

Some Comments on Wallace Chafe's "How Consciousness Shapes Language"

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Abstract

It is argued that Wallace Chafe's approach of relating studies of mind and consciousness to studies of real spoken language interaction is precisely what is needed in linguistics and psycholinguistics. However, the way Chafe attempts to establish the link between spoken language and consciousness is, in several respects, in need of clarification. The paper critically examines several of Chafe's claims and points to areas, e.g. the notions of "consciousness" "intonation unit" and "new idea" where clarification or possible revision is needed.

1. Introduction

First, I would like to agree with Chafe on the importance for both linguists and psychologists of more deeply considering the relationship between mind, consciousness and language. I also think Chafe is right in claiming that this is most fruitfully accomplished by studying how mind and consciousness relate to real spoken language data where no parts have been edited out. The risks involved in studying only invented data or data where large parts have been edited out with reference to some doctrine of competence and performance are fairly obvious. The practice of declaring some occurring expressions in a transcription performance errors provides a very convenient way of excluding uncomfortable facts which do not fit with what one's current theory predicts. Conversely, the practice of constructing one's theory totally on the basis of invented and selected examples often is a convenient way of providing support for the theory. The consequence of both of these practices is an overreliance on consensus concerning linguistic intuitions among groups of linguists. This, in turn, means that there is a danger that social group pressures rather than observable facts about linguistic usage become the strongest determinants of what is assumed to be the correct theory of language and communication.

There are, however, also a number of points in Chafe's paper which

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I think require further clarification.

2. Consciousness

Chafe provides no definition of consciousness (which admittedly is hard to do). Instead he characterizes consciousness by providing a number of properties of consciousness which bear a strong resemblance to qualities of consciousness earlier discussed in gestalt-psychology and phenomenology. However, even if there is no definition of consciousness, one may wonder whether the notion of consciousness implicitly provided by these properties is adequate or inadequate in the sense of being too narrow or too wide.

Mainly, I think it can be argued that Chafe's notion is too wide. It is questionable whether really all the properties Chafe lists as properties of consciousness primarily are properties of consciousness or properties of some other phenomenon related to consciousness. Chafe lists the following properties as constant properties of consciousness: (i) focus - periphery; (ii) restless movement; (iii) point of view/interest/orientation, (iv) need for background. He also lists what he calls variable properties of consciousness, i.e.: original source (perception, action, evaluation) immediacy (immediate vs displaced) facticity (factual vs fictional) interestingness/verbality of object of consciousness

Let us now consider these properties a little more closely. Starting with the "constant" properties of consciousness, the first property "focus- periphery" seems adequate and correct. But already with property number two, "restless movement", it is less clear that this is a constant property of consciousness. If I am concentrated on some work, reading a book or listening to a piece of music, it seems clear that I am conscious, but is there really any restless movement of consciousness. Restless movement certainly is a quality of conscious experience on some occasions but by no means always. Thus, in Chafe's terms, it should perhaps rather be seen as a "variable" than as a "constant" property of consciousness.

As far as property number three "point of view /interest/orientation" is concerned, it seems connected with property number one "focus-periphery" since it seems as if one's focus would also have to be one's orientation. However, whether one accepts such a connection depends on how one constrains the concept of orientation. In any case, it is not obvious that one can always associate all of the four concepts "focus", "point of view", "orientation", and "interest" with each other.

For example, it does not seem clear that a point of view can always be connected with an interest, especially not if the interest is to be connected with survival. Can I not observe, for example, a house from an economical or esthetic point of view without any survival interests at all being involved. It is only at the price of making "interest" empty of content that one can claim that what might, to make a point, be called "disinterested observation from a certain point of view" must involve interest.

Further, it is unclear whether a point of view can always be associated with a focus of consciousness. If I am listening to a pure tone or observing (imagining) a colored surface, it does not seem that there has to be a point of view involved. Of course, there can be and probably often is. But the point here is that a focus of consciousness does not always seem to involve a point of view in any clear sense. It could now be claimed that having a focus of consciousness is inherently connected with having a point of view. But, as with the notion of interest, discussed above, this would amount to also making "point of view" empty of content.

