

What Might Speakers "Tacitly Know"?

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The theory of innate ideas, as revived by certain developments in transformational grammar, has been the subject of extensive discussion. In this paper I shall argue that there are no grounds at present for the claim, advanced by rationalist linguists, that one must posit certain highly specific items of tacit knowledge (or innate ideas) in order to account for linguistic behavior.

Transformational theory of grammar is taken by some philosopher-linguists as lending weight to the "rationalist" claim that there is innate knowledge. The transformational linguists claim to have discovered certain linguistic universals; if, however, the rationalist-oriented linguist is to move from the existence of these universals to the presence of innate knowledge, he must defend a notion of tacit knowledge. In a recent important article, "Tacit Knowledge," Jerrold Katz and several co-authors characterize the problem as "whether 'tacit knowledge' can be made sense of in a way that permits us to say that empirically adequate grammars explicate what a speaker knows about a language."¹ Their aim in addressing this problem is to defend Jerry Fodor's claim that speakers of a natural language tacitly know the rules governing verbal behavior,² and to show that Stephen Stich is mistaken in both his criticisms of Fodor and his positive claim that we do not need to assume any knowledge on the part of speakers *qua* speakers.

Rather than add another line to the usual exchange which rationalist- and empiricist-oriented philosophers of language engage in, I shall first consider the position which Stich must advocate if his criticisms of Fodor are to have any force. This position, however, is indefensible, as I shall demonstrate. Second, while granting the reasonableness of crediting a speaker with tacit knowledge, I shall show that the "rationalist" linguists cannot support their claim that speakers must have certain specific "innate ideas".

I

Stich argues against tacit knowledge of what I shall call "linguistic propositions"—these consist of linguistic universals, rules of particular grammars, and consequences of the rules and definitions of such a grammar. Against the claim that speakers possess such knowledge, Stich cites three conditions which he takes to be necessary for knowledge in general:

... when a person knows that p [(a)] he has occasionally reflected that

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p . . . ; [(b) he will, if inclined to be truthful . . . , assert that p if asked. [(c) More basic still, he is capable of understanding *some* statement which expresses what he knows. Yet for the propositions of linguistic theory none of this *need* be true. People—exempting a few linguists—. . . are *incapable* of recognizing the propositions of linguistic theory [i.e., linguistic propositions] when presented.³

These conditions are satisfied by what Stich calls the “unproblematic cases of knowledge,” i.e., explicit knowledge. Since they are not satisfied in the context of linguistic theory, one must (Stich thinks) provide reasons for employing the notion of tacit knowledge in this context.

As Katz *et al.* point out, (a) and (b) are not satisfied, but this is to be expected given the very notion of tacit knowledge. Thus, if we are to allow even the possibility of tacit knowledge, we cannot take (a) and (b) as necessary conditions for knowledge. Hence (c) becomes the most significant condition. If Stich’s claim were that the absence of (c) rules out the possibility of tacit knowledge of linguistic propositions, he would introduce a new element into the rationalist-empiricist debate. Now a necessary, although not sufficient, condition of someone, A, having tacit knowledge that p is that it be possible for A to have explicit knowledge that p . And in the passage quoted, Stich might be thought to hold that with regard to linguistic propositions, this condition is not met—i.e., that certain people are *incapable* of acquiring such explicit knowledge, not merely in practice but in theory.

In fact, however, Stich does not make this claim, nor would he be justified in doing so. The most he is entitled to claim is that at least one person has neither reflected on, assented to nor understood some statement of the propositions of linguistic theory. But even if this is the case, as it undoubtedly is, there is nothing to preclude the possibility of the situation’s changing and of everyone’s coming to be in the position of having the explicit knowledge which only linguists presently possess.

Stich’s “incapacity” claim does not amount to much more than a statement of the fact that tacit knowledge is not explicit, which no one has denied. Hence his entire case rests on showing that there are no reasons which warrant positing tacit knowledge. At this point the debate assumes a stereotyped form which is representative of the recent rationalist-empiricist controversy in linguistics. Katz claims, e.g., that the open-ended quality of the speaker’s knowledge requires that some rules be employed; Stich claims that no rules are needed, that the speaker is merely comparing various strings of words, and that his judgments do not concern grammatical properties at all.

