

Rational Culture

Universals of Meaning in First-Ascending-Generation Kin Terms

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Abstract: – Beginning in the mid 1950s transformational-generative linguistics revolutionized scholarly thinking about language by proposing that people are endowed with extensive knowledge that allows them acquire language. They challenged the earlier empiricist ideas about language acquisition and replaced them with rationalist assumptions. Language and culture have many common features that may justify a rationalist approach to culture. In this paper the meaning of kin terms is represented using concepts from componential analysis and generative phonology on a body of data from cross-cultural research. The meanings are represented using a single underlying structure that interacts with four rules. The structure and the rules generate the referential meanings of the kin terms and capture restrictions on kin term meaning that more traditional methods do not. The use of the structure and rules to represent kin term meanings, however, makes no sense under empiricist assumptions and are only warranted if culture is a rationalist phenomenon. [*Kin term semantics; kin term meanings*]

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Beginning in the mid 1950s transformational-generative linguistics revolutionized scholarly thinking about language. The transformationalist school produced spectacular and intricate solutions to old linguistic conundrums such as phonemic overlap (Bloch 1941; Chomsky and Halle 1965), and opened areas of language such as syntax to insights that previous approaches had not achieved. These notable accomplishments, however, were more a result of the revolution rather than its core. The basic change in thinking advocated by Chomsky and his followers occurred not in the technical aspects of their linguistics, but in the transformationalists' approach to the way people acquire their language.

Before the transformational movement began, the linguistic establishment took it as given that people know nothing about language at birth. According to this model, people learn all of what

they eventually acquire as language through complex interactions with their linguistic environment (Bloomfield 1933: 22–29). The idea that people learn only through experience was quite popular in the social sciences through most of the 20th century and was a direct derivative of the empiricist school of British philosophy.

Chomsky and the transformationalists rejected empiricism and its social science variant behaviorism, and looked to continental philosophy, especially the works of Descartes and von Humboldt, to propose a "rationalist" model for the acquisition of language.

In the rationalist approach, people are not "blank slates" on which experience writes. Rather, they possess broad, deep knowledge about language, with which they construct the specific language they will eventually speak. The transformationalists refer to this innate knowledge as the Language Acquisition Device (LAD), universal grammar, or the general theory of language. They argue for the general theory of language on the grounds that empiricism is fundamentally flawed as a learning theory (Chomsky 1975: 15–20) and that the rationalist approach accounts for features of language that the empiricist approach cannot.

The negative argument that empiricism (or behaviorism) carries little weight, at least for me, because to point out that one thing does not work well is not to argue that another does so. The positive arguments are much more convincing because they show how the rationalist approach explains universal and fundamental facts about language that go unexplained in behaviorists' thinking. These facts include common structural features of language that are opaque to behaviorist models (Chomsky 1975: 79–134), the universality of language acquisition, the rapidity of acquisition, the near lack of instruction, and the sheer magnitude of the task of acquiring a language.

Acquisition of a language is a major intellectual feat. Almost everybody who has satisfied a foreign language requirement in college