Notes on Trần Đức Thảo's theory of language

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Trần Đức Thảo – Một số vấn đề triết học và lịch sử
Trường Đại học Khoa học Xã hội và Nhân văn
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lời cảm ơn

Cảm ơn Trường Đại học KHXHNV đã tổ chức sự kiện này (và cảm ơn TS Phạm Thu Trang đã giúp đỡ tôi trong các bước tham gia)!

roadmap

- discuss TDT's theory of language in the context of modern empirical linguistics and analytic philosophy
- raise some issues for future research
- conclude

1 TDT's theory of language
- The phenomena
- The explanation

2 Issues for future work

3 Conclusion

the text

- Tran, Duc Thao. 1984. Investigations into the Origin of Language and Consciousness. Translated by Daniel J. Herman & Robert L. Armstrong. Dordrecht: D. Reidel Publishing Company.
  - Tran, Duc Thao. 1973. Recherches sur l'origine du langage et de la conscience. Paris: Editions sociales.
  - Trần, Đức Thảo. 1996. Tìm cội nguồn của ngôn ngữ và ý thức. Hà Nội: Nhà xuất bản Văn hoá Thông tin.

outline of exposition

- TDT takes the following intuitions about language as facts to be explained
  - language is conscious
  - language is intentional
  - language is social
  - language is material
- TDT's explanation: language is gestural

1. **TDT's theory of language**
   - The phenomena
   - The explanation
2. Issues for future work
3. Conclusion

language & consciousness

- speech and conscious thought are phenomenologically similar
  - conscious thought is anchored to an "epistemic agent" who has control and introspective access
  - conscious thought is "inner speech"
  - conscious thought can be made public

(1) a. Hãy nói/nghĩ về vấn đề này!
b. #Hãy nằm mơ về vấn đề này!

(2) a. "Hôm nay trời sẽ mưa," Nam nghĩ.
b. "Hôm nay trời sẽ mưa," Nam nói với My.

(3) Hãy nói cho tôi biết anh đang nghĩ gì!

Stalnaker (1978), Schwager (2005), Maier (2006)

[...] consciousness is the language that the subject addresses to himself, generally in the outlined form of 'internal speech' [...]

(Tran 1984: 16)

4	Der Gedanke ist der sinnvolle Satz.	The thought is the significant proposition.

Wittgenstein (1921)

language & intentionality

- language presupposes an extra-linguistic reality which it is "about"

(4) A: Trời đang mưa.
B: Không! Trời đang nắng.

Brentano (1874), Husserl (1907)

[...] if the whole meaning of signs merely consists in their referring to one another, without ever referring directly to things, then we [...] no longer see what speaking of things could mean [...] it is [...] impossible to ignore the existence of a fundamental sign, whose meaning consists precisely in positing a 'direct relation between the word and the thing' [...]

(Tran 1984: 33)

4.01	Einen Satz verstehen, heißt, wissen was der Fall ist, wenn er wahr ist.	To understand a proposition means to know what is the case, if it is true.

Wittgenstein (1921)

language & society

- language presupposes a community of speakers
- the use of language is subject to "conversational maxims" which are mutually known by discourse participants

(5) a. trời mưa nhưng Trịnh Hữu Tuệ không tin là trời mưa
b. #trời mưa nhưng tôi không tin là trời mưa

Moore (1942), Wittgenstein (1953), Austin (1962), Grice (1967), Searle (1969), Schlenker (2016)

[...] the individual can address himself only insofar as he is a social being [...] "It is clear ... ," says Marx, "that [the individual] relates even to language itself as his own only as the natural member of a human community."

(Tran 1984: 27)

4.01	Der Satz **zeigt**, wie es sich verhält, **wenn** er wahr ist. Und er **sagt**, dass es sich so verhält.	The proposition **shows** how things stand, **if** it is true. And it **says**, that they do so stand.

Wittgenstein (1921)

language & matter

- grammar is constrained by reality

(6) a. Nam gặp tất cả các sinh viên trừ My
b. #Nam gặp ít nhất một sinh viên trừ My

→ this intuition is not obvious

von Fintel (1993), Krifka (1995), Moltmann (1995), Gajewski (2008b, 2013), Crnič (2021), Vostrikova (2021), Chierchia (1998, 2010), Magri (2009), Chierchia (2013), Crnič (2019), Menéndez-Benito (2005), Crnič and Haida (2020), Bylinina and Nouwen (2018), Haida and Trinh (2020, 2021), Gajewski (2008a), Fox and Hackl (2006), Abrusán (2007), Hirsch (2016), Uegaki and Sudo (2017)

The relation of the signifying to the signified appears to be a matter of purely arbitrary convention. In reality, however, this is just a specific characteristic of the verbal sign which we know does not at all exhaust the material reality of the signifying act.

