

With Eyes Wide Shut: Sharing as Freedom

Tanmoy Bhattacharya
University of Delhi
tanmoy@linguistics.du.ac.in

PART I

1 Nothing can be taught¹

I start with an image. A group of children arrive by a pond within the school compound. A child picks up a small stone and throws it into the water; she watches with everybody the ripples that the stone creates. Somebody else picks up another stone and throws it into the water. Again everybody watches. All this while, an accompanying adult sits quietly on a bench by the waterside. Her only job is to ensure that nothing untoward happens to the children. And nothing more. The children are almost unaware of her presence. They keep throwing stones into the pond, wait, and watch.

The situation I just described is an actual incidence at an experimental school in Delhi.² The space made available to learning in this typical situation captures the very essence of the idea that learning takes places through (socially) *shared* activities (the part of the above scene where the children gather and watch the ripples together). In addition, it also captures the essence of the main proposal of this paper, that is, a certain amount of non-interference from the teacher/ expert/ adult contributes positively towards learning (the part of the above scene comprising the lone figure of the adult).

More crucially, this scene also captures two important trends within the Cultural-Historical activity theories. On the one hand it captures the students' guided participation in an (culturally) organised activity and on the other, it also captures the fact that a material activity (throwing stones into a pond) is successfully transformed into individual mental activity for the student. That is, the strong points of both Sociocultural psychology (shared activity) and developmental-instructional psychology (individual cognitive development) are encapsulated in the process of knowledge acquisition that the Mirambika scene captures.

At this point it is pertinent to remind ourselves of the full quotation of Aurobindo, of which, the title of this section is only a part:

The first principle of true teaching is that nothing can be taught.

¹ *Sri Aurobindo and the Mother on Education*. Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Publications Department, Pondicherry, 1956

² I thank Tania Roy for bringing this to my attention. The school in question is Mirambika.

If we, as educators, are simply in the business of reproducing reality -- what exists out there in the objective reality of the world -- then the only *raison d'être* of our profession seems merely to support the institutional apparatus installed in the name of development. If the goal of the teacher is simply to teach the learner what the learner can learn by herself - and this is truer of acquisition of a culturally evolved cognitive tool like language - then teaching seems redundant. However, institutions have continued to exist in the face of a possible anarchic dissolution or breakdown. In following section I examine the most likely cause of this continuance.

2 Rationalism

I take this continuation to mean that teaching must therefore involve issues that are not out there in the real world and are not mere reproductions of the real world. Rationalism, this paper argues, must therefore be the driving force in knowledge construction. And linguists, as I intend to demonstrate, are in the forefront of imparting such an education.

First, let us go back to the Mirambika scene and remind ourselves of how we actually got here. The developmental-instructional trend in pedagogical psychology focuses on the internalisation of cultural tools such as acquisition of languages or acquisition of scientific concepts as the crucial form of an individual's cognitive development. This model concentrates on how children acquire skills in controlled teaching-learning procedures. Through instructions, it has been shown how certain material forms of action transform (get internalised) into their mental counterpart. That is, psychological processes like higher order thinking, attention, counting, etc. originate in their material avatars. The main object of interest however revolves around examination of the conditions under which the learner comes to be able to perform new actions independently. The role of the teacher in this methodology is unconcerned with the social aspects or situations of the teacher-student interaction. Consequently, meaning construction does not arise out of the student-teacher dynamics in this method. In short, the WHAT aspect of knowledge acquisition is the predominant theme in this model.

In spite of the neglect in this model that the social modalities of knowledge construction suffer from, the almost magical aspect of the transformation of the material into the mental certainly deserves a renewed attention. Furthermore, application of the mental process thus acquired to newer material/ mental activities appeals to knowledge acquisition by indirect means. If this is not rationalism, what is?

Having pointed out a specific model within pedagogical psychology as adopting, what in my view, a rationalistic mode of enquiry, let us now move on to another demonstration of this mode of knowledge acquisition in an area that I *do* know something about. Linguistics - and specifically certain formal studies within

linguistics - has been in the business of imparting knowledge through indirect means ever since the 17th century. Among these formal areas, I will pick Syntax for this illustration, my own area of specialisation.

