LINGUISTIC DIVERSITY IN A UNIVERSALIST CONTEXT:
LANGUAGE, THOUGHT AND CULTURE. *

NOEL BURTON-ROBERTS

Abstract

A central goal of generative (Chomskian) linguistic theory is to describe the human capacity for language—claimed to be an essential component of our human genetic (biological) endowment. As biological, it is universal and wholly natural.

There is a tension between that *universalist* goal and the *descriptive* goal of capturing the facts of particular languages. Pursuing the universalist goal, we risk failing to do justice to the huge variety of descriptive facts. Pursuing the descriptive goal, we risk losing sight of what we all share and makes us human. That tension is related to others that I explore in this paper, including the status of phonology.

Though Chomsky himself articulates some of these tensions, he has not entirely resolved them, pursuing the universalist goal ever more radically. It has even been suggested 'there is in effect only one human language'. How does the richness and diversity of *languages*—as socio-cultural practices—fit into this universalist (biological) conception of *language*?

This paper looks at the relation between 'language' and 'particular languages'. 'Particular languages' are usually thought of as *examples* (instantiations) of 'language'. It is this view, I argue, that gives rise to the problems. I outline a radical alternative, suggesting that 'particular languages' are *not* examples of, but stand in a relation of conventional *representation* to, 'language'. This representational view, I suggest, resolves the tensions and offers a new perspective on the relation between biology and culture in the linguistic context—and on relations among 'language', 'languages' and thought.

Thinking about the nature of language is perplexing and frustrating. Most people are generally engaged in more sensible (but no less perplexing) activities: growing up, earning a living, marrying, bringing up baby, getting on with others on society. The paradox is that so many of those activities crucially depend on language and would be meaningless or impossible without it. Language is what defines us, both individually and collectively, as a species. That's why it is so difficult—and so important—to think clearly about it.

The difficulties experienced by ordinary speakers in thinking about language are reflected in the theoretical discipline of linguistics, which is rich in tensions and controversies. I have just used the term 'language'. The perplexities start right there. What exactly do we mean by the term 'language'?

We might start by asking: is language the same as speech? People who have a language are said to 'speak' it. That seems indicative of an intuition that language and speech

are pretty much the same thing. Nevertheless, there are two different terms here—'language' and 'speech'—and that suggests there is a distinction to be made. But even as thoughtful a linguist as Edward Sapir seemed quite undecided about language and speech. Think of his famous book of 1921: the title is 'Language' but the subtitle is 'An introduction to the study of *speech*'. Similarly, his first chapter is called '*Language* Defined', but it opens with the statement '*Speech* is so familiar a feature of daily life that we rarely pause to define it.' All this suggests that Sapir identifies language and speech. Well, that is a point of view. But that point of view is undermined when later in the same book (p.16), he warns against confusing language and speech.

Clearly, we can't decide what 'language' is without deciding whether it is the same as, or should be distinguished from, speech. And, if we distinguish them, the question arises: what is the *relation* between them? That's a difficult question, and theoretical linguists—the people who have thought about such matters—seem as perplexed as the rest of us.

In trying to locate 'language' in the scheme of things, we might approach the matter from another direction and ask about the relation between language and thought. Everyone has views on this difficult and intriguing question. It is a common intuition that language and thought are closely interdependent. The question is: how closely? Some writers have suggested they are same thing. For a recent version of this idea, see Carruthers 1996.

On the one hand, then, there is an intuition that language is closely allied to thought—possibly even constitutive of thought. On the other hand, there is an intuition that language is speech. It is these two intuitions, taken together, that give the famous (or notorious—see Pullum 1991) Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis its particular character. Ways of speaking are known to differ from culture to culture. So, if all three—language, speech and thought—are constitutively bound up with each other, we are led to the conclusion that ways of thinking are culturally differentiated. This cultural relativity of thought is the hallmark of the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis. (See Gentner & Goldin-Meadow (eds.) 2003 for recent reconsiderations of the hypothesis).

