

**The Language of Thought Hypothesis: A Critical
exposition of Jerry Fodor's Theory**

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Man stands nowhere without his language. It is, in fact, our ability not only to communicate but to do so in a complicated system accessible to all of us which distinguishes man from animals. There is, evidently, no literature, philosophy, or science without language and most significantly there is no society or civilized life without language. Therefore, language is the essence of human life. But is it something we possess alone? We observe that animals and birds also communicate. How do they do so without a language? How do after all children communicate? How do children acquire linguistic skills so fast? These questions with many others have compelled philosophers to try to understand the nature or function of language from early times. Different philosophers have raised different questions. There have been arguments, debates, agreement and disagreement. But, all these arguments put together, we stand before one big question: is language just a medium of expression? Or a psychological necessity without which thought is impossible? Does thought have its own language? These are some of the questions which the present thesis is going to address.

Let us, therefore, first try to understand why after all we should bother to consider something such as 'language of thought' - a phrase that itself sounds to be an absurd possibility. Can a common man ask whether thought has language? Is it not that we think before we write or speak? This has been, indeed, our common sense understanding till date. But of let, some philosophers have labored hard to raise a slightly more difficult question. The question is: how do we speak or write about thoughts which we do not understand ourselves? Here the common man will say, "Who told you we do not understand our own thoughts?" Of course, we do. But how do we do it? Do we understand our own thoughts while they are not communicated to ourselves? Now if they are communicated to ourselves, how will such internal communication be possible without a medium? This medium, according to some philosophers, is language of thought.

Of these philosophers, Jerry Fodor, an American philosopher, introduced the term language of thought, and in the present investigation, we shall deal with his basic claims regarding language of thought which have been elaborated in *The Language of Thought* published by Howard university press, in the year 1975.

There are two distinct ways to approach Language and Thought as concepts. First the traditional view is that thought comes before language. Second, thought and language are simultaneous operations. If we accept the first view, we support the claim that thought is

already in complete formation before it finds expression in language, while if we accept the second view, we contemplate language and thought to be just patterns of behaviour, one complimenting another. Fodor rejects both these approaches. Fodor offers us a third option. Language (in a special sense) comes before thought or rather thought is self-communicated before thought becomes thought ready to find 'expression in a natural language'. Indeed, according to him, thoughts must be 'thought about' before it may be called thought proper. This is, of course, no mere tautology. This is, so far as Fodor is concerned, a genuine possibility. We have no difficulty understanding communication of thought between two persons. But Fodor claims that any thought must be understood "before" it is communicated. Now, if so, how is, after all, thought understood, unless some sort of internal communication precedes external communication? And, how, after all, communication is possible without a medium? This medium of internal communication in which, according to Jerry Fodor, thoughts are couched is the Language of Thought. The language of thought is a 'language' in the sense that it has a number of structural similarities with the natural languages. But, at the same time, it is also distinct from a natural language as far as its fundamental cognitive operation is concerned.

The Language of Thought does not communicate 'thoughts already in complete formation'. Basically, it does not communicate (here the term 'communication' is used in the ordinary sense, that is, it is taken to be communication with others) anything at all; it 'represents and computes' a situation for the mind to understand it. It is important to note here that while developing the 3rd position Fodor uses the notion of thought to include both conscious and unconscious thought. Analysis of language, according to Fodor, reveals language to be guided by structures that are but thought patterns. Therefore, in Fodor's view instead of separating thought from language we may consider them to be part of a single system.

It is important to understand that language of thought is a concept of more philosophical possibilities than a well defined concept itself as it is not empirically verified. In his own words, the language of thought is no more than a 'speculation', empiricist philosophers Ryle and Wittgenstein completely oppose this view with their strong arguments in favor of the commonsense concept of language. But, from the 1970s onwards, some philosophers began to raise a number of questions. Not only did they raise some significant questions but also suggested that such questions being adequately answered had the potential to change the very concept of language itself. Chomsky is one of them, and Fodor has borrowed many of his arguments from Chomsky's observation that grammar is universal.

But, what Chomsky has to say, or Fodor has to say about language cannot be appreciated unless we have a clear idea about what these two philosophers are trying to counter in their philosophy. To be precise, to understand Jerry Fodor, it is necessary that we understand the latter Wittgenstein because it is the latter Wittgenstein whom Jerry Fodor is trying to prove misleading in his writing. So, before dealing with the language of thought hypothesis, we must understand Wittgenstein's concept of language. Then, once we are done with Wittgenstein's empirical concept of language, it is easier for us to figure out the inconsistencies in it and the loopholes; Though before Wittgenstein many philosophers did investigations about language Wittgenstein stands out as being most convincing, partly because his arguments appeal rather strongly to commonsense and partly because he almost 'invented' an altogether different explanation so far as human language is concerned. This created an aroma which eluded not only philosophers of his time including Russell but also himself. And, consequently, the loopholes of his philosophy remained undiscovered for an unreasonably long time. But what did he say that was so interesting after all?