The upshot of this is that the connection between "focus of consciousness", "point of view" and "interest", perhaps rather than being seen as necessary should be seen as contingent. Consciousness always involves a "focus of consciousness" which can but does not have to be connected with a point of view. In the same way, points of view can but do not have to be connected with survival interests. If separated in this way, the three concepts retain independent status and it becomes an interesting theoretical and empirical task to determine what relationship they have to each other.

Turning to "need for background", the fourth "constant property" mentioned by Chafe, this property seems to be primarily related to such phenomena as "identification", "understanding" and "interpretation" rather than to consciousness per se. In order to identify, understand or interpret something, one needs to have the relevant background information. But it also seems possible to be conscious of something which one can not identify, understand and interpret. It might even be possible to identify, understand or interpret something without being conscious of what one is doing.

In fact, I think it can be claimed that an analysis of the relationship between consciousness and identification, understanding and interpretation is one of the most challenging tasks in trying to construct a theory of consciousness and that pursuing this task will involve an in-depth probe into the nature of the relation between consciousness and the need for background information.

If we continue by examining what Chafe calls "variable" properties of consciousness, we see that, as with the "constant" properties, it is not obvious that these properties are all primarily properties of consciousness rather than of phenomena related to consciousness. For example, with regard to "original source", we may ask if it is the action per-se or the perception/experience of action which is the source of consciousness.

With regard to "facticity", we may ask if it is not the objects of consciousness, rather than consciousness itself, which are judged as factual or fictional, on the basis of the relationship between the objects of consciousness and reality. Concerning "interestingness", it seems so intimately related to the "constant" property of "interest" as to make it questionable whether the two should really be thought of as separate properties. It does not seem possible that something could be interesting without there being someone who has an interest in it, which means that our theory should show the relation between "having an interest in x" and "x being interesting".

Finally, with regard to "verbality", a property of the objects of consciousness, it is not clear why this property has been selected, given that there are other properties of the objects of consciousness like, for example, the sensory modality of a property which might be equally relevant.

On a more general level, one wonders if the properties discussed by Chafe really identify the most significant dimensions of consciousness. An alternative more phenomenologically inspired attempt might be the following.

- (i) different types of objects of consciousness
- (ii) different attitudes to objects of consciousness
- (iii) different backgrounds of consciousness
- (iv) different levels of consciousness
- (v) different agents of consciousness

The point of departure would here be the idea of a mental act, characterized by intentionality, in the phenomenological sense (see, for example, (Husserl 1913)); i.e., the act is characterized by being directed at some object or focus. This object may then be subclassified in different ways depending on the relations and properties that it has. For example, we might consider, the properties mentioned by Chafe, i.e., its source, whether it is immediate or displaced, whether it is actual or fictional or whether it is verbal or nonverbal.

With regard to different types of objects of consciousness, much work has been done in the phenomenological tradition to clarify their status. However, an interesting and still not sufficiently clarified basic problem, which we already have touched on above, concerns the extent to which objects of consciousness can be non-propositional and/or non-conceptual. To what extent can we consciously experience something without being able to identify or conceptually recognize it? If non-conceptual and non-propositional, or perhaps better aconceptual and apropositional, experience occurs, we need to better understand its nature and how it interacts with conceptual and propositional experience. For linguists, the question of whether aconceptual meaning is involved in linguistic communication is especially interesting, since it is often thought that language, by necessity, involves concepts.

Secondly, the act of consciousness is also characterized by a certain "quality", i.e. there are one or more attitudes to the object that is focussed in the act, for example, attitudes of belief, hope, desire, fear or joy. In this way, conscious mental acts may, at least to some extent, be contrasted both with regard to their object and their attitude. We may be conscious of the same object with fear or with joy and we may have an attitude of fear or of joy to several different objects. The emotional and attitudinal quality of consciousness is also important for an understanding of "how consciousness shapes language", especially spoken language, since it is precisely this type of content which is expressed by gestures and prosody. Information structuring is, of course, another important function of prosody and gestures,

but it still awaits further analysis to say if it is more or less important than emotions and attitudes. It might even be that these two functions are not distinct since attitudes like surprise or interest seem to be closely connected with concepts such as "new information", "focus" (in the linguistic sense) or "emphasis".