2.1 Syntax and Rationalism

One conceivable criticism that can be levelled against a rationalistic scientific discipline like syntax (but have not been so far) is with regards to the notion of *subjectivity*. If it is too difficult at this moment in the history of science to imagine this criticism, it can still be approached by looking at the “problem” from a different perspective. Is it perhaps the case that the lack of subjectivity has somehow been replaced/ compensated in such a discipline by something else? Consider the dazzling moment of post-structuralism in this connection. If the repressive logic of *presence* is what shaped the history and discourse of western philosophy, then it is quite likely that the lack/ impossibility of subjectivity in the history of syntax has shaped the discourse of syntax in a way that minimalism, in my reading, is a striving to leave it behind.

2.1.1 Interface Designs: Minimalism

The decade of 90s in the study of languages, according to Chomsky (2002)³ was marked by a shift from methodologically-driven research paradigm to a substantively-driven one, from constructing the best theory to looking at the possibility of whether the object of enquiry itself has some kind of optimal design. The “Galilean style”, identified as the methodologically driven enterprise, put the emphasis on trying to understand how a certain thing works and not just describe a lot of phenomena, the latter, for example, is most easily identifiable with the typological (areal or genealogical) mode of language study. This mirrors the situation in Physics today where 90% of the matter in the universe is considered to be dark matter. Related to and a part of the Galilean style is the Post-Newtonian style, i.e., a search for better theories in terms of understanding and not coverage. However, the Minimalist Program (MP) raises the new question of substantively-driven enquiry: *How well designed the system is.*

In terms of this perspective, the question of optimal design is raised. The new question that MP is raising is: Is language well designed from the perspective of internal structure? In order to seek an answer, forgetting the use to which language has been put (i.e., communication) helps to clarify the interaction of language with other cognitive systems of the brain. For example, the human liver is perhaps not meant to be put to the kind of use that it has been. It was perhaps meant to communicate well with the other internal organs and operating systems but not with what humans accidentally have put it to use. However, from the perspective

³ Chomsky, Noam. 2002. “An interview on Minimalism”, in Belletti, Adriana and Rizzi, Luigi (eds.) *On Nature and Language*, CUP.

of natural selection, it must be, on the other hand, well designed enough in terms of the outside system too so as to get by.

Chomsky's view is that FL is inserted (embedded) into already existing "external" systems: the sensorimotor system and some kind of system of thought (conception, intention etc.) both of which are somewhat independent of language. The faculty of language (FL) has to interact with these systems, otherwise it won't be usable (like, if the liver produced something else, not bile, that is not usable by the rest of the organs of the body, then it wouldn't be useful). So the question that MP raises is: Is the FL well designed for interaction with those systems? In answering this question, a different set of answers and conditions emerge. Given that language is essentially an information system, the only condition that clearly emerges is that the information it stores must be accessible to the other systems with which it interacts. The question is thus reformulated to find out whether language is well designed to meet the condition of accessibility to the systems in which it is embedded.

The Minimalist position is that everything is questionable, about everything that you look at, the question should be: *Why is it there?* In this connection, let me simply mention two relevant specific empirical cases which we have studied, namely, the use of Classifiers in Bangla⁴ and Cleft questions in Meiteilon.⁵ The situation may be comparable to the idea that Coherence or Centering (of Grosz, Joshi and Weinstein 1995⁶) is a cognitive phenomenon *independent of language*, perhaps part of the module responsible for general cognitive abilities like concept formation, intention and the like.

Taking functionality (i.e., for communication) out of language, minimalism presents itself as a mode of enquiry that is not goal-directed as per some perceptual objective reality of the world. It thus trains our mind/ thinking in indirectly reasoning which is not directed towards any short-term achievement. Syntax in general and minimalism in particular provides a unique window to the working of knowledge acquisition by indirect reasoning, in short, rationalism.

2.2 Subversion of hierarchies - PART I

Minimalism achieves it by destabilising "received superstructures" which had come to occupy logophoric status even in such a relatively younger discipline like linguistics/ syntax. Minimalism does it at various levels, one by doing away with such predetermined superstructures like D-structure, S-structure and Government

⁴ Bhattacharya, Tanmoy. 2003. 'The Role of Interfaces in Language Design: Destabilising Categories', talk delivered at IIT, Kanpur, Sept.

