

CULTURAL RELATIVISM AND THE LOGIC OF LANGUAGE

1. INTRODUCTION

A. L. Kroeber, who together with C. Kluckhohn wrote a now classical review of the concept of culture (1958), claimed that the most significant accomplishment of anthropology in the first half of the twentieth century was the extension and clarification of the concept of culture. In the book mentioned they analyzed about 300 different definitions of the concept. In a critical review of Kroeber's and Kluckhohn's book their colleague L. A. White contests Kroeber's claims and writes: "On the contrary, I believe that confusion has increased as conceptions of culture have been multiplied and diversified" (1954, p. 461).

Controversial beliefs among scientists in the same field are the order of the day. My opinion is that an essential point in their dispute is not whether there are definitions of the concept of culture, whether they are confusing or clarifying. More important is the very claim of usefulness. A traditional standpoint is expressed in the belief that scientific methodology demands well delimited definitions, so that we know exactly what we are talking about. Certainly one can define many concepts in a rather precise way. There seems, however, to be an inverse relationship between the degree of specification and delimitation of conceptual definitions and their scientific and philosophical significance. In general, says

Cultural Relativism and the Logic of Language

G. H. von Wright, well defined concepts have seldom been problematic and are therefore interesting from a philosophical point of view. To abstain from preciseness and to accept Wittgenstein's notion of "family resemblance" of various meanings of the same concept, a family resemblance as expressed in "a complicated network of similarities, overlapping and criss-crossing" (1968 p. 66) is much more challenging for the problem under discussion. Von Wright goes a step further: "A person who tries to solve the problem by concept-determination is hunting a chimaera. The solution is reached through the understanding that the problematic concept *cannot* be defined, because the phenomena which are subsumed under its domain do not *have* any common essential characteristics" (von Wright, 1965 p. 213)¹.

If the concept of culture is to remain problematic and interesting from a scientific and philosophical point of view we should therefore not strive for precise definitions that are valid once and for all. This must be the conclusion—a conclusion which is opposing naive operationalism in those versions of the social sciences which first aim to be empirical and second theoretical, if theoretical at all.

Given now that the concept of culture is problematic, the analysis and explanation of cultures, the understanding of similarities and differences between various cultures, is still more complex. If we opt for the family resemblance of various concepts of culture to be used in different contexts, we may introduce the idea of *conceptual relativity*. A logical step further then is to introduce the notion of *cultural relativity* in the explanation of similarities and differences between various cultures, as well as in the explanation of class differences within the same culture at a given historical point.

2. CULTURAL RELATIVITY

I would think that the notion of cultural relativity today has been generally accepted by most anthropologists and sociologists

¹ Von Wright makes it clear that the thesis of family resemblance and the contextual use of concepts should not be mixed up with the problem of the ambiguity of concepts. A concept may have many meanings, which can be determined and delimited.

as well as by philosophers dealing with the methodology of the social sciences. I do not therefore take it up for discussion, but use it as an example for illuminating a central epistemological problem. It is not always clear what “cultural relativity” means, what, logically viewed, it can and cannot mean. In order to present some of the problems involved and to put forward our point of view we will introduce a distinction between “relativism” and “relationism” rejecting the former and arguing for the latter.²

Let me start with a well known example. The Marxist thesis that social existence determines consciousness has in vulgar Marxism been associated with the idea that *all* knowledge depends on the individual’s sense of belonging to a class. One can speculate how the two hypotheses came to be related. My guess is that “class-belongingness” is taken as an indicator for social existence, and that “consciousness,” in the tradition of German idealistic philosophy, is identified with knowledge.³ Regardless whether that is the case or not the thesis that knowledge and “class-belongingness” are related to each other is an example of relativistic reasoning. At the same time it is an example of the danger of a logical mistake inherent in any relativistic thesis thus formulated.⁴ If *all* knowledge is class-related and this thesis is

² The distinction between “relativism” and “relationism”, has been used by Karl Mannheim (1960). It differs from the way I am going to use the distinction. Mannheim, in spite of the distinction, takes up a position which is untenable as the following quotation indicates: “Once we recognize that *all historical knowledge* is relational knowledge and can *only* be formulated with reference to the position of the observer we are faced once more with the task of discriminating between what is true and what is false in such knowledge” (p. 71 [my italics].)