(Tran 1984: 24)

If [the linguistic sign] is presented merely as an arbitrary sign [...] consciousness will [...] be defined [...] as purely lived internality which makes its relation to matter inexplicable.

(Tran 1984: 26)

Consciousness must, therefore, be more exactly defined as the idealized form of the motion of inner language. And since it exists only in that language, the only 'form of the motion of matter' in question here is, strictly speaking, language itself.

(Tran 1984: 29)

4.01	Der Satz ist ein Bild der Wirklichkeit [...]	A proposition is a picture of reality [...]
3.21	Der Konfiguration der einfachen Zeichen im Satzzeichen entspricht die Konfiguration der Gegenstände in der Sachlage.	The configuration of simple signs in a propositional sign corresponds to the configuration of objects in a state of affairs.
4.014	Sehr klar wird das Wesen des Satzzeichens, wenn wir es uns, statt aus Schriftzeichen, aus räumlichen Gegenständen (etwa Tischen, Stühlen, Büchern) zusammengesetzt denken. Die gegenseitige räumliche Lage dieser Dinge drückt dann den Sinn des Satzes aus.	The essential nature of the propositional sign becomes very clear when we imagine it made up of spatial objects (such as tables, chairs, books) instead of written signs. The mutual spatial position of these things then expresses the sense of the proposition.

Wittgenstein (1921)

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Hypothesis

- to speak is to make an indicative gesture, which by definition
  - requires transcendence: consciousness
  - requires an direct object: intentionality
  - requires an indirect object: society
  - requires physical conditions: materialism

[...] the guidance movement does not consist in simply tracing a direction, it has essentially the function of a call. The indicative gesture, as distance guidance, is a call for work on the indicated object. Now, as a call, it is naturally completed by the normal form of a call, the vocal form.

(Tran 1984: 8)

gesture & consciousness

If the gorilla had had **conscious** perception of the steak, he would have simply **indicated** the part of the meat that he wanted by stretching out not his finger, to be sure, but at least his hand.

(Tran 1984: 4)

[...] once the structure of the gesture is established, the subject applies it to himself. In other words, he **points out the object to himself** [...]

(Tran 1984: 7)

[...] the relation to oneself constitutes consciousness. Consciousness appears identically as consciousness of the object and **consciousness of self** [...]

(Tran 1984: 11)

gesture & intentionality

The indicative gesture marks the most elementary relation of consciousness to the object as external object.

(Tran 1984: 4–5)

[...] the meaning of the indicative gesture is precisely to express the relation of objective externality, in which consists the fundamental intentionality of consciousness [...]

(Tran 1984: 5)

the meaning of the indicative gesture in no way refers to any other sign. It uniquely and directly refers to the thing itself in its external existence as independent of the subject [...]

(Tran 1984: 34)

gesture & society

The original form of the indicative move ment thus can be defined as **guidance** at a distance.

(Tran 1984: 6)

gesture & matter

The indicative gesture began in a material form: the gesture of guidance at a distance as it was formed in the development of adaptive work starting with the anthropoids.

(Tran 1984: 15)

[...] the material component [...] is [...] an integral part of the [...] movement. Its necessary presence in the act of consciousness enables us to define it as language [...]

(Tran 1984: 16)

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implicit knowledge

- a large part of linguistic knowledge, including semantics, is implicit (i.e. unconscious)

(7) a. Nam có ăn cơm không?
b. Cả Nam có ăn cơm không?
c. #Chỉ Nam có ăn cơm không?

Chomsky (1957, 1986), Trinh (2022, 2023)

logical constants

- many linguistic expressions are non-referential

(8) **all** A B
all C **not** B
---
all C **not** A

(9) **all** A B
some C A
---
some C B

etc.

Aristotle's Organon, Barwise and Cooper (1981), Heim and Kratzer (1998)

intensional contexts

- meaning is more than the external object

(10) a. the morning star is the evening star
b. the morning star is the morning star

(11) a. Nam nghĩ Joe Biden là tổng thống Mỹ
b. Nam nghĩ Joe Biden là Joe Biden

(12) a. quyển sách tôi đang viết sẽ nặng 5 kg
b. Luân Đôn bị cháy rụi và được xây dựng lại cách đó 100 km

Frege (1892), Hintikka (1961), Kratzer (1981), Chomsky (2000)

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3 **Conclusion**

- TDT made a creative proposal on how language originates and evolves
- the proposal squares with some basic intuitions about language
  - consciousness
  - intentionality
  - sociality
  - materiality
- there are properties of language which pose a challenge to TDT's proposal
  - implicitness
  - functionality
  - intensionality
- future work
  - critical evaluation
  - improvement and extension

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