Thirdly, as Chafe says, a conscious act has a background constituted, for example, by the beliefs, motives, goals, interests or points of view of the conscious agent. These background factors will strongly influence what attitudes and objects become conscious and how they are conceptually recognized but they are background determinants of consciousness rather than direct properties of the conscious act itself.

Fourthly, an analysis of consciousness should involve a consideration of "levels of consciousness" and a way of distinguishing the conscious from the pre, sub- and unconscious. Roughly, one might here suggest that being "unconscious" means that conscious activity is absent. "Subconscious" refers to processes which can occur simultaneously with consciousness and, in many cases, themselves can be made conscious. "Preconscious" might then refer to those subconscious processes which are about to be made conscious. Introducing the concept of levels of consciousness means that consciousness should not be regarded as an all or none phenomenon. We can be more or less conscious and aware. This is, not least, important to keep in mind when analyzing the relation between consciousness and spoken language. Very often, what we communicate with prosody and gestures is on a lower level of awareness and intentionality than what we communicate explicitly and verbally. Communication is multidimensional, not only in terms of content and expression, but also in terms of levels of consciousness. Sometimes what we say meets with surprising responses. One of the reasons for this is that we communicate content which we are not fully conscious of ourselves, such as aggression or love. Another reason is that we also react to what others say in ways we are not fully conscious of. Communication can, thus, both with regard to sending and receiving take place on several levels of awareness.

It is here of a certain interest to link awareness with intentionality. We have, in communication, not only levels of awareness but also what could be called levels of communicative intentionality.

As is the case with awareness, communicative intentionality probably constitutes a continuum from a low to a high degree of awareness and intentionality. However, at least for communicative intentionality, it seems possible to discern three levels of special interest, namely, what in was called; (i) indication; (ii) display and (iii) signal. (Allwood 1976). When we "indicate" we convey information without intending to do so. We function as natural signs. When we "display" we intend to exhibit, or show, another person something and when we "signal", we intend to exhibit, or show, another person that we are displaying something. Signalling is, thus, a kind of second order display.

In normal spoken interaction, we convey information in all of these three ways simultaneously, using mostly words to conventionally signal

information and mostly prosody and gestures to display information. What we indicate is not controlled by us, since it is non-intentional. Rather it is controlled by the listener/receiver and dependent on the beliefs and associations he/she has. An analysis of this type, of course, has problems connected with operationalization (how do we know whether someone is indicating, displaying or signalling?) but it could be helpful in bringing together studies of the type Chafe is doing with concerns of the type Grice initiated in his 1957 and 1969 articles on "Meaning" and "Utterer's meaning and intentions", respectively.

Fifthly, one should consider whether consciousness is a purely individual phenomenon and whether all individuals have the same type of consciousness. Regarding the first question, one might ask whether there isn't, over and above, individual consciousness something we might call collective consciousness, i.e. that several individuals share attitudes to a given focus of attention, on a given level of awareness. It might, for example, be claimed that this is precisely what is going on in dialog and that language provides us with an instrument for collective interactive thinking. The second question, whether all individuals have the same type of consciousness can now, in the light of the analysis suggested above, be rephrased as the question of how the differing backgrounds of different conscious agents affect the level, attitudes and objects of their acts of consciousness. Do, for example, persons with different cultural or gender backgrounds have different types of consciousness?

>3. "Intonation units" and "new ideas"

Let me now turn to what Chafe calls "foci of consciousness" and "activation cost". First, he identifies production of consciousness with production of what he calls intonation units. Such an identification of speech and consciousness is, of course, possible but is, by no means, necessary. It is not difficult to imagine how an act of consciousness could cover both more or less than one intonation unit. Some form of argument is needed with regard to the separability or non-separability of thought and speech before we can accept that in studying units of intonation, we are studying consciousness.