³ The Marxist thesis presupposes a class theory in which: 1) classes are antagonistically opposed; 2) the members of the opposed classes have interests and goals opposed to each other in as much as the achievement of the goals of one class excludes the achievement of goals by the other class; 3) the members of each class are aware of these facts; 4) they act in accordance with their awareness. The last precondition—acting in accordance with awareness—is formulated by reference to Marx’s use of the word *Bewusstsein* as *bewusstes Sein* antagonistically opposed; 2) the members of the opposed classes have translatable as “acting with awareness.” The German word *Bewusstsein* ought in this context to be translated as “awareness”. “Awareness” can then be interpreted as “having knowledge of facts and being able to interpret these facts”, for example in accordance with class-interests. Awareness then is not only knowledge, but *interpreted* knowledge. (If I ask “Do you know that workers in the Soviet Union have no right to strike” I am asking for facts. If I say “Are you aware of the fact that workers in ...?” I assume that the other has the facts and what I am asking for is his point of view, i.e. how he interprets these facts.

⁴ The logical error consists in formulating a proposition using a universal

Cultural Relativism and the Logic of Language

taken as correct or true knowledge then we can ask: Is this thesis dependent on the class-belongingness of the person who claims that it is correct? If so, then the thesis is not universally true, but holds only for persons with membership in a certain class. If, however, the thesis holds independently of a person's class-belongingness then its content is false. We must conclude that there exists knowledge which is independent of a person's class-belongingness.

Another example of the same mistake is the following. It has been assumed that our cognitive functions depend on our language or, in other words, that the language we speak determines the way we think and the way we experience the world. More specifically, the hypothesis of linguistic relativity in its most radical form is arguing for the total dependence of our thinking on the natural language we have learned. But this thesis is self-defeating. If our thinking were totally dependent on our language we would not be able to recognize it since our "prison-house of language" would not make possible comparisons with the thinking of those people who speak another language, and therefore think in a totally different way. Each specific language user would be imprisoned in his own language and thus we would have a case of culturally originated solipsism.

Our task therefore will be to show the difference between a relativistic—and therefore logically erroneous—position and a meaningful position of cultural relativism or relationism, as we prefer to call it. I will try to demonstrate the difference by discussing the previously mentioned thesis concerning language, determining thinking, a thesis usually attributed to the anthropologist Edward Sapir and his ingenious student Benjamin Lee Whorf. A discussion of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis will provide the rationale for discussing some basic problems of epistemology in the framework of the analysis of language, a problem which I consider of great importance for social scientists.

But before doing so, let me make a short deflection for a note on functionalism. Functionalism has played an important role in cultural anthropology for the defence of relativism in its

quantifier and at the same time restricting the application of the proposition, i.e. making it dependent on relative conditions.

attempt to explain that strange rites, rituals and magic are or can be understood as rational behaviour as well as sometimes based upon rational beliefs (see e.g. the discussion in B. Wilson, ed., 1970).

A NOTE ON FUNCTIONALISM

There are at least two versions of functionalism, the extreme and the moderate. The extreme version may be presented in simplified manner by the assumption that everything in society contributes to its maintenance and for this reason is "functional". Since some items may have adverse effects on the maintenance of society (or of the given order of a society) they sometimes are labelled "dysfunctional" and so extreme functionalism is saved. B. Malinowski has explicitly stated this form of functionalism by insisting "upon the principle that in every type of civilization, every custom, material object, idea and belief fulfils some vital function, has some task to accomplish, represents an indispensable part within a working whole" (quoted after Pratt, 1978).

C. Lévi-Strauss quickly dismisses this version of functionalism, making the following comment: "To say that a society functions is a truism; but to say that everything in society functions is an absurdity" (1976, p. 13).