But speech and thought are very different. Thought is private, wholly internal to the individual mind and not intrinsically connected with communication. Nothing in the nature of thought suggests it has to be—or even can be—communicated. Speech by contrast seems intrinsically connected with communication: it is public and external to the mind. If you think of language as being *for* communication, then your instinct will be to ally language with speech. If, on the other hand, you think that thought is language—that language is *for thought* (irrespective of communication), then your instinct will be to distinguish quite radically between language and speech. The intuitive questions we are asking here relate to a theoretical tension in linguistics: is a theory of language the same thing as a theory of communication?

Later on I will suggest that perplexities surrounding these difficult questions cannot be resolved until we address a fundamental ambiguity in the term 'language'—an ambiguity that has become ever more apparent in the light of Chomsky's philosophy of language . For now, I am concerned only to show that, as ordinary speakers, we have conflicting intuitions about the nature of language. It is not just a theoretical matter.

There are many such intuitive tensions and they are bound up with each other. There is, for example, the ancient debate as to whether language is natural or conventional. You might think that this is not an issue in present-day linguistics—at least not since Saussure. For Saussure, famously, a language is a system of signs. And—again famously—Saussure

articulated what is universally acknowledged: that linguistic signs are arbitrary. A linguistic sign is an association between a sound image (phonology) and a concept (semantics), and sound-meaning associations are established, for each language, by arbitrary convention. There is nothing natural about signs or, therefore, about systems of signs (languages). In Malay, there is a sign in which the concept [CHILD] and the sound /anak/ are associated. Other languages have different signs. In Finnish, there is an association between [CHILD] and /lapsic/ and, in French, between [CHILD] and /enfant/. As these differences show, there is nothing natural or inevitable about any one of these associations.

It is this non-natural *conventionality* that gives rise to the *diversity* of languages. It is precisely because signs are not natural, but conventional, that languages (as systems of signs) can and do differ one from another. This is not just a matter of words, but of syntax. Some languages signal the subject and object of a verb by ordering them SVO (English and Malay, for example). Other languages do this by ordering them SOV (Japanese). Yet other languages don't even use *ordering* as a sign of syntactic relations like subject and object, but use inflections, changing the *form* of the noun as a sign of whether it is functioning a subject or object (Latin, for example). With pronouns, English (rather redundantly) uses a combination of order *and* inflection (*I invited her* vs *She invited me*). The fact that the 1st person pronoun in *She invited me* is functioning as object is signalled both by its position following the verb and by its form (*me* rather than *I*). By contrast, Malay (more economically) sticks just to order, without inflection. Some languages use neither order nor inflection (Chinese, for example). But I hardly need to persuade this audience that languages differ. Malaysia is a multicultural and multilingual society.

The Saussurian insight that languages are systems of wholly conventional signs leads to the conclusion that languages are not natural but conventional systems, socio-culturally differentiated. Languages are culture-specific, and cultures—almost by definition—differ one from another. And, as we all know, learning another language is not just a matter of acquiring new words, or even new syntactic rules. It is a matter of absorbing the culture insofar as this is reflected in its idiom. When I first went to Italy, with almost no Italian, I asked my landlady on the first day if I could 'have a bath'. Now, the translation of *have* in Italian is supposed to be *avere*. So that's the word I used. She replied 'No, you can't have the bath'. Sensing I had been misunderstood, I tried again: could I perhaps 'take a bath'? The translation of *take* in Italian is supposed to be *prendere*. 'No', she insisted in exasperation, 'you cannot <u>take</u> the bath'. In Italian, if you're not going to use *bagnarsi* (way beyond my command of the language at the time), the correct idiom is *fare bagno*. (I hesitate to 'translate' this. In saying *fare bagno*, do Italians say 'make/do bath' or do they, like the English, thereby say 'take/have a bath'?) This is a trivial example, but it shows that what I needed to get to grips with was the idiom. This involves immersing oneself in a form of culture. Within that culture, that idiom was the most literal way of expressing the concept. More generally, what counts as literal is a cultural matter.

