

# Language Acquisition: Seeing through Wittgenstein

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## Abstract

This paper aims to exemplify the language acquisition model by tracing back to the Socratic model of language learning procedure that sets down inborn knowledge, a kind of implicit knowledge that becomes explicit in our language. Jotting down the claims in *Meno*, Plato triggers a representationalist outline basing on the deductive reasoning, where the conclusion follows from the premises (inborn knowledge) rather than experience. This revolution comes from the pen of Noam Chomsky, who amends the empiricist position on the creativity of language by pinning down it with the innateness hypothesis. However, Chomsky never rejects the external world or the linguistic stipulation that relies on the objective reality.

Wittgenstein's model of language acquisition upholds a liaison centric appeal that stands between experience (use theory of meaning) and mentalism (mind based inner experiences). Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* never demarcates the definite mental processes that entangles with the method of understanding and meaning. Wittgenstein's 'language game' takes care of the model of language acquisition in a paradigmatic way. The way portrait language as the form of life and the process of language acquisition is nothing but a language game that relies on the activity of men.

**Key words:** Language learning, Wittgenstein, Plato, Chomsky, Innate, Inborn knowledge, Rule following, Language-game.

The problem that initiates a tremendous debate in philosophy mainly concerned about the questions of linguistic acquisition and language learning procedure. Tracking back to Plato and holding the position of the Chomskian belt (innate based generative grammar), I think Wittgenstein, who may perhaps be inspired by Hume's legacy (empiricist way) has significantly fulfilled an impressive intermediary stance by bringing the model of language acquisition induces through the language-game and rule following procedures.

### *Socratic Model of Language Learning*

Let me clarify the Socratic model of language learning, a key model of language learning method in western philosophy that is instigated by the great Greek philosopher Socrates. A newborn baby, an amazing creature of the world who has born without language, but learns it somehow through his/her mind that relates to the world. The puzzle regains when we consider what a newborn baby learned is very creative (in the sense of productivity) or is a part of representation (in the sense of creativity) of mind. Socratic model of learning as appears in Plato's *Meno*, refrains the moving beyond possibilities by defending the acquired knowledge that underrates a new productive knowledge. Plato's *Meno* highlights on the following query: 'can virtue be taught?' Here Socratic model intends to classify inborn knowledge or the knowledge that one already have in his/her mind initiating through representations, otherwise no knowledge can be obtained unless it is already having in the agent's mind. The procedure of learning is nothing but a kind of recollection. The conception of new knowledge is an expression that is already latently sited in the mind of the language users. Socratic model of teaching a slave boy on geometry specifies that the boy actually knows geometry, even though he has hitherto been unaware of the processing of the particular knowledge. In *Meno*, Socrates concerns about the latent implicit knowledge and explicit knowledge. He claims that the procedure of learning the implicit knowledge becomes explicit in our language. The explicit knowledge is not actually an acquired knowledge (new); the content of the knowledge has been already in the agent's mind as in Platonic model the knowledge remains eternal and static. The dilemma arises because what the agent knows is a type of recollection that s/he has forgotten; so in this sense the acquired knowledge remains new, but still the acquired knowledge is non-new, as it has latently located in the agent's mind. In *Meno*, Socrates says:

Nothing prevents a man after recalling one thing only—a process which man calls learning –discovering everything else for himself. (Plato: 1981, 81d)

A query may arise, 'what role does experience play here?' Actually, in Socratic model, experience plays the role of triggering knowledge and the knowledge can deduce later in the case of representation or recollection, so doubtlessly the process of learning in this model is relied on the deductive (deduction) centric reasoning where the conclusion follows from the premises. The constructive challenges to the mentioned arguments come from the account of empiricist David Hume. It defines the necessary parts of the challenge by claiming that there may be some knowledge that does not depend on the Platonic metaphor of the rigid pre-

existent formation of knowledge. Hume's stance emphasizes on the experienced based learning procedures that intend towards the creativity of the mind. In Hume's words:

...all this creative power of the mind amounts to no more than the faculty of compounding, transposing augmenting, or diminishing the materials afforded us by the senses and experience. (Hume: 2011, 586)

One point that needs to be clarified here is the conception of creativity. In Plato's account, creativity seems to be a kind of representation, whereas Hume confers creativity as a kind of productivity of the agent's mind. For Hume, the mind does not produce latent knowledge, but actively produces new knowledge through experience as building block entangling with the mind.