This shattering evaluation of extreme functionalism has sometimes been used as an argument against a dialectical view of society by implying that such a view maintains that if society is to be viewed as a totality, then in this totality everything functions. This argument is, however, untenable. A dialectical view of society does not hold that in a totality everything functions, but that everything which functions does so within the framework of a totality, implying that if we want to understand functioning we have to take our point of departure in the notion of a totality.⁵

This brings us to the second, moderate version of function-

⁵ Karl Popper commits a similar fallacy by asserting that the concept of totality is fruitless since we can never have total knowledge. Though it is true that we cannot have total knowledge, the rule that the partial knowledge we have acquired should be placed and interpreted within the context of a totality is sound and dialectical.

Cultural Relativism and the Logic of Language

alism. It stresses the importance of the *context* in the explanation of societal features. Marxist functionalism looks at society as a process and views structure as a temporarily or historically limited way in which process congeals. This is an important point of view. Traditionally structure has been viewed as the primary feature of society and change and transformation as specific characteristics of structure. The changed emphasis, which amounts to a figure-background restructuring of scientific methodology turns this around. Now change is basic and structure a temporary, historical limited, characteristic of ongoing change and transformation. This in turn makes praxis the central concept in the functional analysis of social systems (see J. Israel, 1979). However, also the moderate version of functionalism poses difficulties. Let me mention two. The first brings us back to the problems encountered in the claims of cultural relativism. In order to understand and to explain cultures other than our own—e.g. in order to understand whether certain rituals in so-called primitive societies can be viewed as rational conduct—it is claimed that we ought to analyze them in their societal context. This will help us from falling into the ethnocentric trap provided when the conduct of individuals in other cultures and the functioning of parts of, or whole, social systems in so called primitive societies are viewed as possible variations which human nature allows. The problem from a relativistic-functionalistic view point is: “Viewing man as a part of nature, as enlightened Reason requires, it (this view point) wished to see his cognitive and evaluative activities as parts of nature too, and hence as varying, legitimately, from organism to organism and context to context. (This is the relativist-functional view.) But at the same time, in recommending life according to Reason and Nature, it wished at the very least to exempt this view itself (and, in practice, some others) from such a relativism”⁶ (E. Gellner, 1970, p. 31).

Hence again the problem comes up whether there are uni-

⁶ This is the dilemma of all genuine liberalism. E. Gellner describes the anthropologists’ dilemma in the following way: “Anthropologists were relativistic, tolerant, contextually-understanding *vis-à-vis* the savages, who are after all some distance away, but absolutist, intolerant *vis-à-vis* their immediate neighbours or predecessors, the members of our own society who do not share their understanding outlook and are themselves ‘ethnocentric’” (*op. cit. ibid.*)

versal features which allow for a relativistic or relational position.

The second of the difficulties pointed at is the following. The methodological demand that individual conduct and societal functioning should be analyzed within its own context makes it imperative to define or delimit the context. This is important especially in the analysis of alien cultures and a precondition for avoiding ethnocentric interpretations. However, how does one establish “the correct context”? “After all there is nothing in the nature of things or societies to dictate visibly just how much context is relevant to any given utterance, or how that context should be described” (E. Gellner *op. cit.* p. 33). Therefore the context selected depends on the theoretical point of departure. But then again we meet a problem. Either we superimpose a theoretical structure on the issue to be analyzed or, if we take our point of departure from the issue itself and its empirical manifestation, we may have difficulties in establishing a context. It seems that we here face a general problem. In order to acquire knowledge of something we must have some knowledge in advance, some *Vorverständnis*. Take e.g. capitalism: “The analysis of capitalist society not only presupposes a certain methodology (in the broad sense of meta-theory), but the development of this methodology presupposes in turn a certain amount of advance knowledge of capitalist society. This appears to be a logical contradiction, but it is not the case because the relation between the development of a methodology for gaining knowledge and the necessity of pre-existing knowledge for developing a methodology has to be viewed as a continuous process of reciprocal influence” (J. Israel, 1976, p. 48).