A more pervasive example is found in Turkish where, in reporting an event, the conventions of the language oblige you to specify whether or not you have first-hand knowledge of the event (Aksu-Koc & Slobin 1986). Inevitably, then, speakers of Turkish are sensitized to the distinction between first-hand and second-hand knowledge in a way that speakers of English are not. That is a linguistic but also, and more deeply, a cultural (indeed cognitive) difference. In another domain, Grev Corbett (2003) has recently been discussing on

the *Linguist List* the extent to which, historically, cultural assumptions have informed the development of so-called gender systems of different languages.

The differences between languages—due to their non-natural and thus differing conventions—are real and obvious. So you might think the ancient debate whether language is natural or conventional is a dead issue: language is conventional, not natural. Well, it was pretty much a dead issue, until Noam Chomsky. Chomsky's work—especially his more recent work—has opened up the whole debate again. Chomsky's concern, over many years, has been to argue that language (by which he means the human capacity for language) is natural. What persuades Chomsky of the naturalness of language is that the capacity for language is not only *universal* among humans—regardless of intelligence or culture—but *specific* to humans. For Chomsky, these twin properties of the human language capacity—universality within the species and its species-specificity—argue strongly that language is part of a distinctly human *genetic* endowment. Ultimately, then, language is a matter of biology, and thus natural. This is, of course, Chomsky's 'innateness hypothesis' for human language, according to which language is innate, genetically pre-programmed. Only this, it is claimed, can explain the speed and ease of first language acquisition by infants.

This is a bold hypothesis both about human nature and the nature of language. It has given rise to an explosion of successful linguistic research. However, it *is* controversial. I have referred to *controversies and tensions* in linguistic theory. I am not so much concerned here with *controversies* between pro- and anti-Chomskians. What intrigues me are the ever-increasing tensions within Chomsky's own work. It is these tensions that I want to focus on.

Modern generative linguistic theory (the kind of linguistic theory that Chomsky inaugurated in the late 1950s) sees itself as concerned with what all languages have in common. The theory of what all languages have in common is called 'Universal Grammar'(UG). So UG is generally thought of as being about *all* languages. Now Chomsky himself has frequently alluded to a tension here. On the one hand, there is a rich diversity of particular languages—Malay, Dayak, Cantonese, English, Arabic—and, obviously, linguistic theory is committed to describing each of these in all their rich and intricate detail. Chomsky has called this the goal of Descriptive Adequacy. Insofar as linguistic theory concerns itself with any particular language, it must describe that language adequately—in Chomsky's terms, it must offer a descriptively adequate grammar of that language. Clearly, descriptively adequate grammars of different particular languages are going to differ. A grammar of English is going to look rather different from a grammar of Swahili. In fact, surely, the two grammars would not be descriptively adequate if they did *not* differ.

It would not be far from the truth, then, to say that the DESCRIPTIVE GOAL is precisely about capturing linguistic *detail*, *difference, plurality*. This is in sharp contrast to the goal of Universal Grammar, which is to capture what humans as a species (and all languages) have in common. This is the UNIVERSALIST GOAL (in Chomsky's terms, the goal of Explanatory Adequacy). It involves abstracting way from the diversity, the detail, and the plurality. So the two goals are in tension. Pursuing the universalist goal, we risk failing to do justice to the huge variety of descriptive facts of particular languages. Pursuing the descriptive goal, we risk losing sight of what we all share and makes us distinctively human.

You might ask, what's the problem? We can all accept that, while languages do differ, they surely have properties in common. The enterprise of Universal Grammar—thought of as the theory of what all language have in common despite their differences—is still concerned with *languages*. On this view, 'theory of language' (UG) is really 'theory of *languages*'—all

languages. Surely the universalist goal is not incompatible with recognising the diversity of languages?