### *Chomskian Model of Language Acquisition*

Noam Chomsky, the celebrated linguist has it in mind that the empiricist explanation of knowledge and their way out of the creativity of language to defend the productivity of language looks provocative. Chomsky intensely instigates an exclusive aptitude of human language that he called 'innate universal grammar' that envisages the generative and transformative rules together. Chomsky seems inspired by the Cartesian legacy as Descartes keeps apart mind from the physical world and frames it in a more prolific way to make out mind in the scope of human knowledge. However, he thinks that we are not proficient to promote the innate universal grammar through empiricism (an adventitious construct) and the concept of innate grammar in its universal form is certainly an intricate component of the mind. Chomsky says:

As for Hume, I think he was wrong in his empirical assumption about the principles by which the mind is actuated, innate, and acquired, but right in the way he formulated the question, particularly, in taking his inquiry to be analogous to physics. (Chomsky: 1980, 31)

The wide-ranging linguistic theory is closer to the taxonomic linguistic model that aims to resolve grammar from the juncture of corpus of data, whereas the rationalist version infringes the intrinsic properties of language acquisition, as the transformational grammar must have a mental structure depending on the innateness hypothesis. A prolegomenon that hinges on knowledge and language seems initially necessary in Chomsky's language acquisition method. Knowing the language is a task of internalizing grammar that metes out upon the

structural description engaged highly with the rules and grammar. Certainly, this rationalist approach is to see knowledge or language speculates knowledge in terms of the disposition of mind. Chomsky answers to the Socratic model or we can say, Plato's problem (Plato's problem is generally called the "poverty of the stimulus" that argues in favor of limit of generalization in the sense of linguistic experience) is as follows:

...there is a biological entity, a finite mental organ, which develops in children along one of a number of paths. The paths are determined in advance of any childhood experience. The language organ that emerges, the grammar, is represented in the brain and plays a central role in the person's use of language. (Lightfoot: 2005, 45-46)

One can defend that grammar in Chomsky's sense has a great import in the theory of language that congregates the model of "descriptive adequacy", a model that corresponds to the intrinsic competence of the idealized agent (the linguistic intuition) who has the capability to preferring correct grammar from alternatives. The conception "explanatory adequacy" helps to attain it.

As we know that, the meaning is a primordial part of language. Meaning in Chomskian and especially in Katz's model is considered as a set of rules that oversee the underlying grammatical structures. However, the rules can acquire the knowledge of language basing on an internalized structure that Chomsky called 'I-language', a mode of competency that is *innate* based. Moreover, children born with the principle of universal grammar that espouses a kind of creativity and understanding to them when they are confronted with unfamiliar sentences. Chomsky believes that to know a language is to know a set of rules that will resolve an infinite number of sentences and doubtlessly this attitude goes beyond the mechanism of 'stimulus' control. In the case of learning language, Chomsky admits that the learning language does not merely rely on the process of piling up the 'behavioural repertoire', but he says, 'we somehow develop certain principles (unconscious, of course) that decide the form and meaning of indefinitely many sentences.' (Chomsky, 1969, 64) One can argue that the developing principles are not in a sense innate rather it sounds extensional as we could acquire them through the steady of behavioural interaction with the world or socio-linguistic interaction of the world and others. To review Skinner's work *Verbal Behavior*, Chomsky argues that the utterances of an individual cannot be under controlled by the stimuli or the manipulation of those stimuli and writes, 'We cannot predict verbal behavior in terms

of the stimuli in the speaker's environment, since we do not know what the current stimuli are he responds.' (Chomsky, 1964, 553) the creativity of language uses regain when the speaker is beyond of any stimuli control and create the sentences innovatively. This sort of antipathy outlook against behaviorism or in a nutshell the habit-structure of language acquisition leads towards a capacity that produces an indefinite numbers of new sentences with the limited accessibility of words. I will not elaborate the Chomskian paradigm of language learning here, as it is not my key concerned of the paper.

### *Wittgenstein's Model of Language Acquisition*

The Moorean philosophical way to secure the 'common sense' exhibits a kind of certainty or self-evidence of the common sensual belief that is fundamentally interlinked to the conceptual system. Moore writes:

Starting, therefore, from the view of Common Sense that there certainly are in the Universe (1) material objects in space and (2) the acts of consciousness of men and animals upon the earth, we might most simply get a general description of the Universe in one or other of two ways: Either by saying , these two kinds of things are the only kinds in the Universe or by saying: they are the only kinds we know to be in it, but there may possibly also be others. (Moore: 1966, 28)