Thus not only social systems but also theories about social systems and theories about theories have to be viewed as undergoing continuous change. This is a logical consequence of the principle concerning the primacy of change and praxis over structure and order. It is clear that if social systems are viewed as processes of change and transformations, theories explaining them also have to be changed and transformed, a very difficult point of view for any dogmatist who prefers exegesis to theoretical efforts and creative thinking.

The problem of previous knowledge or *Vorverständnis* also

Cultural Relativism and the Logic of Language

involves the relation between common sense knowledge, through mastering a natural language, and scientific knowledge, a problem to which we will return later on.

Let me conclude this short discussion concerning problems of functionalism by making the following point. To analyze something in its context does not give any guarantee for the establishment of one, and only one, valid explanation. In fact the way we relate ourselves to reality, the perspective we use or the aspects we emphasize, are of importance for the way we understand and explain phenomena. Hence we may arrive at different and alternative explanations, which may even contradict each other, but at the same time complement each other.⁷ In this respect I think we may learn from modern natural science, and more specifically from quantum physics and the principle of complementarity. Social scientists traditionally have been urged to learn from the natural sciences and to adopt their methodology. Usually these demands refer to a notion of natural science's methodology which has been superseded by rapid development in the natural sciences and especially in physics.

This principle as developed by Niels Bohr and Werner Heisenberg is based upon Heisenberg's indeterminacy relation. The principle states that any attempt to measure the location of an atomic particle changes its momentum and energy. "Conversely, the use of any arrangement suited to study momentum and energy balance—decisive for the account of essential properties of atomic systems—implies a renunciation of detailed space-time coordination of their constituent particles" (N. Bohr, 1963, p. 11). Hence one either can measure the localization of a particle but will be prevented from measuring its momentum or the reverse. This principle then was developed into complementary principle to explain other phenomena, e.g. those associated with light.

⁷ The physicist J. A. Wheeler (1977, p. 5) writes that it was natural "to regard the observer as looking at, and protected from contact with, existence by a 10 cm. slab of plate glass. In contrast, quantum mechanics teaches the direct opposite. It is impossible to observe even so miniscule an object as an electron without smashing the slab and reaching in with the appropriate measuring equipment... The observer is elevated from 'observer' to 'participant'. What philosophy suggested in times past, the central feature of quantum mechanics tells us today with impressive force: "In some strange sense this is a participatory universe". Bohr suggested that we are both watchers and actors in the same play.

Given a certain experimental set up, interference phenomena can be sufficiently well described with the electromagnetic theory of light. The result then can be described in terms of wave-theoretical principles. If one, on the other hand, wants to describe the photo-electric effect, the description has to be given in terms of light as particles or photons. The question then “what is light?” does not make sense. Under certain condition light “is” wave-movements. Under other conditions it “is” particles, photons. The two descriptions do not exclude each other, but supplement each other and are at the same time exhaustive. The principle of complementarity hence presupposes three conditions: 1) the category of totality, within which various descriptions complement each other; 2) the abandoning of the traditional dualistic epistemological position maintaining a sharp separation of the knowing subject and the object of knowledge. This is due to the fact that the actions of the experimenting subject have to be taken into account in the description of the experimental results; 3) the abandoning of the idea of strictly deterministic and total descriptions in favour of partial descriptions, taking into account complementarity, which can be viewed as one of three possible dialectical relations of “contradiction”.⁸

However, these requirements would inevitably lead us into a position of subjective idealism, where a description or explanation would be the result of the subject’s i.e. the researcher’s way of relating himself to the world. In order to avoid these consequences we have to look for *universal constants* which are seen as the basic precondition for relativistic thinking. Before we do this, however, I would like once again to present the cultural relativistic thesis as formulated by Sapir-Whorf about the relationship of language and thinking, in order to relate cultural relativism to problems of language.