⁵ Bhattacharya, Tanmoy and Thangjam Hindustani Devi. 2004. 'Why cleft?', *CSLI* Publication, Stanford.

⁶ Grosz, Barbara, Joshi, Arvind, and Weinstein, Scott. 1995. "Centering: A framework for modeling the local coherence of discourse", *Computational Linguistics* 21(2): 203-225.

at a technical level, and two, by maintaining that the “moment of speaking” is ever slippery (Deferred). On the other hand, the most striking subversion is attempted in questioning the functional role of language itself by asserting that language is *not* for communication.

Furthermore, the development of the theory so far in other directions, especially in terms of Uriagereka’s Multiple Spell-Out model (MSO)⁷ and Platzack’s Multiple Interface model (MI)⁸ further destabilises through plurality any monolithic role that the notions interfaces might have ended up acquiring given the central role that the interfaces play (see section 2.1) in shaping language design. This path of development of the theory has come about as a result of the underlying concern for the “absence” referred to above which is (the concern is) now somehow hardwired in the architecture of the theory.

If this is construed as too generous a Postmodern reading of minimalism, so be it, at least it is taking us somewhere, which is the spirit of minimalism. If the collapse of Marxism is due to its over insistence on identifying antagonism in a society through the singularity of class struggle, then minimalism offers a glimpse of the shape of a post-Marxist plurality of antagonism by giving up the singularly monolithic construction that language is for communication.

2.2.1 Phase⁹

In another respect where Minimalism has made a radical departure from the earlier models are in its conception of the idea of a Phase. For the past three years much of my own research energy has been directed at exploring a concept of syntax which is fairly new but has already come to occupy an important place in the way syntax is perceived. The face of syntax is subtly but surely changing. The idea of a phase incorporates the notion of displacement of parts and wholes. The notion is familiar to psychologists and logicians. I believe Chomsky’s use of it in his 1998 and 1999 manuscripts¹⁰ is not an accident but rather an invitation to perhaps explore the boundaries of formal syntax yet again.

Consider the following quote in this connection:

A unit in the middle range of a nesting structure is simultaneously both circumjacent and interjacent, both whole and part, both entity and environment. An organ - the liver, for example - is whole in relation to its own component pattern of cells, and is a part in

⁷ Uriagereka, Juan. 1999. *Multiple SpellOut In Working Minimalism*, ed by Nerbert Harnstein and Samuel Epstein, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

⁸ Platzack, Christer. 1999. Multiple Interfaces. In U. Nikanne and E. van der Zee (eds.) *Conceptual Structure and Its Interfaces with other Modules of Representation*. The Oxford University Press, Oxford.

⁹ Discussed in detail in Bhattacharya, Tanmoy. 2001. Incomplete Phase. Ms. Universität Leipzig.

¹⁰ Chomsky, Noam. 1998. Minimalist Inquiries: The Framework. *MIT Occasional Papers in Linguistics*, Cambridge, MA: MIT; Chomsky, Noam. 1999. Derivation by Phase, *MIT Working Papers in Linguistics* 18, Cambridge, MA: MIT.

relation to the circumjacent organism that it, with other organs, composes; it forms the environment of its cells, and is, itself, environed by the organism. (Barker 1968)¹¹

Phases can be crudely considered to be “chunks of thought”, and these chunks are organised in a certain fashion. The implicit claim seems to be that we access a chunk at a time while computing a structure before it is spoken and we build the structure (= we compute or derive the sentence) up in parallel workspaces. The chunks that we work with, seem to be chunks which are thought-like. In other words, a phase is a somewhat crude representation of thought itself, perhaps the unshapely, hazy first thought. This reduction nonetheless brings about a reduction in computational complexity of the whole system.¹²

2.2.2 Morphology

It is sometimes too easy as a learner to see connections among various forms in a language and therefore the sense of discovery driving rule formation and later to rule abandonment. Soon though, this dissatisfaction with not finding a full-proof rule leads to the total abandonment of the project of learning language.

