Postal vs. Chomsky A Review of Katz & Postal's Necessity Argument

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Abstract

This work mainly focuses on the debate between conceptualism and realism concerning linguistics. The so-called Necessity Argument by Katz and Postal is taken as the leading argument against Chomsky's conceptualist framework is analysed as such.

Keywords: Katz, Postal, Chomsky, necessity, conceptualism, realism

Postal Chomsky'e Karşı Katz ve Postal'ın Zorunluluk Argümanı'nın Yorumu

Özet

Bu çalışma, genel olarak, dilbilimi bağlamında kavramsalcılıkla realizm arasında olan tartışmaya yoğunlaşmaktadır. Önde gelen bir argüman olarak Katz ve Postal tarafından ortaya atılan Zorunluluk Argümanı ele alınmakta ve bu argüman Chomsky'nin kavramsalcı çerçevesi ile karşılaştırılarak analiz edilmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Katz, Postal, Chomsky, zorunluluk, kavramsalcılık, realizm

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Introduction

In this work, I review the debate on conceptualism and realism between Postal and Chomsky. It can be easily said that Postal takes himself to be a Platonist and a realist (Abbott 1986, p. 155). His account, opposing Chomsky, seems to offer a linguistic realism. The aim of this paper is to compare and contrast Postal's realism and Chomsky's so-called conceptualism, to a limited extent, and to focus on the Necessity Argument of Katz and Postal.

1. Some Ontological Roots in *The Vastness of Natural Languages*

In the book *The Vastness of Natural Languages*, Langendoen and Postal (from now on L&P), refer to a Platonic realism of a certain kind. In chapters 6 and 7 we see some discussions and conclusions about the ontology that L&P would like to posit. At the very beginning of chapter 6 they say:

> …[T]his study derives in part from Katz's critique of the now standard ontological position in linguistics that grammars and grammatical theory characterize a psychological domain, and his extensive argument…for the view that NLs are abstract (platonic) objects, not psychological ones (Postal & Langendoen 1984, p.104).

They further say that no conceptualist ontological theory can counter the vastness theorem (p.104) and it is obvious from the discussion in the book that they see no ontological alternative for Platonism, or Platonic realism. In chapter 7, they suggest that the transfinite sentences (sentences of infinite length) do have a Platonic reality, just as the "unperformable finite sentences do." They articulate the view that "[t]he nature of sentencehood is such that size is irrelevant." Therefore, linguistics can be analysed within "a logico-mathematical discipline," which is clearly a method of a Platonic realism (pp.158,59). Such discussions give the impression, rather vision, that L&P posit a kind of realism that is against the 'received' conceptualism of Chomsky. Now, I will represent some of the points that Katz and Postal (from now on K&P) raised against Chomsky while they suggested a realism based on a logico-mathematical discipline.

2. K&P against Conceptualism

K&P see Chomsky as the main critic of realism (Katz & Postal 1991, p.515). They open their discussion in the paper 'Realism vs. Conceptualism in Linguistics' with a distinction: between *linguistics proper* and the *foundations of linguistics* (p.516). [1] According to them, "[l]inguistics proper…is concerned with constructing correct grammars of particular NLs and a true general grammatical theory for the entire range of NLs." (p.516) They instantiate a six-step agenda:

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1   I consider the demarcation crucial for the terminology of this paper, too, to a limited extent.

(1) (a) and (b) are grammatical, while (c) and (d) are not (C[homsky], 1957, p.15)

> (a) Have you a book on modern music?
>
> (b) The book seems interesting.
>
> (c) *Read you a book on modern music?
>
> (d) *The child seems sleeping.

(2) The phrase *John* in (a) is the direct object of *please*, while the same phrase in (b) is the subject of that verb (C[homsky], 1964a, pp.34-35).

> (a) John is easy to please.
>
> (b) John is eager to please.

(3) The form *telegraph* has at least the distinct phonetic representations in (a)-(c) (C[homsky] and Halle 1968, p.11).

> (a) teləgræf (in isolation)
>
> (b) teləgræf (in the context –*ic*, i.e., *telegraphic*)
>
> (c) təlegrəf (in the context –*y*, i.e., *telegraphy*).