4. THE SAPIR-WHORF HYPOTHESIS

The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis is based upon the notion that each natural language creates through its specific syntax a cosmology

⁸ I have tried to show that the notion of contradiction in dialectics—and we should talk about “*contrariedades*” rather than “*contradictions*”—refers to three different notions (J. Israel, 1979).

Cultural Relativism and the Logic of Language

or *Weltauffassung*, typical for the users of a given language.

As a consequence the users of different natural languages will view the world in a different way and make different and even contradicting judgments about it. The way of thinking therefore is heavily influenced by a specific language and its inherent syntactical and lexical features. The consequence is that we cannot talk about general and objective knowledge. Instead all knowledge must be considered to be true relative to the given world picture inherent in a specific language (I do not need to mention that a thesis formulated in such a way is logically contradictory, as discussed before, because in order to be true such a thesis cannot be relative to a given language, but must hold for all possible languages).

The above-mentioned thesis has been ascribed to Edward Sapir and his student B.L. Whorf, who specifically studied the language of the Hopi Indians. The most comprehensive analysis of Whorf's study was done by Gipper (1972). He not only presented a detailed summation of the Sapir Whorf thesis but also the critical discussion it gave rise to. He also did field work among the Hopi Indians, disproving some of Whorf's results.

According to Whorf the Hopis have peculiar notions of time and space. Whorf maintains that our system of using tenses makes it possible to "objectify" time. We talk about the past, the present, and the future, and think of time as a continuous succession of events. We count days in the same way as we count objects. We speak about a week having seven days, being separate and side by side. We use cardinal numbers in order to count time events. The Hopi on the other hand, according to Whorf, do not use *spatial* terms or *spatial metaphors*. They have no tenses for their verbs—a peculiarity which also holds for the Chinese language. In addition Hopi Indians use ordinal numbers where we use cardinal. They speak e.g. in terms of first, second, third days etc. They have quite a different notion of the passing of time. Assume that we think of the passage of ten days. As an analogy we could use the visit of a man. For us, each different day is like the visit of a different person. For a Hopi, however, the same person makes visits on the different occasions. Hence we think that what we will do today will not influence so much what we are going to do tomorrow, or next week. The Hopis,

however, since they think in terms of the same happening over and over again, believe that it is therefore possible to interfere and influence what is going to happen. For this reason the Hopi way of life involves many rituals and exercises by which they try to influence the future. They are led to deal with the future by working within the present situation. The Hopis are, according to Whorf, mostly interested in what happens later on, in duration and in the way events occur.

Due to these peculiarities Whorf formulates his hypothesis by quoting Sapir: "Human beings do not live in the objective world alone, nor alone in the world of social activity as ordinarily understood, but are very much at the mercy of the particular language which has become the medium of expression for their society. It is quite an illusion to imagine that one adjusts to reality without the use of language and that language is merely an incidental means of solving problems of communication and reflection. The fact of the matter is that 'the real world' is to a large extent unconsciously built up on the language habits of the group" (Whorf, 1956).

Now the question is: Does logic vary with language and, secondly, do differences in syntax affect, even unconsciously, the world outlook of users of different languages? Take one example of syntactic variation. In German "man" is *Der Mensch*, i.e. of male gender. In Swedish *människan* is of female gender. In Danish, however, *mennesket* is neuter. These peculiarities do not seem to reflect on very different attitudes towards sex rôles or towards the outlook concerning relations between men and women in these three countries. Now this may be too simple an argument.

Objections to the Sapir-Whorf thesis may take at least two directions. One is of a sociological kind, the other, which appears to me the more important, is of an epistemological kind.

Let me exemplify briefly sociological objections to the Sapir-Whorf thesis. L. Feuer (1953) says that "there is overwhelming evidence that the structure of languages has had no determining effect on men's philosophies". One of his arguments, formulated within the framework of the sociology of knowledge, is based on the fact that *similar* metaphysical systems have been developed in different language cultures. At the same time most diverging philosophies have been expressed in the same language

Cultural Relativism and the Logic of Language

and hence culture. To take one obvious example: Hegel, as well as the Vienna circle of logical positivists, wrote in German. So did Kant and Heidegger, Marx and Husserl, Mach and the young Wittgenstein.