Another problem is that not enough information concerning intonation units is provided in the article. They are claimed to be universal and a number of criteria enabling their recognition are given (temporal interruption, significant pauses, slight breaks in timing, acceleration-deceleration, change in pitch baseline, distinctive final pitch contour and final change in voice quality). One difficulty with these criteria is that, as far as I can see, they are applicable not only to "intonation units" but also to other possible units of speech, such as phrases, sentences or utterances which means that the question of what the basic organisational unit of speech is, is still unsettled.

A second difficulty is that Chafe says nothing about the status of the criteria. Are they to be taken disjunctively (which seems likely), i.e., one of them is sufficient to say that we have an intonation unit or conjunctively, i.e., all of them are necessary? More generally, a question could be raised with regard to each feature, as to whether it is necessary, sufficient or neither?

A second central notion for Chafe is the notion of an "idea" and the claim that there is only one new idea per intonation unit. A difficulty in evaluating this claim is that neither the notion of "idea" nor the notion of "intonation unit" have been sufficiently clarified. Is the expression *a boy kissed a girl* a counter example to Chafe's claim or not? This will depend, first of all, on whether Chafe would consider an example of this type at all, given that it does not derive from a transcription of real talk, and, secondly, on whether he would consider the expression an intonation unit and, thirdly, on whether he would consider *a boy, kiss, a girl* new ideas or not.

Connected with the problem of what would provide a counter example to Chafe's theory is the question of how sound Chafe's methodology is when he considers intonation units as given and then, guided by the claim that each intonation unit can only have one new idea, proceeds to revise the notion of "idea". Function words such as negations, modal expressions or question particles, thus, cannot express "new ideas". Other ideas are said to be "semi-active", which I suppose could be paraphrased as "half new", all in the interest of preserving the claim that each intonation unit can only support one new idea. Lurking behind the somewhat ad hoc nature of this procedure are, of course, the difficulties inherent in trying to decide what is meant by "new information". If A says: *it's raining* and B replies *no it isn't*, is B offering new information or not? For some of the other difficulties with the notion of new information, see (Dahl 1976).

4. Introspection, irrevocability and deixis

Over and above what has already been said, I would like to briefly discuss three points which are only tangentially related to Chafe's main argument.<P>

The first concerns his use of the term "introspection", This term, I think, is properly used to refer to a person's study of his/her own mental life. However, Chafe uses it in a wider sense: we are using introspection when they are trying to decide whether they think a certain sentence is grammatical or not. As far as I can see, no introspection in the sense of studying one's own mental processes is involved here at all. What seems to be involved is rather "linguistic intuition". Do I feel that this sentence is grammatical or not? We have intuitions about many things including language but using our intuitions does not mostly amount to engaging in introspection.

Another small quibble concerns Chafe's statement that speaking is irrevocable while writing is not. In one sense, this is true. What has been said will be heard by the listener if he/she is listening and can, in this sense, be irrevocably committed to memory. In another sense, it is not true, since spoken language contains a number of devices which a speaker can use to change and correct what has been said. See Allwood, Nivre and Ahlsén, 1990. Such changes are fairly frequent in spoken language and listeners normally take them into account, changing what they have committed to memory

A third quibble concerns Chafe's analysis of deixis, in which he claims that there is a substantial difference between temporal (or spatial) adverbs and tense with regard to a speaker's ability to explicitly move their anchoring point away from the here and now of the situation of speaking or writing. Chafe claims that adverbs like *here* and *now* can be moved whereas tense endings can not. However, the phenomenon of the so-called historical present amounts to just such a move. Consider the following examples. "It is 1066 and William is getting ready to land at Hastings", or "In 2002, we still remembered what had happened in 1996" (written at an even more future date). In both examples, the anchoring point of the present tense has been explicitly moved. However, granting that such examples exist, I think that Chafe probably is right in pointing out that moves of the deictic anchoring point are more uncommon with tense endings than with adverbs.

5. Conclusion

In spite of the points noted above, I would like to end by repeating that, in the main, I find Chafe's approach very promising. One of the key areas to investigate if linguistics is to make progress, is precisely the interface between spoken language interaction, mind and consciousness and here Chafe is doing pioneering work.

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