Well, Chomsky's more recent pursuit of that universalist goal sometimes suggests that he thinks it *is* incompatible. Increasingly, he seems to want to deny that the diversity exists or to dismiss it. For example he writes: 'English is not Swahili—at least not quite' (1995a:13). '*At least not quite*'? The suggestion seems to be that, although English and Swahili might *seem* very different, there is in fact very little real difference them. On another occasion (1995b:8) he explicitly goes further and suggests that the main task of linguistic theory "is to show that the…diversity of linguistic phenomena is *illusory*" i.e. that it's an illusion, doesn't exist. I am tempted to respond: try telling that to English speakers trying to learn Swahili or Swahili speakers trying to learn English.

In the same vein, Chomsky has suggested that a Martian linguist visiting earth would be completely unimpressed by, would barely notice, any differences among the languages of the world. Well, I suggest that he/she/it would be a very unobservant Martian. We humans—and they are, after all, *human* languages—are generally impressed by the differences. Even (and perhaps especially) as a linguist, I personally am deeply impressed by the fact that, when I hear other languages spoken, it is just so much meaningless noise to me. To me it is an awesome wonder that people actually manage to communicate by such means.

Some generative linguists have expressed Chomsky's universalist line of thought (accurately, I believe) by suggesting that the goal of linguistic theory is in fact to establish that *there is in effect only one human language* (eg Epstein et al. 1996). This is consistent with some of Chomsky's own remarks (1995b: 7, 131, 170, 359). Taken literally, that idea is extraordinary. So taken, it raises the question: if there is only one human language, what are the things that are more usually called 'languages'?

In posing that question, I am not criticising the universalist goal—quite the contrary. I believe that the Chomskian enterprise of identifying the universal, genetically determined, human linguistic endowment is a genuine scientific enterprise. I am even prepared to accept that there is only one human language. But, somehow, it needs to be properly reconciled with our real experience of the *diversity of languages*. The radically universalist enterprise will be suspect and controversial just as long as it seems to require that we deny or downplay the real differences between particular languages. That, I suggest, is not the way to resolve the tension between the universalist goal and the descriptive goal. Some quite different tactic is needed.

Why should Chomsky want to deny or downplay the diversity of particular languages in this way? It seems to me that Chomsky's own conception of UG (and 'language') has been developing in a way that makes the facts and general character of particular languages and their diversity increasingly problematic. Chomsky himself alludes to a central problem in the enterprise of UG, if UG is supposed to be about *all languages*. The problem is that UG is also supposed to about something entirely *natural*, a biological, genetic endowment. But that means it cannot in fact be a theory of (all) languages—precisely because languages are *not natural*.

In addressing the *relation* between UG and particular languages, Chomsky used to (and often still does) suggest that, in a particular child, Universal Grammar (the human language capacity) *turns into*—in Chomky's terms, *is instantiated as*—some particular language. In other words, particular languages are instantiations or examples of UG. The problem is this: how can a natural thing become—get instantiated as—a non-natural

conventional thing? This is surely impossible. Chomsky appears to agree when he writes (1995a:11):

> What we call English, French, Spanish and so on…reflect …factors that cannot seriously be regarded as properties of the language faculty….It is hard to imagine that the properties of the language faculty—a real object of the natural world—are instantiated in any observed system' [i.e any particular language, NBR].

The reason he gives for this is precisely that the fact that any particular language is a messy, non-natural hotch-potch, influenced by a huge variety of cultural, political, societal, geographical and historical factors, all of which fall way outside the study of *natural* language.

In this quote Chomsky uses a revealing phrase, 'a real object of the natural world'. Almost every word in that phrase is significant. 'Natural' I have already commented on. But notice also that the phrase is singular. If universalist linguistic theory is about *language,* thought of as 'a real object of the natural world', it is not about any *plurality* and hence not about *languages*. 'Real' and 'object' are also significant. 'Language'—*thought of as a real object*—cannot be just a theoretical term for the use of theoretical linguists in talking about all languages. Rather, it exists as a real object in its own right, independent of theory and independent of particular languages. It is this real, natural object that linguistic theory is about, for Chomsky

Clearly, Chomsky—in talking of 'a real object of the natural world' and suggesting that this object is in some 'perfect'—is moving far away from the vision of UG as the theory of, and as about, *all languages*. In identifying the object of linguistic enquiry as a single real object of the natural world, he is clearly not talking about the diversity of the messy, socio-cultural, non-natural systems that we call languages.