The point Wittgenstein wants to emphasize regarding language consists in the notion of linguistic uses, by which he intends to understand nothing more than 'use of words' and these uses cannot be described by a single comprehensive formula. One single word has many possible uses which upon being critically analyzed reveal how its meaning is conditioned by its use. So he rather hastily concluded that understanding the meaning of a word is 'not a mental process' but 'social behavior. According to him, language does not consist of 'names'; when we use a name of any object in our language that does not mean we mean the name only. The understanding of a name depends on the situation when we use the name. For example, when a laborer makes a house and produces the word 'brick' that means he asks for bricks. Here 'brick' does not mean only the name of brick. Understanding a word is all about understanding how it is used in a particular situation. According to Wittgenstein there is no place for private language. There is nothing different about thinking than using language. There is no such separate thing or mechanism as thought. No wonder, Wittgenstein did not define thought. But, though apparently applying solutions to philosophical problems, Wittgenstein fails to answer a number of questions.

One such question, which was raised by the Fodorian, relates to linguistic purposes. The question is: why do we, after all, need a language? Wittgenstein himself admits that language is a vehicle of expression. But, what do we after all express? Evidently, following his line of thought, we express thoughts. But, then, are thoughts just meaningless emotions? Thoughts

must have meaning and according to Wittgenstein, such meaning is derived from use of words. But, if we consider a situation in which neither a word nor its specific designated use is present, we wonder how communication is possible in such a situation (for instance, the case of Preverbal child and animal's communication). The fact is that communication is quite possible in such a situation, and what is communicated in such a situation, evidently and understandably following Wittgenstein's philosophy, cannot be the meaning of something derived from usage. Then as per Fodorians what is this meaning all about?

In Fodor's opinion, is this meaning, then not about understanding a situation or circumstance by psychological reasoning? This is where Wittgenstein and his philosophy goes against the views of Jerry Fodor and also Noam Chomsky from whom Fodor derived many of his arguments. According to Fodor, if it is thought, it has to be meaningful, and usage cannot be the only possible source of meaning. Fodor would claim that Wittgenstein fails to understand that understanding a word, being understanding its rules, is also about understanding a given situation psychologically represented as a mental state. In simple words every experience has a parallel mental state in order to be an experience for understanding. So what we understand is a mental state caused by an experience, and, unless, therefore, an experience is psychologically represented as a mental state, understanding by mere usage is impractical and beyond comprehension.

The cardinal question, therefore, which Wittgenstein should have an answer and which all of them avoid to an extent is: are thoughts linguistic in nature?

Even conventional linguistics claims that certain ideas must be put together for the language to start. But we know that such ideas with which a language starts must be arranged in a particular order to achieve the purpose of communication. Now what are these rules that are required for this order? Or, are these the rules that construct a language? Apparently, these are linguistic rules because we find them in a language. Then do these rules come before or after the birth of language? If we believe that language and thought both follow a common sequence then we have to admit that the same rules operate in between language and thought, and if we have to say that they are linguistic in any possible sense, we can only say that they are linguistic being an intermediary between abstract concepts and their concrete expressions in language. So, according to Fodor without such rules being already in existence, we would not be able to arrange the ideas to achieve the purpose of communication.

These rules, when they are applied to concepts, for a certain linguistic arrangement in a natural language, the purpose is external communication. According to Fodor, when these rules are applied for necessary modification of materials that constitute thought, the purpose is internal communication. In short, whether the purpose is external communication or internal communication, these rules are indispensable. Of course, the behaviorists do not accept that such internal communication is at all possible, because gross commonsense does not approve of the possibility of the communicator and the person communicated to be the same person. But if we accept such a gross commonsensical point of view to understand mental operations, in Fodor's opinion it would be a mistake. Fodor has pointed to animal behavior to substantiate the point. There are, in fact, a hundred instances to be found in daily life indicating that thoughts are being thoughts even without linguistic expression. For example, while one is engrossed in thought, it is an absurdity to believe that one is equally engrossed in a linguistic process involving natural language. In other words, it is not that we translate our thoughts into some sort of linguistic expression in order to convince ourselves that we are thinking. So, a person who is deaf and dumb can think, and no one can reasonably say that he is thinking linguistically (natural language), for the simple reason that linguistics itself is beyond his imagination.

