

Where is Language?

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If asked "Where is Language?", most people would probably consider the answer obvious and respond "in the head" or "in our cognitive faculties". The answer becomes not so obvious if one treats, for example, mathematics as a language. For Galileo, nature was a book of mathematics. The whereabouts of that language is debated to present times, as witnessed by a paper by three physicists – Piet Hut, Mark Alford, and Max Tegmark – entitled "On Math, Matter and Mind". Furthermore, if one should ask a cognitive linguist such questions as, "Is there a way the world is, irrespective of how we take it to be?" or "Is an articulable world anything but the 'product' or 'construct' of human thought and attitude?", the answer may likely be "no", resting on the assumption that nature is what language interprets it to be. Knowable nature, in other words, falls under the arbiter and rules of language, where knowable=language cognizable. Hence, we can see how, by this manner of reasoning, the reach of language extends far from the head and dictates reality itself, whether we accept language as having universal rules of construction or something more Whorfian and relative.

This paper will propose a different take on the presumptive reach and scope of human language, starting with neuroscientist Antonio Damasio's binary distinction between "core consciousness" and the cognitively "extended consciousness". In place of the notion of cognitively extended consciousness we propose, as our translation of that concept, "the cognitive core" because it derives from the brain. And in place of core consciousness we posit a self-other extension that includes a territorial reach into world and nature by the very fact of our being awake to the world, a circumstance which distinguishes one's existence from mere cranium-enclosed dream or illusion. The paper, in other words, takes a direct realist approach on key questions: contending, for one thing, that there is a way the world is, irrespective of our interpretations through language, and that our being awake to the world is other than simply a human artifact, construction or interpretation, and that the constructivist premise as to the contrary leads to self-contradiction, an impeachment of knowledge itself. Hence, the underlying theme is that nature comes to us as part of a self/other composite, rather than we ourselves imposing a language conformity on nature that gives the definitive version of nature. The paper brings up an additional scenario, besides that of Damasio, summarized in a "many minds" interpretation of the measurement problem in quantum physics. The purpose is to show how a physicalist interpretation, in the language of physics, and based on what comes from us – our biology, our cognitive faculties -- fails to authenticate knowledge as being other than our own constructions.

The paper closes with a reference to the Sinhas in his study of the Amondawa language, an indigenous language in South America without a system of number or mathematical language, and his overall assessment that “time as such” – the conventional system of time in modern languages that is based on number and calculated measure – is not foundational or resting on a pre-conceptual, universal base. Hence, we may postulate from this, a retrenchment of language’s claim to dictate reality.