Fodor on Concepts and Language: Evolutionary (Dis)Continuity?

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Abstract In *The Language of Thought* Jerry Fodor puts forward a set of apparently *a priori* arguments to show that one cannot learn a language whose expressive power is greater than that of a language that one already knows. More specifically, he argues that one cannot learn a language whose predicates express extensions not expressible by those of a previously available representational system. This effectively disposes of the hypothesis testing account of language *learning* by demonstrating that everything must be innate. More importantly, the outcome appears to broach a breach in the evolutionary continuity of the emergence and genesis of language.

A significant number of linguists have found Fodor's argumentation, to say the least, *paradoxical*, but, as John Marshall, for example, notes, no one has yet brought forth a convincing counter-argument. In fact, the creolist Derek Bickerton thinks that the data from creole languages provide *a posteriori* evidence for the Fodorian *paradox*. Bickerton's version of the paradox runs thus: small children who could barely control their own bowel movements were capable of learning things of such abstractness and complexity that when brought to the level of consciousness, mature scholars often misanalyse them.

The purpose of this paper is, therefore, to probe the force of the Fodorian argument *vis-à-vis* the presumed evolutionary constraints on the origin of language. Specifically, the target of the paper is threefold. (1) To examine the validity of Fodor's central argument in order to show that the premises of the argument suffer from several ambiguities whose removal waters down his radical nativist conclusion, thus opening up a way of bridging the evolutionary gap in the process of language development. (2) To present a counter-argument against Fodorian nativism by looking at the process of *concept acquisition*. This obviously draws on an understanding of the nature of concepts and is done against the background of Fodor's theory of concepts as developed in his *Concepts*. (3) Finally, and rather *paradoxically*, to assay the applicability of evolutionary explanation to language in particular and cognition in general. There is a widely held view that natural selection is a sufficiently *fine-grained* process to exert an impact on cognitive capacities. Yet, despite the appeal of explaining cognition as the result of evolution through natural selection, there are serious qualms about administering evolutionary explanations to cognitive capabilities. Natural selection is often deemed to be too *coarse-grained* to be sensitive to such traits, and evolutionary explanations of cognition seem be founded at best on an analogy with biological evolution. Generally, the problem is that there may have been no direct natural selection for cognitive ability at all. Cognition may have developed as the purely epiphenomenal consequence of the major increase in brain size, which, in turn, may have been selected for quite other reasons. Should this line of reasoning turn out to be plausible, one may be able to maintain a moderate linguistic nativism without falling foul of evolutionary concerns.