In the realm of meaning, difficulties arise out of our concern to understand every little detail and not the system as a whole, an idea out of synch with the spirit of minimalism. This is true of language learning too. E.g., the working of the verb *be* in English (*be, being, been*, among various other irregular forms) cannot be fully comprehended if we simply start chopping affixes or parts of the words. As children thus what we do all the time is Morphology, chopping parts to make a whole. However, this is morphology of a certain kind, of chopping parts into meaningful units, because that’s how we *think* we understand. Such compositional Morphology also finds support in compositional semantics --- we must also be thinking compositionally.

Against this view of Morphology, I would like to bring to your attention the idea behind a different type of Morphology and provide a poststructuralist interpretation of it (intended in the original formulation). Seamless Morphology or Whole Word Morphology¹³ (WWM) which considers the word as the only unit adopts a Saussurian stance that focuses on contrast or differences between words. Consequently the following is a typical definition of WWM:

¹¹ Barker, Roger. 1968. *Ecological Psychology, Concepts and Methods for Studying the Environment of Human Behaviour*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

¹² See Bhattacharya, Tanmoy. 2002. Minimal Look-Ahead. *Yearbook of South Asian Languages and Linguistics* 4, London / Delhi : Sage Publications, for a critique.

¹³ See Singh, Rajendra and Sylvain Neuvel. 2003. When the whole is smaller than the sum of its parts: The case of morphology. *Chicago Linguistics Society Papers*, 38, and references therein.

Morphological Relation:

Two words of a lexicon are morphologically related if and only if they differ in exactly the same way as two other words of the same lexicon.

Seamless Morphology is thus perfectly in line with a poststructuralist view that the image of a perfectly self-present meaning is an illusion or, at the least, subscribes to the view that a word cannot be decomposed into meaningful subunits. Therefore the associated implication that understanding and therefore learning takes place by working out parts into meaningful subunits cannot be a part of Seamless Morphology.

Research in Syntax and in parallel processing has shown that thinking is surely not concatenation, if at all, it is structural. However, it is only in MP that a true nonconcatenation approach is developed in theories such as MSO (and Phase in general) where a slightly different but crucial claim on thinking is put forward. If there are parallel workspaces, as in MSO, then it only matches up with parallel (and therefore nonlinear and overlapping) thinking. These chunks of thought are the only predetermined “structures” we may have and at that level, structures are much closer to concepts.

2.3 Conclusions so far

Let us briefly go through the structure of the argument presented so far. The Mirambika scene split into depicting shared activity (sociocultural psychology) and individual cognitive development transforming the material to the mental (developmental-instructional psychology). The latter is marked by knowledge by indirect means, or rationalism in short. Rationalism, on the other hand is the life and blood of Linguistics, especially the Minimalist theory of syntax, which with its multiple interfaces and phases brings about a subversion of received hierarchies. In addition, the problematics of learning through “complete”/ compositional structure building and meaning are found paralleled in traditional theories of morphology and semantics within Linguistics.

Finally, as educators we have just one query regarding all this: What are we to make of this? That is, how do we, as teachers, respond to this? This is certainly a big question, one that this paper will only pretend to approach in the last section, pending which we move on now to another super-theme of the project of learning - the role of the teacher/ expert /adult --- the lonely figure on the bench of the Mirambika scene.

PART II

3 Sharing

The sociocultural model referred to earlier in section 1 is largely based on the contextualised social aspect of the learning dynamics. A great amount of emphasis is placed on the students' guided participation in culturally organised activity. In short, the *HOW* aspect of the knowledge acquisition is the predominant theme in this model.

Having pointed out the obvious importance of the concept of sharing in this approach, let me now offer you a slightly different take on the notion of sharing. Anticipating the so-called response to the two super-questions raised at the end of the two super-themes, namely, Rationalism (section 2.3) and Sharing (section 3.2) let me also point out that since Sharing, so to speak, is the super-answer, it will be worthwhile to ponder upon my interpretation of a philosophical underpinning of Sharing.

3.1 Sharing as Freedom: Jean-Luc Nancy

Self-contained individualism in Nancy¹⁴ is self-defeating, for to know oneself as a distinct individual already presupposes one's differentiation from others. Absolute self-containment is thus ruptured in favour of a notion of a relationship. Further, this relation is non-absolute and non-dialectic. An individual is merely a residue of a dissolved community in its atomistic indivisibility.