What is emerging here is a contrast between two radically different senses of 'language'. Possibly Chomsky himself started off by thinking, like everyone else, of 'language' in GENERIC terms. On this generic concept of 'language', particular *languages* are the prime realities—'language' doesn't really exist as such, it's just a generic cover term for all of them.[1] 'Language' is just what particular languages are examples of.

What is significant about this generic view is that it implies that whatever is true of all languages must be true of (generic) 'language'. So, if languages are conventional and socio-culturally defined, it follows that 'language' (understood generically) will be conventional and socio-culturally defined. Furthermore, from the fact that languages are spoken and must therefore include phonology (to accommodate the sound side of things), it follows that 'language', in the generic sense, must include phonology.[2]

However, the phrase 'a real object of the natural world' suggests a quite different—*non-generic*—sense of 'language'. Picking up on two adjectives in that phrase, I'll call it a REALIST/NATURALISTIC notion of 'language'. This concept of 'language' is quite different from how we think of *languages*. In particular, there's no reason to suppose that, on this non-

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[1] Since using the term in Burton-Roberts (2000), I have discovered that Bickerton (1996) also uses 'generic' for this sense of 'language'.

[2] For the purposes of this talk, I am assuming that sign languages can be said to have a phonology (see van der Hulst 2000) and thus be 'spoken', though in an extended sense of that word.

generic sense, 'language' has *anything* in common in languages. Most obviously, it is natural and supposed to be perfect whereas particular languages are known to be neither natural nor perfect. Could it then be that, in talking about 'language' (UG) in the naturalistic and realistic—rather than the generic—sense, Chomsky is actually talking about *something quite different* from actual languages? It seems to me that this *must* be the case. In the passage just quoted, Chomsky is in fact denying that linguistic theory—insofar as it is concerned with a real, natural, single object of the natural world—can concern itself with particular languages.

Now this of course is highly controversial. Nevertheless, I am going to pursue it and try to address the urgent question that it poses: what could possibly be the connection, the relation, between this single natural object ('language') and the plurality of the non-natural conventional systems we call 'languages'? I believe that trying to answer that question without downplaying the plurality of languages offers a way of resolving the perplexities surrounding 'language' and its relation to speech and to thought.

However, it is not altogether clear that Chomsky really operates *consistently* with this distinct, non-generic, natural sense of 'language'. It is Chomsky's own work that has pinpointed the ambiguity of the term 'language' (and the possibility of looking at language in an entirely new way) but the ambiguity is not fully resolved in Chomsky's own work. The ambiguity crucially concerns phonology.

On the *generic* sense of 'language', to repeat, 'language' must have phonology (in addition to syntax and semantics) because *all languages* have phonology. But with 'language' understood in Chomsky's non-generic realist/naturalistic sense, there is no reason to suppose that 'language' has the properties that particular languages have. Language in this sense and languages are simply different. So the fact that all languages have phonology does *not* necessarily mean that Chomskian natural language has phonology. In fact, I suggest, it is simply *impossible* that natural language could include phonology. If natural language did include phonology in addition to syntax and semantics, it would have to be regarded as *a system for associating sounds and meanings*.

There are two interrelated problems in this. The first is that there *is* no single, universal system that relates sounds and meanings. There is a plurality of such systems. This is related to the second problem: *no system that associates sounds and meanings is a <u>natural</u> system*. Any such system is by definition a conventional system, as we have seen. So the idea that the single natural human language could possibly include phonology is ruled out. The two problems are interrelated because, as noted, it is precisely the non-natural *conventionality* of sound-meaning relations that makes for the *diversity/plurality* of systems that effect such relations.