5. EPISTEMOLOGICAL ARGUMENTA AGAINST THE SAPIR-WHORF THESIS

The following objections can be raised from an epistemological point of view, taking ordinary language and the analysis of its basic logical rules as a point of departure (J. Israel 1979):

“(1) As with all relativistic theses, a thesis of linguistic relativity is self-contradictory: if all world views are different and dependent on a specific language, in which language can this view be expressed? And further, is the thesis itself relativistic or absolute?

(2) If all languages are specific and dependent on their typical grammars and syntax, how is it possible to translate one language into another? How, for example, is it possible for Whorf to translate the peculiarities of Hopi-language into English in a way that allows an English-speaking person to understand how Hopi Indians speak and think.

(3) Is it possible to say that observers using different languages are not equivalent, i.e., are different in as much as they have nothing in common? Is it possible to speak about something being different without saying what it has in common with other things? Later on we will argue for the thesis that words like ‘different’ and ‘same’ are complementary, and that concepts referring to them cannot be used independently of each other.

(4) Could Hopi Indians talk to each other, make themselves understood, cooperate with one another, and at the same time avoid following the rules we have codified in terms of the law of contradiction? And if their communication is non-self-contradictory, is it then not reasonable to assume that speaking in a non-self-contradictory way is something common to all languages?

(5) If there had not been some common ground, how would it have been possible for Whorf to act together with Hopi

Indians at all, not to mention how it was even possible for him to interact with them?

(6) Theories of relativity can only function if there is at least one factor which is constant.”

Einstein's theory of relativity is based upon two postulates:

1. *The principle of relativity*, maintaining that the same laws of electrodynamics and optics will be valid for all different frames of reference for which the equations of mechanics hold good;
2. Light is always propagated in empty space with a definite velocity, which is independent of the state of motion of the emitting body (L. Marder, 1971).

The laws of electro-dynamics and optics as well as the velocity of light do not vary in different contexts. They form the necessary constant, or universal conditions, for the special theory of relativity.

Do we find analogously universal conditions which will enable us to save cultural relativism from being formulated in a self-defeating way? My answer is that we can find these universal conditions in the basic logic of our common sense or ordinary language and that the same logical rules hold for all natural languages.

Let me first start with a description of what it means to possess a language or—basically the same thing—to be a user of language (which applies to us all and which, beside the process of objectification, defines human existence). To have a language means to have objective knowledge. Take as an example the following statements:

- 1) If I touch the hot oven I will burn my fingers.
- 2) If I jump out of the window I will fall.
- 3) “There exists at present a living body, which is my body” (G. E. Moore, 1959, p. 33).

These three statements express objective knowledge, i.e. knowledge which we cannot doubt. They are therefore correct statements. As users of language we can put forward correct statements or, which is the same, we have objective knowledge. As has been pointed out (P. Zinkernagel, 1977), the problem of having objective knowledge cannot be raised since in order to raise it and to formulate it we must possess a language. This implies that we have objective knowledge. In other words,

Cultural Relativism and the Logic of Language

this sceptical attitude concerning the possibility of our having objective knowledge presupposes that we already possess objective knowledge or can put forward correct statements about ourselves and our immediate environment. To deny this is self-contradictory, which can be proved in the following way:

Statement 1: "Users of language can put forward correct statements."

If we negate statement 1 we get:

Statement 2: "It is not the case that users of language can put forward correct statements."

We can now ask whether S_2 is a correct statement or not. If it is, then we can at least set forward one correct statement, but then its content is false. If its content is false then S_1 holds.

Our position has five consequences:

1. It negates Locke's epistemological dictum that the human being, from an epistemological point of view, is a *tabula rasa* on which sense impressions are recorded. We have to start our investigation with the fact that when we do it we already possess language and can use it in a meaningful way. At the same time this standpoint also excludes a transcendental position: we cannot study conditions of language without using language.

