

From Chomsky on: an Analysis of Skinner & Chomsky Intersections

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Abstract— Skinner and Chomsky were both prominent figures of scientific and linguistic research during the second half of the last century. The criticism of the latter over the former meant a shift in the way both science and linguistics were to be researched from then on. However, there seem to be inconsistencies between this criticism and the way some words are used years later. From this point on, we try to question the whole path of modern linguistics and conceive a deeper way to see common words. However, the aim is not to go back to behavior-based approaches but to go one step further, from Chomsky on, hopefully.

Index Terms— conception, criticism, language, mands, prayer, science, words.

1 INTRODUCTION

MANY years have passed since Skinner and Chomsky differences concerning the nature of language, in other words behaviorism vs cognitivism. These differences marked the beginning of a new stage in research with much effort devoted to internal processes rather than behavior. This transition had an impact on other scientific fields as well.

In this article, Chomsky criticism of Skinner view of language will be briefly explored. Then, an apparent flaw in Chomsky use of common words will be analyzed to know if it is possible to go one step further from there, from Chomsky on.

2 DISCUSSION

It is a fact that Skinner view of language, derived from his vision of science in general, was behavior-based. One of the ways Skinner used to make his point was defining questions, and he did this using particular methods. In his attempt to define language as verbal behavior, Skinner defined questions as what he called “mands” that could be classified into different categories depending on the listener reaction to them (Skinner, 1958).

Among these categories, Skinner said those mands were prayers if the mand “promotes reinforcement by generating an emotional disposition” (Skinner, 1958). This and the other categories were a major point of attack from Chomsky as it can be seen in his book “The essential Chomsky”.

A core aspect of Chomsky criticism to Skinner was that, according to him, Skinner did not use words in the common sense they are normally used (Chomsky, 2010) to make his point in relation to the concept of mands and the categories derived from it. But in an interview held in 1992 called “Chomsky explores origins of language” he seemed to make the same mistake when he was asked “What do you think about when humans started to speak?” He answered “I do not think we have a prayer of answering it on the basis of anything that is now understood”.

The way he used the word “prayer” was clearly not in the common sense it is normally used, which seems to contradict the criticism of Skinner previously mentioned. It is fair to mention however, that Chomsky main purpose of that point in the interview was to deviate attention from another issue

not to be discussed here but worth mentioning anyway, which is the historical origin of human language.

What does this all tell us? Certainly both Skinner and Chomsky have sometimes been unable to use words in the common way they are used, even to make a scientific point. If we go back to the word “prayer” as it is commonly used, we will find without even needing to pick a dictionary, that it has some kind of religious connotation, belongs to a certain group, etc.

In any way, this is not a defense of a spiritual vision of language in any sense, it is just an observation of apparent flaws in how Skinner and Chomsky seem to use word choice in particular ways to make their points, with all respect to their contribution in their own way.

Where does this all lead us too? We could initially think nowhere. But if we consider the other option it leads us somewhere, we could see language and hopefully some aspects of science from another perspective. The point now is, Can we think of a different conception of language taking words like “prayer”, etc in the common way they are used?

If the answer is yes, then we can notice how deep a word like “prayer” -or any word used the common way, can be. Maybe words are deeper than we thought.

3 CONCLUSION

In this article we explored some aspects of the main differences between Skinner and Chomsky view of language and science in general. It was found Chomsky criticism of Skinner was partially inconsistent with his own use of a common word many years later. From that point we think it is possible to conceive a vision of language in which words have more depth than we have thought to this point.

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