After this point, therefore, apparently it is clear that thoughts can exist without deliberate use of language. But the problem is that besides believing that thoughts do not require a language to be thoughts, we also believe that language is a vehicle of thought, which is questionable, because if thoughts are nonlinguistic by nature, it is next to impossible that language should convey, communicate, and become a vehicle of such completely nonlinguistic abstractions. This primarily gives birth to the philosophical doubt that most probably thoughts are arranged just in the way ideas are usually found arranged in a sentence. And, if so, thought as a process must be as much linguistic as language itself: hence the possibility of some sort of a language being constantly in operation to produce thoughts that find themselves expressed in a natural language. So, in a gross way of analysis we have two languages: one for internal communication and the other for external communication. Common sense view is correct as far as it observes that the rules of linguistic expressions are subject to conventions that depend on contextuality. But then what are the rules of internal communication subject to? Evidently contextuality cannot determine the rules for a language which is itself beyond all contextuality being universal in nature. Indeed, there cannot be any such rules that are subject to change and modification because of situational variations. Then, if such rules do exist they

can only exist by virtue of being in themselves invariables of their own kind. So, the mind remains outside of influence of all contextuality, hence any rules or set of rules for thought to govern thought process must be innate.

It is to be noted here that Fodor's Language of Thought is nothing innate in the Platonic sense. But, in what precise sense then, is it innate? Fodor seems to argue that it is innate in the sense that it is beyond contextuality being so 'intimately personal or private'. It is a 'rule unto itself' – a sovereign mechanism of the mind outside all external influences. There are, Fodor argues, systematic connections among the ideas an individual can entertain. For example, if you can entertain the idea that x is y , then you can also entertain the idea that y is x : Systematicity looks like a crucial property of human thought and so demands a principled explanation.

The representational states and processes that figure in high-level cognition have certain fundamental properties: thought is productive and systematic; inferential thinking is systematic. The states and processes have these properties as a matter of nomic necessity: in short, it is a psychological law that they have these properties.

According to the Fodorians, if the Language of Thought has to be innate, it can only be innate in the sense that the fundamentals of cognition, called propositional contents otherwise, are innate. Thoughts, according to the Language of Thought Hypothesis, can only relate to thoughts, thoughts being in reality a series of interconnected mental contents. While it is argued to oppose Fodor that whoever speaks in English thinks in English, the Fodorians will claim that we cannot altogether deny the possibility that complex thought is present even in those who do not possess a public language (e.g. babies, aphasics, and even higher-order primates), and therefore according to Fodor some form of mentalese must be innate.

Now, though in Fodor's point of view it is no more than just an assumption, the claim here is that thought, as a process, both at psychological and cognitive level, is independent of the natural languages which we assume to communicate thoughts. In other words, thought as a process may well operate even without a natural linguistic medium to communicate.

Of course, it is not an unjustified observation that thought once communicated appears to be more organized than thoughts we experience being consciously a part of introspective analysis, but such may be an illusion, particularly in the light of the observation that such

conscious thoughts, whether or not they have been communicated, already bear linguistic properties of the language of the individual consent.

Let us try to understand the nature of conscious thoughts a little more in detail, so that it becomes clear that Fodor is not at all dealing with them. First of all, it is necessary to understand that as anything that may be thought about may communicate, anything that may be communicated may also be thought about without actual communication. In both the cases, whether it is thinking or communication, the activity is linguistic in nature, because, in both the cases, we are using sentences. For example, if I can say 'this is a beautiful morning'. I can also think this is a beautiful morning, and in both the cases I am using propositions, and, therefore, in both the cases, I am 'linguistic' but only in the conventional sense. Basically whenever I am saying something to myself, knowing that I am doing so, I am not really thinking', and it is, as already pointed out, as much 'external' as when I am saying it to somebody else. In short, my thoughts are not only propositional in nature but propositions themselves.

This eliminates one of the strongest objections against Jerry Fodor that thoughts may be internally communicated by means of a natural language. No they are not thoughts in the Fodorian sense. They are sentences, conventionally and linguistically constructed, ready to be written or spoken. Two individuals who speak two different natural languages may express a single common idea differently. This, however, does not mean that they are thinking differently, suggesting that 'thinking may be done in a natural language' only when the mind is entertaining thoughts already organized into propositions.