Rather than enter into this debate, I intend to show that even granting tacit knowledge on the part of speakers, the “rationalists” cannot get the “innate ideas” they claim to want. Before doing this I must consider a

paradox which Stich sees arising from the claim that speakers are capable of making judgments concerning the grammatical properties of sentences. I shall suggest a way of avoiding this paradox which leaves open the possibility of speakers having tacit knowledge.

II

According to Stich, if the speaker is making judgments concerning grammaticality, this presupposes a complex grammar in terms of which the judgments are justified. This situation is paradoxical: the speaker's judgments provide the data from which the grammar is constructed, yet the justification for these judgments can only be given in terms of the grammar which the speaker does not possess.⁴ In order to avoid this paradox, Stich argues that speakers do not judge strings of words to be grammatical or ungrammatical; rather, they merely judge that strings "sound similar to or different from those of some specific set [of strings of terms]." These judgments express only that knowledge which is acquired upon being presented with the particular strings of words.⁵ Unfortunately, such judgments appear incapable of affording data which warrant explanation by tacit knowledge.

There seems, however, to be a half-way house between the positions of Stich and Katz. Instead of holding that speakers make judgments concerning grammatical properties, we will say that they judge whether strings are acceptable, unacceptable or questionable (in the sense that the speaker simply does not know how to classify them). While we may lose some judgments, e.g., those concerning noun phrases, we will retain enough for the construction of grammars. From the data provided by these judgments, the linguist constructs a grammar which accounts for the data and decides the status of questionable strings.⁶ This treatment does not result in the paradox which Stich mentions, and it leaves open the possibility of crediting the native speaker with knowledge beyond that allowed by Stich. Judgments concerning acceptability may be presumed to require a conceptual framework which is more complex than that required for perceptual judgments.

We can easily imagine, then, that the ability to make such judgments presupposes a conceptual framework compatible with tacit knowledge of rules, some of which may turn out to be linguistic universals. I shall assume henceforth that we do need to posit tacit knowledge of this sort, in order to explain both the native speaker's explicit knowledge of the acceptability of strings of words and his ability to learn to classify strings according to a formalized grammar. Katz *et al.* characterize this tacit knowledge in terms of tacit deductions. A reasonable explanation of tacit deduction might be:

A person, A, may be said to have tacitly deduced *p* from *r*, if *p* follows validly from *r*; *p* is not "directly evident"; A is not aware of *r*; and A's awareness of *p* cannot be explained in any other way (i.e., by any

combination of A's knowledge and/or belief statements).

A is not of course aware of the deduction.

Now if we are to claim that A tacitly knows r , then the deduction from r to p must be not merely valid, but sound. For if A is to know that r , whether tacitly or explicitly, it would be unreasonable to allow for the possibility of r 's being false. Hence, to support their claim that A tacitly knows that r , Katz *et al.* require something like the following:

If A knows that p and p is the conclusion of a sound argument which has r as the premise, and A's knowledge that p can only be explained in terms of a tacit deduction from r , then A tacitly knows that r .

I find this formally acceptable. The difficulty for the linguists who defend tacit knowledge is in the clause "A's knowledge that p can only be explained in terms of a tacit deduction from r ." Specifically, the problem is to establish that r is the unique explanation of A's knowledge that p . This difficulty obviously arises for Fodor's analysis of tacit knowledge in terms of an optimal simulation, though Stich curiously fails to consider it. As we shall notice, it is a fatal difficulty for the rationalist.

III

It seems almost truistic to say that for any pattern of behavior there are alternative means of explaining it. Thus in the case at hand, for any natural language there are alternative grammars which account for all the data and yet are incompatible with each other. Generalizing, it is clear that the same holds at the level of linguistic universals; in short, there may be alternative incompatible "universal" grammars, all of which accommodate the data of linguistic behavior. In *Convention*, David Lewis points out that unless we have some privileged method of evaluating the alternative grammars, we must consider all of them to be on a par.⁷ Yet Stich, for example, simply assumes that there is one grammar which will count as *the* grammar of a language.

...a grammar is *the* correct grammar of a language if it is the *best* grammar that accounts for all the data and meets certain further restraints.⁸

Stich seems unaware of the significance of this assumption, for he neither indicates what makes a grammar the "best" grammar, nor specifies the character of these further restraints; in short, he fails to give us the privileged method of evaluation, a failure he shares with his rationalist opponents.