Wittgenstein reiterates Moore's model, but aims to reject the approach in favour of *Common Sense* about worldview. He appreciates Moore's quest for safeguarding the existence of the external world to get rid of the wicked plea of scepticism. Sceptic's claims against the existence of common sense based objects are not only any false conviction, but it looks meaningless to Wittgenstein. The bedrock of our beliefs following Moore's dictum of *Common Sense* depends on the frame of the reference, a fundamental structure (in Wittgenstein's word 'foundational-wall') of our thought or belief related to the external world. Wittgenstein says, 'the truth of certain empirical propositions belongs to our frame of reference.' (Wittgenstein, 1974, 83) He also admits that the conceptual changes often insist a considerable role in our language, but we find a natural limit between what sort of concept the agents actually holds and what the world in reality is. The conception of certainty is a puzzling situation. How could a person be certain about his/her knowledge? The conception of certainty copes with the subject and object interaction, but in a different level. *On Certainty*, particularly in the *section 115* commences the Cartesian quest for certainty by

defending that the conception of certainty precedes any continuous doubt as Wittgenstein puts it, 'The game of doubting itself presupposes certainty'. One should be certain about the fact that constructs the certainty of the meaning of the words of a proposition. Wittgenstein clarifies:

Certainty is *as it were* a tone of voice in which one declares how things are, but one does not infer from the tone of voice that one is justified. (1974, 30)

However, later Wittgenstein argues that in the process of knowing the conception of 'I know' plays a logical insight that cannot be essential in any grammatical proposition like 'I know that rose is red'. In case of knowing a proposition, the subject-object interaction remains as an existing correspondence maintained between the meaning and rules. If we evaluate the meaning of the word with function, then Wittgenstein believes that mere changes of meaning will lead to a consequent change in its function. Wittgenstein writes:

When language-games change, then there is a change in concepts and with the concepts the meaning of words change. (1974, 65)

Now the decisive question is 'how could we check the statement in language game?' Wittgensteinian model emphasizes on the understanding decorum as a trace back to true sentences. One can understand a false sentence (if presumed), and the whole task would be uncertain since in the process of description of a language game 'truth' of a certain empirical proposition directs to the reference. So here, the bewilderment of philosophical analysis submerges into the domain of meaning and reference. Meaning for Wittgenstein is beyond of any image centric mind-set. The paradigmatic mode to express the apprehension of meaning relies on the explaining meaning of a particular word from an ostensive or verbal level. It seems to me that in the *Blue Book*, Wittgenstein does not strictly shun the mentalese approaches. The mental process can deal with the process of understanding and meaning through which language may use. Wittgenstein writes:

The signs of our language seem dead without these mental processes; and it might seem that the only function of the signs is to induce such processes, and that these are the things we ought really to be interested in. Thus, if you are asked what is the relation between a name and the thing it names, you will be inclined to answer that the relation is a psychological one... (2009, 88)

Wittgenstein is partially (personally, I don't consider completely) aloof to the sense of mind given interaction with the reality or objectivity rather he hinges towards the meaning given activity that stresses on the claim that the sign of language depends on its uses. The picture theory of *Tractatus* blends the elements of the picture with things outside of the picture. We know that the first part of this encounter belongs between the picture and its elements while the second part of this correlation maintains the liaison of elements and the objectivity from the level of the users, not anyway from the stage of the picture itself. However, *Tractatus* represents that language is limited by its extent and the limits are conferred by its *logical form* and propositions that match up with the totality of the world. It sounds exciting that language is unable to represent the logical form or the totality of the world because of its transgressed limits. Language is not synonymous with certainty. In the preface to *Tractatus* (*Tractatus*, 3-4), Wittgenstein draws the limit of thought on language. In addition, the solution that he urges would seem to be mere *a posteriori* hypothesis as Wittgenstein claims, 'What can be shown, cannot be said'. (*Tractatus*, 4.1212). It means we can show the rules of the logical syntaxes in its uses of signs, or the formal concepts like objects and facts can be shown in different variables. However, Wittgenstein believes that the limit of proposition is reflected in the case of presenting the logical form of language. He calls this approach 'mystical' as it manifests itself beyond any word expression and this approach helps us to think *the world as a limited whole*. (*Tractatus*, 6.45). Now the question is what sort of method philosophy need to adopt? Wittgenstein's response is as follows:

The correct method in philosophy would really be the following: to say nothing except what can be said, i.e. propositions of natural science—i.e. something that has nothing to do with philosophy—and then, whenever someone else wanted to say something metaphysical, to demonstrate to him that he had failed to give a meaning to certain signs in his propositions. Although it would not be satisfying to the other person—he would not have the feeling that we were teaching him philosophy—*this* method would be the only strictly correct one. (*Tractatus*, 6.53)