Nancy considers Heidegger's *Mitsein* "being with" as more primordial than being, consequently community is considered to be prior to being. The emphasis on *Mitsein* implies a shift from being as substance to being as an act. Community, in this view, is thus not a substance shared but is a dynamic movement of sharing. 'If being is sharing, *our* sharing, then "to be" is to share'.¹⁵ Community for Nancy is not empirical, it is an advent, a calling, something lying in the wait. The Community is seen as a mode of *compearance* or a shared space. It signals the place of 'the *between* as such'. Thus 'You and I' (between us) in Nancy is a formula in which the *and* does not *imply juxtaposition, but* exposition or exposure. As a variation on the Cartesian adage, Nancy proposes *ego sum expositus*, meaning 'I am first of all exposed to the other, and exposed to the exposure of the other'.¹⁶

The share forms the locus for freedom and relation and claims that 'freedom withdraws being and gives relation' (p68 *The Experience of Freedom*). Thus freedom is the dissolution of being as substance, and substitution of relation for identity. For

¹⁴ Nancy, Jean-Luc. 1991. *The Inoperative Community*. University of Minnesota Press (*La Communauté desoeuvree* 1986)

¹⁵ Nancy, Jean-Luc. 1993. *The Experience of Freedom*. Stanford University Press.

¹⁶ All quotations here are from *The Inoperative Community*, see footnote 14 for reference.

Nancy it is also 'the mode of the discrete and insistent insistence of others in my existence as originally for my existence' (p69 *ibid*). In my reading of Nancy, I consider the ecstatic transgression of being into a dynamic relation comprising community as freedom of a kind that surpasses the teacher-student hierarchy and creates a context for learning.

But what really are the uses of Sharing? In responding to this question, I take you to a domain which alas is all too familiar in the current atmosphere¹⁷ of the feel good fever that is casting a hypnotic spell over the public sphere in this country.

3.2 Sharing as an antidote to consumerism

The deep slumber that we all seem to have been put into is loosening our collective grip over reality, it is slipping through the gaps between our fingers as we slowly fall asleep and step into the dreamland where everything is well, shining or raining. Rain or shine, consumerism is here to stay. I wish to bring to your attention another type of consumerism – teaching/ learning as consuming.

The idea that learning can take place only through negotiating problems and solving them is quite like preparing for an exam by going through question-answer booklets (*Kunjis*) the night before. The metaphor of preparing for an exam at the last hour is deliberately invoked in order to draw a parallel with the speed at which learning may take place when teaching is specifically targeted as a goal-directed activity. One could easily lapse into teaching of highly advanced and abstract subjects like Minimalism in syntax through such a packaged deals. The learner will quickly memorise the bullet points but will she have learnt anything at all? What about the essence of Minimalism, which is the basic philosophical foundation of studying the mind? The quicker she learns, the quicker she forgets. The method and the accompanying forgetting are repeated *ad nauseam* in schools, colleges and universities all over the country several decades. The system, the institutes, the authorities facilitate this mode of teaching/ learning.

The continued encouragement of this mode of teaching/ learning is based on the false assumption that understanding proceeds in a similar fashion - by integrating meaningful, complete parts into complete wholes. The conviction behind such a view is that understanding can only take place by working out the complete meaning or referentiality, compositionally. The emphasis has been on "completeness" of meaning, of compositionality. This view of completeness is passed down to us through a codification of the past, in the past. Books are thus instruments thrust upon us by institutions dictating the recycling of these codes. How does one deal with these edicts? How does one resist this closure? I will come back to the issue in section 3.3 below

¹⁷ Prior to the parliamentary elections of April-May 2004 in India which inflicted a massive defeat upon the incumbent right wing Bharatiya Janta Party (BJP) government.

According to this state of affairs, the consumption of completed wholes/ parts is the defining moment in the construction of knowledge. With consumption comes ownership and with ownership comes hoarding. Let us consider in this connection the case of over-cautious governments/ people in the west who for reasons of security adopt the strategy of leaving landmarks unmarked. Whatever may have been the thinking behind it, it appears that a desirable fall-out of this strategy is the resulting reduction in the consumable value of the landmark in question. It desists or at least retards the process of touristic “doing” and then the accompanying forgetting, a necessary corollary to consumption. Thinking in this manner, forgetting or absencing from the mental consciousness is an imperative of ownership. You own it and then forget it and thus forgetting (though later) is a condition for owning. How do we then un-own something?