(4) Parastic gap cases involving an extracted NP are possible, as in (a), but parallel cases with an extracted PP are not, as in (b) (C[homsky], 1982a, p.55),

> (a) a book which I copied from without buying
>
> (b) *a book from which I copied without buying

(5) If (a) is true, then in virtue of NL so, necessarily, is (b) (C[homsky] 1988b, p.8).

> (a) John killed Bill.
>
> (b) Bill is dead.

(6) The proposition expressed in (a) is a truth of meaning independent of empirical fact (C[homsky], 1988c, pp.33-34).

> (a) Whoever is persuaded to sing intends/decides to sing (pp.516,17).

Foundations of linguistics deal with the "nature of facts" as represented in (1) to (6). Different theories can determine these facts from manifold aspects since the foundation of linguistics includes "things…less straightforward." (p.517) It is also evident that linguistics proper cannot ensure the nature of the sentences as represented in (1) to (6). Namely, the nature of sentences cannot be fixed by linguistics proper (p.517).

Generally, K&P say that conceptualism is not an adequate position within linguistics; nor do they consider Chomsky's criticisms as seriously damaging to realism (p.518).

3. K&P for Realism

A proper understanding of the nature of linguistics, for K&P, lies in the relation between logic and linguistics. Such a theory was once formulated by Fodor. This theory was important in the sense that it applies "semantic properties like *analytic*" (see (6)), or "semantic relations like *analytic entailment*" (see (5a), (5b)) (p.519). It is important, though, to note that such theories *should* not state that the obvious relation "between the senses of NL sentences and logical objects" does contain a psychologically based assumption, since in that case logic itself would be eliminated or at least be reduced to psychological states. The former case is impossible due to the fact that it annihilates all that is essential to grammar, in a way. So is the latter, since reducing logic to psychology is an absurd view that contradicts the very core of the sense of logic itself (p.520).[2]

An adequate formulation of realism, according to K&P, is constituted by Katz saying that there should be a

> …distinction between knowledge of an NL and the object it is knowledge of, the NL itself….[T]he lack of [(conceptualism's not making this distinction)] the…distinction leads to adulteration of grammars with extraneous factors reflecting particular features of information representation in the mind/brain (p.521).

It is, then, obvious that this 'adulteration' considers NL grammar as being completely based on our psychological aspects, and thus contingent. However, it should be that a contingent base is not a stable base, and not only for this very reason but because the relation's —between NLs and their knowledge— are necessary relations, and that a stable base, which is logic, must be considered as an adequate rather than a contingent relation (p.521). In the following sub-section, I review three realist arguments against conceptualism as put forth by K&P.

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2   There are, K&P say, three possible explanations for this matter, none of which is adequate. For more information, see Katz & Postal 1991, p.520 especially par. 2-4.

3.1. Realist Arguments

K&P represent three realist arguments: (i) type argument, (ii) necessity argument and (iii) veil of ignorance argument (p.522-24).

Argument (i) states that "both NL grammars and grammatical theory are about sentences in the type sense." It follows that tokens of a sentence lack spatiality, temporality or causal relations. Having none of these, therefore, sentences are "by definition abstract objects. Thus conceptualism is false." (p.523)

Argument (ii) states that there are necessary connections between e.g. (5a) and (5b), so a theory about NL must, in any way, accomplish the aim of explaining "semantic structures of [necessary (maybe causal) connections]." (p.523) According to some such arguments that fulfill such an explanation process (e.g. "Katz's argument (1972), or Katz, Leacock, Ravin (1985)"), the necessary relation between (5a) and (5b) can be explained to show that psychological dependence is not an adequate way (pp.523,24). I will review this argument in more detail in the following sections.