But Fodor is not at all dealing with such so-called thoughts. Rather, he is dealing with such thoughts as requiring a medium to be communicated to the mind for interpretation enabling understanding leading to actions. This actually takes place entirely at the cognitive level [brain states], and, understandably this is the same for both humans and the animals. This medium is called language of thought. Here, at this cognitive level, we do not have natural language sentences but only language of thought or mentalese – one state of mind maturing into another and thereby framing a change of abstractions producing understanding.

Moreover, whatever has been stated above in order to logically countered the argument furnished by philosophers who mentioned that thoughts may occur in natural language, as also to defended by Jerry Fodor in his exposition of language of thought, is apparently in vehement contradiction with Fodor's own point of view that the natural languages spring

from the language of thought. But, as just stated, this is only an apparent contradiction borne out of complete misunderstanding. Fodor's points out that any natural language, whether English or French, has constructional peculiarities indicating that they have a root somewhere at the cognitive level.

The philosophical position that a natural language will be treated as the language of thought is the direct outcome of the epistemic position that thought and expression are either identical or simultaneous psychological activities. Do we think before we speak or we think as we speak? This is the main question. The philosophers who believe the natural language of man to be his language of thought are convinced that thought and an expression occur together, and so if they have to accept the possibility that thoughts are communicated to the mind through a linguistic medium, they assume that it can be done only through a natural language. What they understand by Fodor's expression 'thinking about thought' is basically a rehearsal of thought. But as per supporters of mentalese rehearsal of thought and thinking about thought is not just two distinct phrases but two altogether different psychological activities. When I am telling myself that the earth is round I am simply repeating a well formed idea or thought either for the purpose of confirmation or vindication or conviction. This is, of course, not thinking about thought, not at least, in the sense in which Fodor has used the expression. This, at best, may be rehearsal of thoughts so far as such rehearsal does not reach up to the cognitive level. but thinking about thoughts, as the phrase goes, in Fodorian concept, is an entirely distinct concept: more than a psychological activity, thinking of thought is a cognitive ability, and when an organism is involved in thinking about thought, it is considering thought presented to the mind as problems and trying to reach a possible solution from a number of options available to the mind. Therefore neither introspection and soliloquy nor even rehearsal of thought may be an adequate argument on the basis of which the language of thought hypothesis may be rejected.

To cut a long story short, therefore, understanding as a process is all about coming into terms with a particular or a series of particular inter connected states of mind. This is the position held by not only Fodor but also by some eminent psychologists of our time including Murphy. Fodor's characteristically unique question is: how do we, or for that matter any organism, come to terms with its own state of mind? Jerry Fodor maintains that it is done through a process similar to linguistic operations. So, according to him, it is a language, and in it are couched all our thoughts. The difference between a natural language and the language of thought does come out clear. A natural language is the vehicle of expression and

the language of thought is the vehicle of thought. But it is not yet understood why Fodor claims that it is a language. After all, every process similar to psychological operation is not required to be a language. In the present thesis this is one of the vital questions that have been dealt with for an authentic answer. Questions concerning certain duality of thought, infinite regress argument, objections from supporters of evolution and pure science have also been given due attention. The cardinal point, however, as always being Jerry Fodor and his exposition on language of thought, where as in the final chapter different views expressed in the instant research work have been synthesized in order to reach a reasonably logical conclusion regarding how much of Fodor's claim in favour of the language of thought can be accepted without objection.

Below is given a summary of each chapter dealing with a separate and distinct aspect of our enquiry:

In chapter 1, our aim is to explain the claim that thinking involves the manipulation of sentences that perfectly explains the distinct features of human thought. Manipulation of sentences is a lot more flexible, compared to other systems of representation. This chapter will also target introducing mentalese as the possible language of thought. Mentalese is an innate language that operates in the background and we are not consciously aware that it exists. The Language of thought is carried out at the cognitive level and the psychological operation involved in the process includes two specific operations: representation and computation. In Fodor's view representation becomes possible through computation. By computation Fodor understands the ability of the mind to analyze a situation and thereby represent it as a problem and seek out its solutions from a number of options similarly presented before the mind as possible solutions. In short, according to Fodor, thought becomes possible because it is computed, and there cannot be any representation without computation. Fodor's claim is that a natural language is distinct from the language of thought. A natural language, whether it is English or French, expresses or conveys certain ideas or thoughts. There is, however, a parallel linguistic operation at the cognitive level that represents such thoughts or ideas to the mind for mental understanding. Therefore, Fodor claims, the two, the natural language and the mentalese, share a number of structural similarities, giving rise to the assumption that the natural language in all probability is modeled after the language of thought. In the next section of this chapter we have discussed the main arguments of Jerry Fodor in favor of the language of thought including arguments from cognitive learning process, linguistic skill development of children, productivity,

systematicity and last but not the least the question of animal language. By all such arguments, Fodor has sought to establish that the language of thought is a cognitive possibility which may be explored from our common observations of life and, most significantly, that no natural language would have been possible without a linguistic structure peculiar to the construction and operation of the mind.