However, the *Tractatusian* model of language learning has some limitations that are integrated by the phenomenon of the limits of thought. The new conception of language that vindicates meaning and use theory together emphasises a new sense in Wittgenstein's later work *Philosophical Investigations* or in short PI (1953) that he himself calls 'a particular picture of the essence of human language'. I think here philosophy embarks on the thesis of

what humans do and the way language functions. *Philosophical Investigations* and the explanation of philosophical queries grapple the sense of human activities. The concept of ‘ostensive’ uses of language to attain meaning leads not only to the meaning of the concrete objects, but also to the abstract objects like numbers. Therefore, the activity of human being for language acquisition constitutes the essence of ‘language game’ that analyzes the traditional model of language learning that precludes the word-meaning relation from a representational level of objectivity. In *Philosophical Investigations*, the elemental question is how we could obtain the meaning of the word by getting rid of the chauvinism of ontological aptitude of language like whether the objects are simple or complex or what’s sort of decomposition we require to uphold the relation between an object and meaning. This type of *Tractatusian* model initiates the jargon of descriptivism, nominalism etc. In *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein discerns the method of old logic, which conceives the account of language guided by the signs centric paradigm of reality and charmed the mental process of representation. Wittgenstein urges for the *essence* articulated by grammar and grammar articulates the nature of objectivity. (PI, 371-373). Derek Bolton claims:

The order of action lies at the basis of logic as grammar; in this way, grammar makes a new interpretation of the original word, ‘logos’. (Bolton:1979, 125)

Grammar positively for Wittgenstein instigates meanings and words that have meanings, an inseparable part of human action. One crucial point is that Wittgenstein even in his later work *Philosophical Investigations* never denies the conception of images, feelings, and the idea of inner experiences, etc. Wittgenstein’s language-game theory shows that the terms like ‘brick’ and ‘bring me a brick’ etc have some explicit correlations to the mind of the speaker and the hearer. Wittgenstein says, ‘We can also think of the whole process of using words in (2) as one of those games by means of which children learn their native language. I will call these games “*language-games*” and will sometimes speak of a primitive language as a language-game.’ (PI, 7)

What Wittgenstein in fact is ready to deny is the *solipsistic mentelese* outlook that inadequately contradicts with linguistic expressions depending on the use theory of language. However, if we allow the distinction that Wittgenstein draws between saying and showing, then the speaker’s attempt to say something in words could turn out as futile, as the words are yet to articulate any determinate thought. There may be some thoughts that a speaker can grasp but cannot express it in words. A speaker who intends to locate these unsayable thoughts into words predictably encounters himself/herself with a contravention of the bounds



of sense.<sup>1</sup> Besides, the logical structure of language prohibits the panorama of unfolding it in language without contravening any logical syntax. In this regard, Marie McGinn has argued very convincingly as she notes:

It is this essential connection between what is shown and what reveals itself only in the use or application of language that makes it impossible to say what shows itself, and not that the thought that we are trying to express is somehow at odds with logical syntax. The idea of the saying/showing distinction is not that there are unsayable thoughts that lie beyond the limits of language, but that the limit of language—that is, everything that is essential to our using our language with sense—is something on which we have an essentially practical grasp, something that shows itself only in our actual use of words with sense, and something that is therefore itself unsayable. (McGinn: 2001, 28)

As we know that *Tractatus* propagates logical-semantics and as it exercises the method of showing rather than saying. The conception of unsayability remains because of this logical-semantic plea in his book.

### **What else?**

Wittgenstein in his later works *The Blue and Brown Books* and *Philosophical Investigations* stress on the understanding that the meaning of a word or a sentence lies in its uses and so there is no concrete or fixed idea of meaning that depends on the context independency. He thinks that we cannot say about the certain characteristic of the object that has been referred by the meaning of a particular word. There is no fixed meaning that aims to cover all possible cases of future use of an expression, which would not be bounded by new contexts. Mainly, Wittgenstein's purpose is to preserve his *family resemblance* plea by maintaining the policy of the 'productivity of language'. *Family resemblance* theory articulates the applicability of a word beyond any static set of characteristic. It actually depends on the varieties of the characteristics that may somehow resemble to each other, but there is no stagnant sense. The conception of rigidity leads towards the private language that Wittgenstein sternly avoids as indispensable. Language and especially grammar beget the process of rules following and the mode of rules following cannot be systematically private as it grounds in share practices,

