

# The Nature of Idiomatic Knowledge

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## Abstract

Since idiomatic knowledge, the knowledge of speakers to speak or competence is exclusive of humans it answers to the nature of humans who are creative and contingent. Idiomatic knowledge is nothing previously made but something being created at the moment of speaking. It is creative because it is individual and new thus answering to the needs of expression of the individual speaker who speaks in accordance with a context and situation. It is contingent and thus historical because speakers learn it from the speaking community they belong to. Depending on the conception the linguist has about language and what to be a human means, idiomatic knowledge may appear as unconscious (Saussure), innate and thus intuitive (Chomsky) or merely intuitive, something learnt in the same way as the other types of knowledge or competence (Coseriu). My aim now is to study the type of intuitive knowledge it is, starting with the human peculiar characteristics of creativity and historicity (Coseriu, Ortega y Gasset) and analyzing the verbal behavior of speakers.

**Keywords:** Unconscious, Innate, Intuitive, Technical, Known and acknowledged

## 1. Introduction

Language manifests itself as something both internal and external to the human speaking subject. Language is something internal because it is given in the conscience of speakers. It consists in the creation of meanings executed by human subjects in order to survive in the circumstance they are in at any moment. Language manifests itself as something external to the individual speaker because it is something common participated by all speakers in a particular speech community. Because of this it can be considered as something independent from speakers. Due to the essential conditions of humans, subjects who are free and creative, absolute and contingent, transcendent and historical, language as the creation of meanings necessarily manifests itself in a language and especially in speech. Language thus is individual, the production of speech by all individual speakers considered in their individuality. In the history of linguistics there are authors who conceive language as something objective (Austin, Searle); objective although internal (Saussure, Bloomfield,

Whorf, Chomsky) and some who believe that language has no concrete existence (Humboldt, Coseriu). Anyway since the 20<sup>th</sup> century language is considered as competence, the knowledge of speakers to speak, referred to, especially since the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, as *la langue* (Saussure), competence (Chomsky) or idiomatic knowledge (Coseriu).

For Ferdinand de Saussure, idiomatic knowledge, *la langue*, is unconscious (Saussure 1974: 137). For Noam Chomsky, competence, “the speaker-hearer’s knowledge of his language (Chomsky 1965: 4)”, is intuitive just because it is innate, or in other words: language, universal grammar, is a property of the human mind (Chomsky, 1965) something implicit in competence. Since it is innate Chomsky considers competence and thus language as something objective although internal to speakers, something existing structurally in the human psychology or the psychology of the mind.

## **2. Human Creativity**

Creativity is a primary concept relating to the special condition of humans. Being a human being means having to decide what to do in the circumstance he is in a very limited range of possibilities (Ortega y Gasset). This means that a human subject is not determined to do anything in particular. He can imagine and because he is able to imagine he will try to overcome the difficulties he finds in his circumstance in an individual manner. The means to achieve his phantasies is language and the objectification implicit in language. In language human beings manifest as creative because human beings go beyond experience thus creating projects of possible performance. A human subject thus is someone going after achieving their projects, the great majority of them spurious or with little or no connection with the material existence of humans. Language is creative because it involves speaking and understanding (Coseriu), speaking, knowing and saying (Martínez del Castillo 2015). In a particular language every word is nothing but a common means to perform a project invented by someone and offered to others, who can accept or neglect it. In the creation of thought, that is, in the creation of concepts human beings create and recreate projects and new projects.

## **3. The Formation of Concepts and the Learning of Meaning**

Concepts are learnt through abstraction. Human beings perceive something concrete and material, select something out of the sensations perceived thus neglecting the rest. What the knowing subject manages and keeps of his perceptions is only a part of the things come to him through his senses. Those aspects selected are given the status of being (Ortega y Gasset 1992), that is, they are given the infinite possibility of application thus making them things in the world (Ortega y Gasset; Coseriu 1992).

Meaning is deduced from concepts. This fact does not affect the nature of concepts but the way human subjects learn concepts. In meaning human beings learn, that is, deduce from context and situation the infinite possibility of application of linguistic signs to all possible facts of the class referred to. Human beings learn the infinite possibility of designation, something necessarily going beyond the things verified. When we experience the word ‘tree’, for example, we experience it as the designation of something, that is, as the fact that the word in consideration can be applied to this or that singular object. At the same time, we learn the infinite possibility of reducing that possibility of application to a particular

systematization of it thus creating the meaning “tree”. Later on when we experience a new fact and want to know if that new fact is a tree or not we reduce the designation of it to the item being dealt with (Coseriu 1992).

#### **4. Creation and Resignation**

Learning is always and necessarily performed in contexts and situations. Learning is always creative. It always creates meanings not necessarily relating to those meanings that are traditional in a speech community. Learning is the continuous creation of meanings, projects and systems, and the continuous resignation of the concepts, meanings and projects previously created. As a matter of fact, it is the continuous modification and adaptation of the concepts, meanings and projects previously created to the language being performed.

#### **5. Idiomatic Knowledge as a Technical Knowledge**

Idiomatic knowledge has seldom been recognized as a problem in linguistics. Linguists merely distinguish between to know or not to know to speak. For Ferdinand de Saussure, speakers do not have any control over their knowledge since idiomatic knowledge is considered to be unconscious. For Chomsky, competence is intuitive in so far as it is innate (Chomsky 1965) but he does not distinguish intuitive knowledge from reflexive knowledge, that is, the knowledge speakers have as speakers (the competence to speak, idiomatic knowledge) and the knowledge they have through reflection (reflexive knowledge). Since linguists necessarily are speakers of a particular language their competence is reflexive knowledge.