This is not a trivial oversight. For even if we are willing to admit the necessity of some tacit knowledge, more specific claims concerning the

innate ideas⁹ allegedly associated with such knowledge have not yet been justified; what must also be shown is that there is one (and only one) grammar which counts as the grammar of a language and, moreover, that there is one (and only one) set of linguistic universals which constitutes the universal grammar. For this reason, the argument which Katz *et al.* employ in this context either fails to establish its conclusion, or presupposes an evaluation procedure which selects one possible grammar as *the* grammar of a language. This argument may be summarized as follows:

Let R be a rule of a particular grammar; S, a speaker; *p* a proposition affirming some grammatical property of a sentence,¹⁰ and U, the set of linguistic universals.

S knows that *p*.

S tacitly deduced *p* from R (or on Fodor's account, "An optimal simulation of S's verbal behavior requires the instruction R").

Therefore, S tacitly knows that R.

R is a member of U.

Therefore, S tacitly knows a rule of linguistic theory.

To discover the members of U, as pointed out by Fodor, one relies on optimal simulations and infers like causes (the rules) from like effects (the verbal behavior).¹¹ If, however, there are alternative sets of instructions which explain S's knowledge that *p*, the second premise must be changed to:

An optimal simulation of S's verbal behavior *can* be achieved by the instruction R.

But now R has lost its special status; S's verbal behavior no longer requires that S know R. Thus contrary to Fodor's claim that it makes no difference whether the "machine and the organism have only one way of producing the kind of behavior in question,"¹² it seems clear that it makes a great deal of difference.

If the "rationalist" linguist intends to defend an historically based doctrine of innate ideas (or items of tacit knowledge), he must therefore meet an objection which may be illustrated by contrasting instinctive with linguistic behavior, taking the latter as ostensible support for innate ideas. It is noteworthy that the explanation of instinctive behavior need not conform (as a conceptual matter) to either of these requirements: that the explanation be uniform across the species, or that it be known to the agents whose instinctive behavior is at issue. Thus, taking the nest building of sparrows as a case of purely instinctive behavior, any of the following are acceptable as possible explanations: sparrows have a certain brain structure, B, which, under conditions C, produces the nest building behavior; sparrows' heads contain colonies of very tiny sparrows which give orders to sparrows in C directing the nest building; sparrows' heads

contain Sony-built components which are programmed to yield nest building behavior in C¹³; sparrows know (tacitly or explicitly) the content of such a program which would yield nest building behavior.

Now in only one case, the last, does the explanation posit even a potential item of tacit knowledge; nevertheless, all the explanations are possible explanations of the sparrows' instinctive behavior. Moreover, it seems that we might discover that all of these explanations described some sparrows, and that no single explanation was available to cover the behavior in question. Although such a discovery might lead to a decision to sub-divide the class of sparrows into sub-species (along the lines of the difference in explanations of the nest building behavior), there is nothing in the case which necessitates such a decision. We might as easily decide to retain one species and allow that the behavior has no uniform explanation (just as smoking behavior in humans may have no single explanation). If the behavior in question is instinctive, we can tolerate a diversity of explanation.

If, however, our concern is with behavior that is taken as explicable only in terms of innate ideas (or items of tacit knowledge), the situation is significantly altered. This sort of behavior does require that the explanation accommodate both knowledge and uniformity. Any explanation of the behavior must provide items which can be the object of knowledge. Thus, in the above case, only the final explanation--knowledge of rules--would be acceptable if the nest building behavior were construed on the rationalist model of linguistic behavior. But if this requirement is satisfied, then in the case of linguistic behavior the uniformity requirement cannot be met, since it is possible to construct mutually incompatible sets of rules to explain the linguistic behavior in question. In spite of his well-known vagueness, when Descartes spoke of innate ideas he clearly did not intend to allow significant interpersonal differences in these ideas.¹⁴ So, too, the modern Cartesian linguist cannot maintain his rationalist stance while admitting that the specific content of these innate ideas varies across persons.

In short, if we are to follow Fodor and argue from like effects to like causes--in support of the doctrine of innate knowledge of linguistic universals--then we must argue for *like* causes. This point may seem too trivial to be worth repeating, but Fodor's cavalier attitude toward diverse explanatory mechanisms necessitates its emphasis in this context.¹⁵ For if S's verbal behavior can be simulated by any of a disjunction of instructions, R or R' or R'' or . . . , and these are incompatible, then they cannot all be members of U. Hence, until one can specify a privileged method of evaluating these alternative rules of grammar, the most a speaker may be said to know tacitly is one member of this disjunction--but we cannot specify which. This blocks the move to tacit knowledge of rules of a particular grammar and, hence, to tacit knowledge of linguistic universals. And since this move is

crucial to defenders of "innate ideas," granting even the necessity of tacit knowledge is not sufficient to establish their claim until a privileged method of evaluation is presented.¹⁶

Notes and References

¹C. Graves, J. Katz, Y. Nishiyama, S. Simes, R. Stecker, P. Tovey, "Tacit Knowledge," *The Journal of Philosophy*, LXX (June 1973), 318.