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<sup>1</sup> The objection of Carnap against Wittgenstein's doctrine of "corollary of the 'unsayables' that are 'shewn'" seems provocative as it hints towards a sort of mysticism. One can avoid it by putting the *formal mode of speech* as proposed by Carnap himself like 'red is a predicate' instead of 'red is a property'. Anscombe writes: 'I once had occasion to remark to Wittgenstein that he was supposed to have a mystical streak. 'Like a yellow streak', he replied; and that is pretty well how the Vienna Circle felt about certain things in the *Tractatus*.' (Anscombe: 1971, 82)

community and in general non-static public habits of using language. Kripke seems promising when he writes:

Other will then have justification conditions for attributing correct or incorrect rule following to the subject. (Kripke: 1982, 89)

Kripke attributes a type of solution (to an extent one can claim) to Wittgenstein's problem that mental states, inner experience cannot fix the meaning of terms that may be done by others or the people of the community in a shareable sense. The learning procedure is not dependent on the inner thoughts, but the process relies on the use of language. In fact, the method of learning of language and the process of knowing how to use language must have a goal and the goal is nothing but to speak and communicate in the similar way as others did in our society. Here one can say like Wittgenstein whether learning is a process of adaptation, which absorbed the model of old and new language together. Wittgenstein's thought on the *family resemblance* shows that it is always feasible to surpass the habit of uses or the way one communicates with others as his rules following hypothesis does not undergo with any static and rigid rules. There is no behaviour common to all instances; likewise, there are no experiences comparable in all instances of understanding. Creativity is a bigger part of language use, but we should also know the limit of language and I suppose it is called the 'master of technique' as Wittgenstein emphasises in *Philosophical Investigations*. Wittgenstein says, 'To understand a sentence means to understand a language. To understand a language means to have mastered a technique'. (PI, 199) Having rebuffed the *Tractatus* model of language of thought Wittgenstein highlights on the training or practice based process of language learning. He writes,

A child uses such primitive forms of language when it learns to talk. Here the teaching of language is not explanation, but training. (PI, 5)

The point is that a child can learn language through language-game basing on the exemplification and training rather than the translation and explanation models. This model induces that we can only show what an agent could learn, but we could not say it as this is the rigor limitation of language use. The acquisition framework of learning sketches the delimitation of language, as the framework cannot be explained through the rules for use of language as it escorts to infinite regress. This infinite regress delineates our erudite knowledge as a familiar previous knowledge. So the element of creativity in language learning would be hampered. The language learning process that undergoes with training also brings out that learning to think and speak language is a procedure to learn how to think and speak rather than knowing how to imitate or translate through mere description (a kind of knowing that

knowledge in Ryle's sense). It is not a regimented process to swallow the general rules of language, but a practice, which concerns about the natural form of life. Chomsky considers human language as undoubtedly biological *in part* (the existence of different languages entails that individual languages could not be wholly innate) and the process of language learning and the creativity of language are strongly associated with the universal grammar and the innateness hypothesis. However, Wittgenstein does not strongly believe in the biological model of language like Chomsky, but unable to ignore the contention that cherished the natural history of the language learning procedure. Wittgenstein urges:

It is sometimes said: animals do not talk because they lack the mental abilities. And this means: "They do not think, and that is why they do not talk." But – they simply do not talk. Or better: they do not use language – if we disregard the most primitive forms of language. – Giving orders, asking questions, telling stories, having a chat, are as much a part of our natural history as walking, eating, drinking, playing. (PI, 25)

Language is nothing but a shared form of human life and the language-game can be considered as a conservatory of our primitive behavior as it has some common ground that can help us to share and comprehend each other's interest. Wittgenstein thinks that the creative part of language game offers us an ample freedom of language to create something new, but we must be aware that this ample process is finite.

My appraisal is that language is an art of the world that is not created by any individual being. We simply participate in this art of language and sometime contribute something new in the structure of language through the interaction between the subjects and inter-subjects (I, Others plus World). The language actually goes beyond human creation, but still subsists in the social construction. We only can practice it and express it on our thinking through a propositional form. The very old natural history of language vindicates that the elementary application of language uses like processing, constructing, evaluating, or especially thinking, etc., most of the chief parts of language uses apart from its 'reference fixation' rely on the 'internal dialogue' of language. The basic concepts are innate in nature, while the complex concept, such as GRAY BOOK, are composed out of simpler building blocks. It is simply physically impossible to have them innately hard-wired in the brain. Wittgenstein also aims to evade Plato's *Meno* dilemma of having to know what one learns, already exists in his/her brain as an inborn knowledge.

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