In this connection I want to point out that the basic *epistemological* question—"What does it mean to possess language?"—cannot be answered by a genetic account of how we acquire language, being a problem for psychology, sociolinguistics, etc., but not for epistemology.

2. It negates Cartesian rationalist and English empiricist scepticism because in order to formulate the very thesis of scepticism we obviously must already possess a language. Hence we cannot question all our knowledge without being able to possess the knowledge about which we are raising doubts.

3. It breaks with the tradition of English empiricism, making perception and sense data the basis of inquiry into knowledge. It substitutes the perceptual basis by language, which becomes the point of departure of any inquiry into conditions of knowledge. This implies that it starts with a social phenomenon and not with the private one of perception. This change in basic strategy does obviously not imply the denial of obtaining or producing knowledge through sense experience. It implies that

our sense experiences only become meaningful when we can describe them, *i.e.* talk about them (even if descriptions sometimes remain vague).

There is at least one empirical example which seems to support the notion that language is primary to sense experience in the constitution of knowledge. The Zuni Indians do not in their language differentiate between red, orange and yellow. They have no word for "orange". The question then is whether they can discriminate between red, yellow and orange, but cannot talk about it. Discrimination tests indicate a significantly higher amount of error than among a white control group (Brown & Lenneberg 1954).

More important, however, are logical arguments.

4. The knowledge which we acquire through the possession of ordinary language is a simplified version of the knowledge expressed by means of scientific languages. The sentence: "If I jump out of the window I will fall", is a primitive version of the law of gravity. In most cases our knowledge is not acquired by means of direct experience (which in certain cases such as that mentioned above would be dangerous) but indirectly through description and understanding of them in the process of communication.

5. Our approach also negates logical atomism, so common in linguistic theory and in the philosophy of language. We start our inquiry into the conditions of knowledge with statements or sentences, which are correct because negating them would be contradictory or meaningless.

Obviously we can accidentally contradict ourselves, but we cannot do it systematically, *i.e.* as a consequent rule, since such a rule itself would have to be formulated in a non-contradictory way.

The language game of our daily natural language is distinguished from other games in such way that we cannot change basic rules arbitrarily and maintain that we still play any possible language game (P. Zinkernagel, 1963). In fact, we can only play *various* language games if we follow the rules of the basic logic of our language. We cannot change these rules, except if we assume that we could use other rules basic to and necessary

Cultural Relativism and the Logic of Language

for the formulation of changed rules. This would, however, lead to an infinite regression.

We have so far only made reference to the basic rules of the logic of ordinary or common sense language, but we have not given any description of these rules.

The basic rules of the logic of our ordinary language express interrelations between concepts or expressions which cannot be used independently of each other without leaving language contradictory or meaningless, though the formulation of these rules does not render them tautological or make them analytic propositions.

It should be emphasized that these basic rules express interrelations. Hence our basic unit of linguistic analysis is *relations* which distinguishes it from any linguistic atomism. For example we cannot talk about “persons” independently of “body” and “state of consciousness” (Strawson, 1964). We cannot talk about possibilities of action without talking about things or persons viewed as objects (P. Zinkernagel, 1962). We cannot talk about persons as users of language without talking about action (J. Israel, 1979). We cannot talk about society without talking about rules (*ibid.*).

We cannot talk about society without talking about freedom or about equality and difference (J. Israel, *op. cit.*) We cannot talk about persons as users of language without talking about social and physical situations. We cannot talk about truth without talking about facts, ... etc. If we violate these rules we either contradict ourselves or our speech becomes meaningless since we commit mistakes about category. It is evidently meaningless to say that I will come to visit you tomorrow and this time even bring my body with me. It is contradictory to speak about society and assert that we can do it without speaking about rules (rules of the social game).

The rules of the basic logic of our ordinary language together make up a net. This means that they cannot be arranged hierarchically. Neither are we able to classify them into more or less basic rules. They are, so to speak, abstract formulations of regularities on the most elementary level of speech. “One difficulty in trying to make clear the existence of such a level is that we are so very seldom aware of it or only aware of it

under unusual circumstances. This level seems so fundamental that it hardly enters our consciousness, which makes it easy and even plausible to ignore its existence” (P. Zinkernagel, 1979, p. 2).