And after that in chapter 2, we would discuss the nature of the language of thought. We will focus on the nature of concepts that form the primitive parts of language of thought. We would also try to find Fodor's answers to some very rudimentary questions, like, what does language express? Does it express thought? If it expresses thought, is thought different from other mental activities which, though not thought, are usually believed to constitute thought? What does Fodor mean when he says that something is innate? Do we mean that it is simply inherent or that it is naturally and constitutionally present in the being?

In chapter 3, Fodor has tried to establish that the language of thought is not just a simple linguistic operation but a language in itself with a system of vocabulary peculiarly its own. Through reduction from a meaningful word to its atomic form, he has tried to show that the atomic ideas eventually arrived at as a cognitive representation that are so unique but they cannot be an innate representation. These innate representations, according to him, constitute a vocabulary on which the language of thought functions. However it has been observed by many critics of Fodorian theory that the vocabulary Fodor himself has used to establish the existence of the vocabulary of the language of thought is the English language, and, therefore, what he has eventually rediscovered is a natural language vocabulary, not the vocabulary of the language of thought. But as per Fodor's opinion it is not true. Fodor tells us how the vocabulary of mentalese is as important as the vocabulary of the natural language.

In chapter 4, we will discuss the psychological evidence provided by Fodor in order to establish his theory and support his contention that the language of thought is a cognitive possibility. The cases in the presence of the evidence are all basically experiments conducted by contemporary psychologists and philosophers to indicate a representational model of mental operations. These experiments include the Broadbent-Treisman experiment, Garrett-Lackner models, and Experiment conducted by Mehler. However, in dealing with these experiments, for the purpose of our investigations, we have raised questions regarding the relevance of these experiments in the philosophy of Fodor and we will also try to see whether or not the representational model may be a logical prerequisite for the language of thought

hypothesis. And we have been obliged to acknowledge that some sort of a representational model does operate at the cognitive level which is conducive to the process of thought formation.

In chapter 5, we have tried to develop a critical estimation of Fodor's theory. There are strong criticisms against Jerry Fodor and his language of thought hypothesis. Some of the important arguments against Fodor have been dealt with here include private language arguments, regress argument, argument from language evolution, and argument against innateness, against the content of language of thought. Some of these arguments show that mentalese is not required and some of these arguments are designed to show that though language of thought hypothesis may well indicate certain linguistic operation at the cognitive level; such hypothesis does not necessarily establish that the language of thought is a language in itself distinct from the natural languages. This will help moving on to the final chapter that would offer evidence to support natural language as the language of thought.

In the conclusion, we will see how far natural language can function as language of thought. First we will focus on evidence that can be put forward in support of the claim that natural language is the language of thought. The next part will involve an examination of the arguments that have been put forward against the idea that natural language is the language of thought. In the final section we would claim that language of thought cannot be explained by the natural language alone or by excluding natural language altogether. This chapter would include a debate between the two approaches of the language of thought theory. According to the first one, the best candidate for the language of thought is mentalese, an innate, hidden and behind-the-scenes language. The second line of theory claims that the language of thought for a person is his/her natural language of communication- i.e., English for English speakers, Hindi for the Hindi-speakers or Bengali for the Bengali speakers. Theorists like Jerry Fodor and Pinker (1975) argue in favour of mentalese. Pinker's (1944) claim is that thoughts are independent of natural language. In Pinker's view the human mind can't be fundamentally shaped by the natural language, whereas, according to the second view, thoughts are constructed from natural language sentences. Sapir and Benjamin Whorf believe in dependence of thoughts on natural language. They would claim that thoughts themselves are not feasible without natural language. There are enough cases of evidence of the involvement of natural language in thinking. Most of them arise from introspection and attempt to support the natural language of thought theory. The next part will focus on Pinker's argument in favour of the mentalese view where arguments will be presented to show that

mentalese can explain certain thought phenomena, which stay unexplained by the natural language. But there are some cases that cannot be explained with the Fodorian theory of mentalese. We also saw that language of thought cannot be explained in terms of natural language. But the natural language must be kept in some cases. Language of thought cannot be explained by excluding natural language entirely.

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