Argument (iii) states that "before the competence is understood," conceptualists factually determine their position wherever they want (it is actually obvious) and after that they subsequently ignore the real situation. Namely, "they acquire their commitment behind a veil of ignorance." (p.524)

3.2. The Necessity Argument Revisited

It can be stated that argument (i) and argument (iii) are less powerful than argument (ii). For K&P's necessity argument, Soames says that "a semantic theory for a natural language must issue in claims of" (Soames 1991, p.575) the following kind:

(1) 'S' is analytic (i.e., true in virtue of meaning) in L

(2) 'P' entails 'Q' in L. (p.575)

Either of the above claims contains necessity. Moreover, according to Soames, K&P assert that for "the truths of the form (1) establish that certain natural language sentences are necessary…(2) establish necessary connections between natural language sentences." (p.575) However, in a proper semantics, no psychological facts should take place, since if they did there would not be necessity, only contingency. Chomsky's account of the semantics of language, in the light of these statements, seems incorrect for some and should be "replaced" by an abstract theory, which, might be a Platonic realist theory based on logic (pp.575,76). However, there seems to be a problem. It can be said that it is not the case that "if a sentence *s* expresses a necessary truth, then the claim that *s* is necessary is itself necessary." (p.576) Yet, it is obvious, for Soames, that K&P are aware of this problem. Their

approach to the necessity argument is a little different in order to eliminate the aforementioned problem about necessity, Soames states. Necessity (or analyticity) should be primarily attained by the *senses* rather than directly attributed to sentences. "Thus, a sentence is analytic (necessary etc.) iff it expresses a sense that is analytic (or necessary)." (p.577) Therefore, it can be said that the sentence (1) is thought in this way:

(3) 'S' expresses sense M

(4) M is analytic (p.577).

Step (3) can be seen as contingent but (4) is surely necessary for K&P. This upgraded version of the argument also seems "restricted" for Soames (p.578). The postulation that each and every semantic issue regarded by psychology is contingent may be unsatisfactory. It may also not be the case that all 'non-contingent' or necessary facts are about the senses, and that the senses may not have such a quality, since it is not necessarily true that a theory is not empirical if all of its constituents are abstract. According to Soames, the Necessity Argument does not offer us a clear fact about the non-empirical characteristics of itself (p.578).

Briefly, Soames declares that although Chomsky seems unable to include psychological phenomena into linguistics, and that the Necessity Argument, despite its problems, seems to refute Chomsky in some way, it is still difficult to say that the Necessity Argument makes possible or necessitates a Platonic reality of a certain kind. There is actually no standpoint from which one can suggest Platonic objects either directly or indirectly (pp. 579,80).

I cannot attempt to solve but must accept the problems within the Necessity Argument, yet it is, in a way, obvious for me that, when psychological aspects are included, it still gives the sense of contingency. This so-called contingency, however, can just be a misleading phenomenon. Psychology if considered as (or reduced to) neuro-science, one can say, can be interpreted more appropriately within linguistics although that still might not solve the problem.

Conclusion

To sum up, it can be said that for K&P, when we consider linguistics, there arise three kinds of interpretation style: "nominalism, conceptualism, and realism." (Israel 1991, p.567) The first is refuted by Chomsky, to a large extent, but also by the limited help of conceptualism. K&P say that conceptualism is also lacking, since it mainly offers a contingent type of an account when interpreting linguistics. Therefore, there *seems* to be only one possibility, which is realism of a Platonic kind (p.567).

It can also be said that there can be no other kind of conceptualism that can escape the criticism of contingency made by K&P (Katz & Postal 1991, p.550). I mainly based this paper on the discussion of a realist argument which is called the Necessity Argument. This is because the other two forms —namely the type argument and the veil of ignorance argument— seemed to me as being rather weak in comparison to the necessity argument. In addition, it seemed to me that K&P lend much more importance to it than to the other two. Yet, as I discussed above, the notion of necessity is also problematic, since a sentence that declares a necessity may not be necessary itself. Moreover, K&P, when evaluating the argument, depend on the senses of the sentences that are necessary. This, however, may not solve the problem, since the same counterargument seems applicable to the senses, too, yet it might be in a different formulation.

All in all, it seems to me that the psychological roots of Chomsky's arguments can be considered as being as contingent as a Platonist argument; but what's more, psychology can be regarded as being more (linguistically) foundational than a Platonic realism due to the fact that it has and will have scientific roots as far as neuro-science – psychology link is concerned.

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