Interestingly, there is in fact a tension in Chomsky's thought in connection with phonology itself. Chomsky maintains the assumption that language does include phonology—even while developing his special, non-generic, naturalistic sense of 'language'. I can only assume that he includes phonology on *generic* grounds—that is, on the grounds that, since all particular languages have phonology, so must 'language'. There is then a tension, within Chomsky's own work, between his own non-pluralistic, naturalistic sense of 'language' and the traditional view of 'language' as a generic cover term for all languages, thought of as conventional/Saussurian systems of signs. To be fair, Chomsky does acknowledge that, by including phonology, he is importing Saussurian arbitrariness into his natural system. But he invariably only notices the problem in passing and in order to set it aside. (1995b: 8, 170).

The tension surrounding phonology in Chomsky's work goes deeper. Chomsky himself believes that it is precisely *phonology* (taken to include morphology) that is the locus both of diversity and of imperfection (eg 2002: 118). Left to its own devices, the 'core' of natural language—i.e syntactic system—would be perfect and invariant. From his writings, it is clear that Chomsky would ideally like phonology (which he describes as 'extraneous' to the 'core' system) to be excluded from the otherwise perfect system of natural language. But he has not (as yet) gone so far as to actually exclude it, despite the acknowledged problems it poses for his general naturalistic philosophy of language.

I suggest we take seriously Chomsky's non-generic, naturalistic sense of 'language' and push it to its logical conclusion. I believe only this will resolve the tensions. Chomsky's naturalistic, singular concept of language raises many questions, which we need to set about trying answer. Since the single natural system language and particular languages are so different, we cannot think of 'language' as a generic term for all languages. In which case, how does the diversity of non-natural particular languages fit into the picture? Put another way: what is the *relation* between the plurality of conventional particular languages and this single natural object language? More generally: how do nature and convention, biology and society, interact in the linguistic context? Furthermore, if we insist that there is only one human language, it follows that, strictly speaking, the things that are generally called 'languages' are *not* in fact 'languages'. So: what *are* they? What alternative characterisation of so-called 'languages' should we offer?

I hope I have persuaded you that, on the naturalistic sense of 'language', language cannot include phonology. Language in this sense will *be* an exclusively syntactico-semantic system—an invariant generative system governing the composition of an infinity of syntactico-semantically constituted expressions. This raises several further questions: if phonology is not in the natural system 'language', where is it? What is it for? And how does phonology relate to the syntax and semantics of that natural system?

If you think about it, these questions about phonology and its relation to syntax-cum-semantics are simply a slightly more technical way of asking about the relation between speech and language—the question I opened with. If the natural system 'language' doesn't (can't) have a phonology, then that system is clearly nothing to do with sound and can't be spoken. It is wholly internal to the mind. Speech is always—by definition—speech-in-a-particular-language. And particular languages are by definition spoken—and therefore by definition have a phonology (see note 1 above). So, in asking about the relation between syntax-semantics and phonology, we are asking about the relation between *natural language* and *particular languages*. Both questions, then, are intimately related to the question I started with: how do language and speech (of necessity, in a particular language) connect?

So let me start by proposing an answer to that first question about the relation between speech and language, understood now in Chomsky's singular naturalistic sense. I suggest that speech itself is not linguistic—by which I mean: not part of natural language. Rather, speech stands in a relation of conventional REPRESENTATION *to* natural language. It is not linguistic (in the naturalistic sense that I intend) precisely because it is *for the representation of* what is linguistic. I am suggesting that speech (in a language) is a way of conventionally *representing* the syntacto-semantic expressions of a single, invariant, natural, mind-internal system, namely 'language'. The relation between speech and languages, on this view, is representational.

This representational idea implies that speakers don't produce/utter the expressions generated by natural language; nor do hearers hear such expressions. What speaker-hearers

utter and hear are simply sounds. The only kind of thing that can be *heard* is: SOUND. Now, sounds in themselves don't have meaning and don't have syntax. This is not to say that, in each particular language, the sounds we produce don't have *significance.* I suggest that the significance of speech sounds is due to the fact they function as *representations* of the mind-internal expressions of natural language. It is those expressions themselves, not the acoustic phenomena that are used to conventionally represent them, that have meaning and syntax. What speaker-hearers utter and hear, then, are acoustic *representations* of linguistic expressions.