²Jerry Fodor, "The Appeal to Tacit Knowledge in Psychological Explanation," *The Journal of Philosophy*, LXV (Oct. 1968), 629-640.

³Stephen Stich, "What Every Speaker Knows," *Philosophical Review*, LXXX (Oct. 1971), 485-486; emphasis mine.

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 478. In *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1965), Noam Chomsky's discussion of primary linguistic data, especially in connection with language acquisition, is subject to this same difficulty. (See, e.g., p. 25)

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 496.

⁶One proponent of this view is William Todd; see his *Introduction to Studies in Philosophical Linguistics*. Series One, 1969.

⁷David Lewis, *Convention* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1969), p. 199.

⁸Stich, p. 478; emphasis mine. Although Stich's remark is restricted to considerations of the possible grammars of one language, it seems fair to assume that he would be willing to extend the claim to include the universal grammar.

⁹See Nelson Goodman, "The Epistemological Argument," *Synthese*, XVII, No. 1, 1967, 28. There Anticus remarks in amazement, "Then I am puzzled. You seem to be saying that these innate ideas are neither innate nor ideas." I assume that Katz *et al.* do not want to advance a claim which would be open to a similar charge.

¹⁰Also see Goodman, "The Emperor's New Ideas" in *Language and Philosophy*, ed. Sidney Hook (New York: New York University Press, 1969), 138. For simplicity, I shall ignore the paradoxical results of this formulation.

¹¹Fodor, p. 639.

¹²In his review of "Language and Mind" (in *On Noam Chomsky; Critical Essays*, ed. Gilbert Harman, New York: Anchor Books, 1974), Harmon too seems to accept as unproblematic the possibility of there being alternative mechanisms or sets of rules underlying linguistic behavior, p. 216. Harmon, an empiricist, fails to appreciate the significance of such concessions to the "rationalist" linguists, a failure whose general implications I have traced in my review of the aforementioned book, *Teaching Philosophy*, I, 3 (Spring 1976), 350-351.

¹³This might cause some concern over the authenticity of these sparrows, but this possibility is immaterial to the present discussion.

¹⁴The claim that innate idea theorists did not intend to allow for conflicting innate ideas is made quite clear by John Locke (*Essay Concerning the Human Understanding*, London: Collier-Macmillan Ltd., 1965) in his statement and first criticism of the doctrine:

There is nothing more commonly taken for granted than that there are certain *principles*, both *speculative* and *practical* (for they speak of both), universally agreed upon by all mankind: which therefore, they argue, must needs be the constant impressions which the souls of men receive in their first beings, and which they bring into the world with them, as necessarily and really as they do any of their inherent faculties.

...This argument of universal consent, which is made use of to prove innate principles, seems to me a demonstration that there are none such: because there are none to which all mankind gives a universal assent. (Locke, p. 31)

I find myself in agreement with Nelson Goodman that Locke is far from attacking a straw-man:

He [Locke] formulated every clear version he could think of [of the theory of innate ideas] and showed each of them to be either trivially true or obviously false. The remaining versions were too subtle for either him or me to grasp. He did indeed refute the theory in its cruder--i.e., more intelligible--forms; the rest are forever immune to refutation.

(“The Emperor’s New Ideas,” p. 138)

¹⁵Fodor, p. 629. It is not merely defenders of innate knowledge in linguistics who seem open to this objection. In a recent paper, “Innate Knowledge” (in *Innate Ideas*, ed. Stephen Stich, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), Alvin Goldman defends the claim that in certain cases it is plausible to suppose that animals have innate knowledge. Goldman’s position does not prevent incompatible propositions from being thus “known,” and is therefore open to precisely the objections which are here advanced against “rationalist” linguists.

¹⁶An earlier version of this paper was completed in 1973 while I was on a Research Grant from the University of Utah. I would like to thank T. M. Reed, William Todd, and Virgil C. Aldrich for their helpful criticisms.