If we don't hold fixed the way the rest of the world is, changes in truth-value are to be expected: the true thought that the encyclopaedia is heavy would be false if the world was such that it was a far lighter book.) If they are not, then we must reject *SV*.

An immediate problem for *SV* is the existence of context sensitive expression types, e.g. indexicals (e.g. 'I', 'here', 'now') and demonstratives (e.g. 'this', 'that', 'those', 'she', 'he').

(1) I live near London.

Sentence (1) as used by different speakers can determine different truth-values. Given (i)–(iii), it follows that uses of (1) can express different thought contents, so *SV* is false.

A modest revision of *SV* would restrict it to context-insensitive expression types. However, it is not clear that there are such expression types. Consider (2):

(2) Barack Obama is 1.87 meters tall.

Even if the expression type 'Barack Obama' is only used to speak about the current president of the United States (from noon, 20<sup>th</sup> January 2009), it's plausible that (2) can be used to express thought contents with different truth-values. For most ordinary purposes, (2) expresses a truth even if Obama is 1.8700001 meters tall. But plausibly, (2) would express a falsehood if the context was precise (nine decimal place) laser measurement of Obama's height.

A different reason for rejecting *SV* arises from arguments that concepts are typed in a more fine-grained way than expression meanings. An example of Saul Kripke's is illustrative. Pierre, a monolingual French speaker, assents to (3) on the basis of reading travel guides:

(3) Londres est jolie.

Pierre moves to an ugly part of London, without realising it's the place his travel guides described. Having acquired English from locals, Pierre dissents from (4):

(4) London is pretty.

It is plausible that the thought content Pierre expresses through assent to (3) is different from the thought content he expresses through dissent from (4). For otherwise, Pierre would appear to believe and disbelieve the same thought content, and it is more natural to view Pierre as ignorant than irrational. The difference in thought contents plausibly traces to a difference in the concepts that Pierre expresses using 'Londres' and 'London'. Nonetheless, it is plausible that 'London' and 'Londres' have the same linguistic meaning. Hence, we have reason to reject *SV*.

### **Linguistic ability and conceptual ability (Q2)**

Two very general questions about the connection between linguistic ability and conceptual ability are the following. First, is linguistic ability necessary for conceptual ability, so that one could not have conceptual ability without having

linguistic ability? Second, is conceptual ability necessary for linguistic ability? Answers to either question depend upon operative conceptions of linguistic and conceptual ability.

Many philosophers hold that linguistic ability is bound up with conceptual ability, though Donald Davidson and Michael Dummett are the most prominent defenders of the view. Such views vary in plausibility with variance in the operative conception of language. For example, natural languages—the languages that humans acquire facility with through normal exposure by the age of three—are governed by rules of case. In English, these rules permit (5) and rule out (6):

(5) He showed her the encyclopaedia.

(6) Him showed she the encyclopaedia.

The operation of such rules plays no role in arguments for the dependence of conceptual abilities on linguistic abilities; moreover, it is implausible that a creature that lacked sensitivity to case would be precluded thereby from possession of conceptual abilities. Nonetheless, insensitivity to case would evince lack of linguistic ability, as ordinarily understood. Those who seek to argue that conceptual ability is dependent upon linguistic ability should therefore carefully specify the operative features of linguistic ability.

Davidson's central argument has three main premises. First, having beliefs—or more generally, states with content—requires conceptual grasp of the distinction between beliefs' being true and their being false. Second, conceptual grasp of the distinction between truth and falsehood for beliefs requires possession of a concept of

belief. Third, grasp of a concept of belief requires linguistic ability. Davidson's argument for the third premise is not transparent. His idea appears to be that intelligible application of a concept of belief requires a means of grounding the attribution of false beliefs. Unless there is need to appeal to false beliefs in characterising a subject's mental life, appeal to belief would be redundant. One might instead appeal to the way the world is. And the only means of grounding the attribution of false beliefs is to appeal to a feature of the subject's behaviour that is assessable for truth or falsehood in partial independence from the way the world is. Since Davidson holds that only language provides the kind of stable, repeatable feature of subject's behaviour that can be assessed in the required way, he holds that grasp of a concept of belief requires linguistic ability.