This representational idea thus makes a radical distinction between a *representation* and *what it is a representation of.* In doing so, it makes the same distinction as the Belgian painter Magritte points to in his famous painting *La Trahison des Images*, in which the image of a smoker's pipe is accompanied by the message 'Ceci n'est pas une pipe' (*This is not a pipe*).

This may seem paradoxical, but Magritte is really making an obvious point: what you are looking at is *not* a pipe; it is just a *representation* of a pipe. Uncontroversially, in everyday life, we do distinguish between a representation and what it is a representation of. I am suggesting—more controversially, it would seem—that we should make that same distinction in the linguistic context.

The distinction is controversial in the linguistic context because it goes against the traditional (Saussurian) concept of the linguistic sign. For Saussure, a linguistic sign *includes* (is partly constituted by) what it is a sign of. Similarly, for Chomsky, linguistic expressions are constituted by both a sound and a structured meaning. The representational idea separates these out: on the one hand we have just mind-external sound (the sign/representation) and on the other, quite distinctly, expressions with mind-internal structure and meaning (what it is a sign/representation of).

This representational relation has to be conventional, because the relevant sounds (speech sounds) are utterly different from the mind-internal linguistic expressions that they are used to represent. In this respect, the acoustic representation of natural language is different from representation in art. Magritte's painting succeeds in representing a pipe because it *resembles* a pipe. But sounds don't resemble the expressions of natural language in any respect. Resemblance plays barely any part in the representation of the linguistic by the acoustic. The only way sounds can be used to represent the expressions of natural language is by means of *conventions*.

Clearly, the representational conventions reside in particular languages. In fact, I suggest, *that* is precisely what a particular language is—a system of conventions whereby sounds are harnessed to the enterprise of representing a natural language system. This

provides a new answer to an earlier question: if there is only one human language, what *are* particular 'languages' and how do they relate to that one language? The answer offered by the representational idea is that all particular languages are *conventional systems for the phonetic representation of a single, universal, natural language*.

On these terms, I can accept the proposition that there is just one natural human linguistic system. What recommends the representational idea is that it allows us to say that, but in a way that does not demand that we deny or downplay the diversity/ plurality of particular 'languages'. Since particular 'languages' are systems of representational conventions, there is indeed a plurality of them. What they have in common is that they are all systems of representation of the same single language. Their diversity can be acknowledged without in any way impugning the invariance and universality of natural language because their diversity is not linguistic but representational.

The representational distinction (between WHAT is represented and HOW it is represented in the phonetic medium) thus allows us not only to distinguish clearly, but state the relation, between
- 'language' and 'languages'
- language and speech,
- single/universal and plural/diverse,
- nature and convention,
- biology and culture,
- what is innate and what has to be learned.

WHAT is represented is linguistic, singular, natural, biologically instantiated, and innate and thus universal. As for speech, plurality, convention, culture and learning, all these have to do, quite distinctly, with HOW it is represented.

What about phonology? Where is it? What is it for? How does phonology relate to syntax-semantics? It is not controversial that a phonological system is a system that determines what counts as a well-formed stream of sound in this context, i.e. well-formed speech. But what counts as well-formed speech differs from particular language to particular language. And that is because different languages have (are constituted by) differing representational conventions. All this suggests that the representational conventions of a particular language should be regarded as constituting a particular *phonological* system. Particular languages on this view *are* phonological systems.

On the one hand, then, we have the one human language, an invariant, universal exclusively syntactico-semantic system. On the other hand, we have a plurality of phonological systems (known as 'languages'). These are systems for the conventional representation of that one language in the phonetic medium. Rather than being examples or instantiations of natural Language, particular languages are systems of representing it in some perceptual medium. I hope you agree that this offers a quite different view of the relation between *particular languages* on the one hand and *natural language* on the other, but one consistent with the radical difference between the two.