The answer might lie in the word itself, *com-* implies ‘sharing’. The hoarding mentality that comes with ownership can only be countered by sharing or distribution. Since to own is to forget, sharing (as an antidote to owning) can be counted as the essence of human existence. The dialectic or *aufhebung* that sharing can engage with *consumption* must therefore lead not to unity but difference and what can be better than the post-structural enterprise relying as it does, on the interpretive openness of language?

3.3 Subversion of hierarchies --- PART II

Recalling the discussion in section 3.1, the countering of *consumerism* with sharing can be seen as a non-absolute, non-dialectical relation; folding of both recovery and loss into each other. In the share, the individual is neither master nor slave (the lord and the bondsman of Hegel), neither owner nor owned but is both divided from other and joined with others

Poststructuralism follows Nietzsche and Heidegger in forcefully presenting a critique of western metaphysics (which implies not just western philosophical tradition but everyday thought and language as well). Western thought has been predominantly structured in dichotomies: Good/ Evil, Being/ Nothingness, Soul/ Body, Man/Woman etc., implying a privileging of the first term over the second, the second term is somehow a fall away from the first, signifying a *lack* or *absence*. Essentially what these hierarchical oppositions do is to privilege temporal and spatial *presence* over distance, difference, and deferment. Western philosophy, as a result, has always claimed Being as *presence*. In its wake, this privileging has also brought about *Logocentrism*, the hallmark of western culture. Derrida, most famously, has pointed out that this is an illusion, since speech is already structured by difference and distance. To mean, in other words, is automatically not to be. As soon as there is meaning, there is difference. Derrida’s term for the lag inherent in any signifying act is, by now well-known, *Différance* from the French verb *différer*, which means both ‘to differ’ and ‘to defer’.

If ownership stands in the way of learning, the latter must take place only when the form of the knowledge is elusive, unownable. It is only sharing which can thus subvert the hierarchy between the teacher and the learner and create a 'compearance' or a shared space that is the foundation of a Nancean notion community.

4 With Eyes Wide Shut

I will appeal to the notion of undecidability as explored by the political philosopher Ernesto Laclau in this connection, seen from a broadly poststructuralist position.¹⁸ Poststructuralism managed to show that many structures/ categories which are seen as closed categories are, in fact, disturbed by internal aporias; their outer manifestation concealing repressed alternatives. Deconstruction, by exploring these alternatives, has expanded further the area of undecidability in social relations, which demand political intervention. However, such intervention requires in turn a theory of the decision; how to take a decision within an undecidable terrain. Gramsci, by showing that social issues/ causes are interdependent, enlarged this terrain of undecidability, and conceived of hegemony as the moment of this decision.¹⁹

This, I think, provides the backdrop against which a semblance of a solution to the problem of construction of knowledge emerges. If sharing is one way of preventing the consumerist hoarding of knowledge, then problematising understanding by resisting closure in the foreground of undecidability followed by a hegemonic moment is another. Learning must take place *OgochOre*, a Bangla word meaning 'without notice'.

By Kubrick, with eyes wide shut.

¹⁸ Laclau, Ernesto. 1996. *Emancipation(s)*, Verso, London/ New York.

¹⁹ The earliest mention of the term hegemony in Gramsci (which consequently changes to a fuller form by *Notebook 13*) appears in his work of 1926, *Notes on the Southern Question* thus:

"The Turin communists posed concretely the question of the 'hegemony of the proletariat': i.e., of the social basis of the proletarian dictatorship and the workers' state. The proletarian can become the leading (*dirigente*) and the dominant class to the extent that it succeeds in creating a system of alliances which allows it to mobilise the majority of the working population against capitalism and the bourgeois State. In Italy, in the real class relations that exist there, this means to the extent that it succeeds in gaining the consent of the broad peasant masses." – From *Selections from Political Writings 1921-26*, ed. and trans. Hoare, Q, London, Lawrence & Wishart, 1978, p. 443.