Davidson's argument can be challenged at almost every step. In particular, it is not obvious that having beliefs requires a conceptual grasp of the distinction between true and false beliefs. It is plausible, for example, that infants have numerous beliefs before they are in a position to recognise that some of those beliefs are false. And it is not obvious that appropriate attribution of false belief requires linguistic ability. It is plausible, for example, that pre-linguistic infants' reactions to apparently unexpected outcomes—for instance, a moving ball that fails to emerge in a natural way from behind a screen—can provide non-linguistic evidence for their having false beliefs.

Davidson's argument attempts to derive a global conclusion about the connection between conceptual ability and linguistic ability from a particular case, the concept of belief. Increasingly, theorists have shied away from the global question and focussed instead on whether linguistic ability is required for possession of particular concepts. Here, we should distinguish between two questions. (1) Is

linguistic ability, or ability with a particular range of expressions, a requirement on *anyone's* ability with a particular concept—e.g., of belief, encyclopaedias, Tuesdays, elm trees, etc.? (2) Could linguistic ability be a requirement on *someone's* ability with a particular concept? One case where an affirmative answer to (1) is plausible is concepts of days of the week. Plausibly, one could not have a concept of Tuesdays without having a system of seven symbols correlated with day-length periods of time. With respect to (2), one case for which an affirmative answer is plausible is a concept of elm trees. Plausibly, someone might be very bad at telling elm trees apart from oak trees, and yet still have distinct concepts of elms and oaks because they stand in the right sort of linguistically mediated relations with experts at distinguishing elms from oaks (a development of a case due to Hilary Putnam).

With respect to the second question, René Descartes argues that the exercise of some forms of linguistic ability furnished decisive evidence that the possessor of that ability had a mind, and thus conceptual abilities. The form of linguistic ability about which Descartes made this claim was the ability to use language appropriately without that use being a merely triggered response to environmental contingencies (e.g. a thermostat's response to changes in ambient temperature). Alan Turing held a similar view. According to Turing's Test, ability to engage appropriately in ordinary conversation is a demonstration of mindedness. The plausibility of such views depends upon the operative conception of linguistic ability, in particular that it embeds an appropriateness condition. Similar views based upon less demanding conceptions of linguistic ability—e.g. the ability to ape others' utterances (something a mere recording device might be able to do), or to respond to presentations of coloured tiles with utterance of the right colour word (an ability akin to that of a

complex thermostat)—are less plausible. Plausibly, something close to conceptual ability is built into the operative conception of linguistic ability.

### **Linguistic determinism (Q3)**

*Linguistic determinism* is the view that conceptual abilities are shaped by linguistic abilities, so that differences in language can make for differences in conceptualization. Historically, the view is most often associated with Benjamin Whorf's now largely discredited claim that the Hopi, an indigenous people of America, spoke and so thought about time in a radically different way from Europeans.

The view comes in a variety of strengths, with the strongest forms involving incommensurability between the conceptual repertoires of speakers of different languages, so that there is no thought content shared amongst speakers of different languages, so no agreement or disagreement between them. The strongest form of the view has not found favour in recent times, in part because the strongest form of view cannot be stated or conceived from within the confines of a single linguistic community, and (so) is not clearly intelligible. However, research into the role of linguistic ability in local shaping of particular ways of thinking—for example, thinking about colour, space, time, and motion—forms an important strand of current research amongst philosophers and psychologists.

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## Further reading and references

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See also Classical Theory of Concepts; Concepts and Abilities; Concepts, Comparative Perspectives; Concepts, Cultural Perspectives; Concepts, Development of; Concepts, Philosophical Issues; Content of Thought; Language and Thought, Relation of;