This is not the place to explore further the conceptual and technical implications of the representation idea (for some work on this, see the starred references below). Instead I want to touch on the broader significance of the rather technical, theory-internal questions I've been addressing and their relevance to the theme of this conference. So let me conclude with a

speculation about the nature of this one human natural language and its relation to thought and culture.

Chomsky distinguishes between language and thought—necessarily so, because he thinks of language as including phonology, whereas the human capacity for thought does *not* involve phonology. But I have argued that the representational idea (and Chomsky's own thinking) give us good reason to exclude phonology form natural language. Phonology is *excluded from* natural language precisely because it is has to do with the *representation of* natural language. Now, with phonology excluded from natural language, I suggest, there is no reason not to identify Chomsky's single universal natural human language *as* what Fodor (e.g.,1976) and others following him have called 'the Language of Thought'. Bickerton (1996:73-7, 107-112) has made the same suggestion. However, it is difficult idea to sustain if you hold—as Bickerton (with Chomsky) does—that HFL is *instantiated* in particular languages: for, if the universal natural language *is* LoT, then LoT must be instantiated in particular langusges—and this (as Pinker 1992 argues) is surely untenable. In the terms of the representational, by contrast, the relation of particular languages to natural language/LoT is representational—and a representation-of-*X* is *not* an *instantiation*-of-*X*.

The one natural, mind-internal linguistic system, on these terms, *is* the thought system. We know that the human system of thought itself must be a syntactico-semantic system; that is why it is called 'the *language* of thought'. So what is the one human unspeakable language for? It is for thought.

In the light of the above discussion, there is I believe only one reasonable response to the question about the relation between language and thought: 'It depends on what you mean by "language"'. If we mean 'language' in the generic sense (as a cover term for the plurality of all particular languages), that's one question. If we mean 'language' in the singular/realist/naturalistic sense, that's a quite separate question.

On that latter sense of 'language', it becomes possible (and surely necessary) to say that language and thought are one and the same. Now that *sounds* like the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis, but it isn't. Quite the opposite. The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis, insofar as it equates language and thought, equates thought with 'language' understood in the *generic* sense. Thereby, it equates the thought system of individuals or communities with the *particular language* they *speak*. Hence the cultural relativism of the S-W Hypothesis. However, in sharp contrast, when I identify thought with natural language, I am saying that there is single thought system that we all share as humans.

It might seem that I am completely rejecting the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis. In fact, I am not, at least not entirely. The representational idea in fact allows for a more nuanced—and, I think, more defensible—version of the S-W Hypothesis. On the one hand, it insists that we as humans share a single, universal thought/conceptual system. On the other hand, we need to distinguish between being possessed of such a system and the kinds of *access* we have to that system. There is no point in attributing such a system to individuals, unless we also attrribute to them some kind of more-or-less unconscious, more-or-less direct access to that system. One kind of thought involves that kind of access. But *conscious* access to the thought system is a different matter. The best—and possibly the only—way of acquiring *conscious access* to the thought system is, precisely, by means of your acquired system of *representing* it—in other words, via your own particular language. Now that *is* another kind of thought—call it conscious thought. It is conscious but—because mediated by convention—much more indirect. It is coloured by how the thought system is represented by your particular language.

'Conscious thought' would seem then to mean: the kind of thought which, if not verbalised, is at least capable of being verbalised. Now, since it is only made possible by your particular representational system (your particular language), *this* kind of thought would indeed be culture-specific.

Unsurprisingly, then, questions about the relation of language and thought depend not only on what you mean by 'language' but also on what you mean by 'thought'. I think the representational idea sketched here allows us to tease out the different senses of those terms, and the relation between what those terms refer to. And I believe it allows us to capture what is reasonable and intuitively appealing in the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis, while rejecting any implication that we cannot communicate across cultural divides. It allows us to celebrate both our human commonality and our cultural variety.

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Noel Burton-Roberts (n.burton-roberts@ncl.ac.uk)