These basic rules of the logic of everyday language are universal in the sense that they apply to all languages. Take the law of contradiction which also belongs to the rules. People in their daily linguistic and communicative praxis followed it before Aristotle formulated it, and they still do it without even noticing.

A serious objection to this point was raised by a Chinese philosopher, Chang Tung-Sun who in an article (1952) about logic and Chinese language wrote: “The Chinese system of logic, if we may call it a system, *is not based upon the law of identity*”, which according to him cannot be formulated in Chinese. Since, however, the law of contradiction is, as we know, derived from the Aristotelian law of identity, the question becomes whether the Chinese theoretically or practically can do without the law of contradiction. In the Chinese language, however, there are signs which make the law of identity as formulated by Aristotle impossible to use, but they have another and exciting way of formulating problems of identification. In the Chinese language there exist two notions of “identification”: one which expresses the idea of identifying something *with* something i.e. in which identity in the most restricted sense (identical with itself, sameness, likeness) is expressed. The other expresses the idea of identifying something *as* something, i.e. referring to that which is specific, different etc. I have recently tried to show (J. Israel, 1979) that in our ordinary language we use the phrase “to identify something” in the two senses of “identifying with” and “identifying as” and that we 1) cannot use these two meanings of “identifying something” independently of each other. In other words, we identify something with something, having already identified it as something specific or reversed; 2) that these two operations are manifested by the use of words like “same”, “being alike”, “having in common”, in the case of “identifying with” and in the case of “identifying as” by words like “different”, “specific”, “unlike”.⁹

⁹ These problems are not new. Plato considers them in e.g. *Parmenides*.

Cultural Relativism and the Logic of Language

The relationship between the two usages of “identifying with” can be formulated as one of the basic rules of the logic of ordinary language:

“We cannot in our daily language use the expression in one sense without implicitly or explicitly presupposing the other. We cannot use the words ‘same’, ‘common to’ without knowing what it means to use words as ‘different’, ‘specific’. The reverse also holds true” (J. Israel, 1979).

This rule then can be used to derive the law of contradiction and to formulate it as a relation between two expressions.

Furthermore, I believe that the formulation of the law of identity as a rule linking the two senses of “to identify”, is necessary in order to apply the law to concrete situations, whereas in the Aristotelian formulation it is abstracted from the time-space dimension and hence formulated in a tautological way. Finally, this formulation relates the rules of the basic logic of ordinary language to dialectical reasoning and the development of a dialectical logic incorporating Aristotelian logic (see J. Israel, 1979).

Let me summarize. The universals which form the basis for our theory are *relations* between expressions which we cannot use independently of each other without contradicting ourselves or rendering our use of language meaningless. This is the *first* aspect of what we call our “*relational* approach”. The *second* aspect is that, given these relational rules, we can then *relate* ourselves to the world in numerous ways, but we cannot give total descriptions, since we can always add new and *different* descriptions to the *same* subject and give the *same* description to *different* subjects (which follows from the above formulated rule).

These two aspects together make up the relational approach.

A *relational* approach to epistemology and knowledge is not transformed into a self-defeating *relativistic* approach because of

Aristotle makes the distinction between *genus proximum* and *differentia specifica*. Hegel in his *Logic* speaks about difference and similarity and so does Bradley, to mention only a few. The new aspect here is to relate the problem to the basic logic of common sense language.

the basic rules of ordinary language. Hence we can correctly maintain that language changes within the *same* culture over a different historical period and varies at the *same* historical period in *different* social classes and *different* cultural contexts. In other words, the Whorf-Sapir thesis of linguistic relativity presupposes unchangeable rules, not only in order to formulate the relativity thesis, but also due to the fact that we, according to the rule of identification, are from a logical point of view unable to talk about something being different without talking about it being the same, having something in common or being identical in this weak sense of the term.

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