Chapter 1: The Nature of Language

1.1 I-Language vs. E-Language

Following Chomsky (1986), we make the distinction between I-language and E-language: I-language is “a state of an internal [computational] system...with which humans are born and which they have co-opted for communication and other purposes” (p. 17); E-languages are the (purported) external social objects we refer to when we talk about English, Spanish, Italian, etc. It is difficult, if not impossible, to study E-languages because their boundaries cannot be established properly (“political identity precedes E-language identity”). Even if we forget about E-language boundaries and look at E-idioms instead, we will find it similarly difficult to distinguish (1) noises a speaker makes which are meaningful linguistic utterances from those he makes which aren’t (coughs, etc.), (2) well-formed utterances from errors, (3) possible but as yet unspoken utterances from impossible ones, and (4) one idiom a speaker uses on a regular basis (e.g., the way he speaks at work) from other idiom he uses on a regular basis (e.g., the way he speaks at home).

Conclusion: E-language cannot be the object of the scientific study of language.

1.2 What is I-Language For?

The standard view is that language is primarily for communication and thus that the propositional content of a given utterance is constant through time and space (language wouldn’t be very useful for communication if it wasn’t). But I-language is a biological endowment like any other, and any claims about its purpose are subject to the same controversy that surrounds the “doctrine” of teleological explanation in evolutionary theory. So even if we discover all the details about some function of language, we still may not know what its other or original purpose(s) are.

1.3 Is I-Language the Language of Thought?

Thoughts (cognitive states that are “about the world”) are simply I-language tokens. The postulation of a separate language of thought whose tokens are translated into I-language representations and vice versa is redundant, because “either the [language of thought] must be isomorphic to I-language (in which case it can do no more than I-language can) or the properties of the [language of thought] are recoverable from I-language representations via some algorithm” (pp. 22-23).

I-language sentences are ordered pairs, <PF, LF>, where PF is a representation that interacts with the “perceptual-articulatory component” and LF interacts with the “conceptual-intensional system.”

Answers to possible objections (1) What about babies or monkeys who can’t speak but appear to be thinking? Babies have LF’s but no PF’s; monkeys and other animals with “thoughts” probably have a system similar but not identical to human I-language. (2) What about people who claim not to think in words? They can’t be thinking in images (we can think about things that we can’t see, like thousand-sided polygons), and they can’t be thinking in mental models (models are only meaningful inasmuch as they obey certain syntactic constraints that make them interpretable, and they are only successful inasmuch as those syntactic constraints “mimic” those of the thoughts they are meant to model).