In order to understand the nature of idiomatic knowledge Coseriu starts with the distinction made by G. W. F. Hegel (1770-1831) between *known* and *acknowledged*. Hegel formulated these two concepts for all types of knowledge, corresponding to *non-justified knowledge* vs. *justified knowledge*. Non-justified knowledge is the type of knowledge people have about something. Justified knowledge is that type of knowledge that starting with non-justified knowledge goes back into itself and justifies itself so that it is made into scientific knowledge. In this respect non-justified knowledge is *known* and justified knowledge is *acknowledged*, the knowledge got through abstraction starting with the previously known since it has already been performed. If this conception is applied to idiomatic knowledge we can distinguish between the *knowledge of speakers*, an *intuitive* knowledge with no justification or a primary justification, and *the knowledge scientifically justified* or *reflexive knowledge*, the knowledge of linguists and even the knowledge of speakers when they reflect on their idiomatic knowledge. The task of linguists thus consists in making the knowledge of speakers, intuitive non-justified knowledge, into reflexive knowledge, that is, scientific knowledge. From this point of view, says Coseriu (Coseriu 1992: 229), linguists either consciously or unconsciously follow Hegel’s advice: *things known must become acknowledged*.

#### **6. The Degrees of Knowledge by Leibniz.**

G. W. von Leibniz (1646-1716) distinguishes different kinds of knowledge or *cognitio*.

	Obscura		
<i>Cognitio</i>		<i>Confusa</i>	
	<i>Clara</i>	<i>Distincta</i>	<i>Inadaequata</i>
			Adaequata

Figure 1. Types of knowledge according to Leibniz (Coseriu 1992: 230). The intuitive knowledge of speakers, that is, *cognitio*, *clara*, *confusa* or *cognitio clara distincta inadaequata* is in italics.

*Cognitio obscura* is the type of knowledge not letting us identify the object of knowledge. It is the kind of vague knowledge we have when something becomes known to us but we are not able to recognize what it is all about it. In Spanish speakers identify this type of knowledge when they say

1) *Ha oído campanas pero no sabe por dónde* (=he could hear the chime of bells but can't say where it came from)

*Cognitio clara* is the type of knowledge letting us the identification of the object known. We know the object and what the object is. For example, we know someone and we can recognize them. *Cognitio confusa*, within *cognitio clara*, is the type of knowledge letting us the identification of the object known but with no justification. In certain circumstances this type of knowledge does not need any justification. This type of knowledge is the typical aesthetic knowledge. For example, painting is a technique that need not be justified. Since it is *cognitio clara* it is reliable. Speakers immediately recognize whether a particular statement is correct, congruent and adequate but they do not give any justification of it. Similarly, people can see if they like music or what type of a music they like or which song is the one they like: they need not give any justification. This type of knowledge is identified in the Spanish proverb,

2) *Sobre gustos no hay nada escrito* (=as you like it)

Likes and dislikes are justified in themselves. They must not or need not be discussed or justified (Coseriu, 1992 231). In this sense it is a reliable knowledge.

*Cognitio distincta*, within *cognitio clara* as well, is the kind of reliable knowledge that is justified, wants to be justified or needs being justified. In the justification of it nothing can be the object of further justification thus constituting reliable and objectively accepted knowledge (Coseriu 1992). For example, if I say *language exists because human subjects speak* the proof for the existence of language is the fact that people speak, a fact reliable in itself since it is intuitively known and nobody has denied it nor can it be denied because in the definition of a human being it is implicit the fact that they speak thus being objectively accepted.

*Cognitio clara distincta inadaequata* is the kind of knowledge justified in itself but with no justification of its justification. It relates to the knowledge of technicians and specialists in their fields. It is basically a pragmatic and thus useful knowledge. A mechanic, a gardener, a carpenter, a teacher, a general practitioner, for example, know how to tackle with things in their fields but they do not have an exhaustive knowledge of the topics in their fields. A gardener knows how to deal with plants: when, how and what for to prune, water and fertilize

them, but he cannot perfectly justify the processes operating in plants to justify all those actions and practices. A speaker knows how to speak, the techniques to express his ideas in different ways, contexts and situations; he can evaluate his speech and the speech of others in terms of different criteria; he can perfectly identify his language as different from others; he can express the differences found in the levels of speech; he can identify different expressions belonging to previous states of his language, and he can create forms and meanings, etc. In a word: he knows his language as the activity of speaking, the knowledge implicit in the performance of that activity, he can evaluate his speech and the speech of others, and how to create words and expressions to mean particular descriptions in accordance with contexts and situations. But he does not have to justify that type of knowledge or at least he does not have to give a full justification of it. He is only required —and he aims to— to speak congruently, correctly and adequately, that is, to apply his competence and create the activity of speaking.

Leibniz's purpose with this classification was to justify scientific knowledge and particularly philosophic knowledge. The type of knowledge Leibniz was looking for was *cognitio clara distincta adaequata*, a type of knowledge to be included within *cognitio clara distincta*. This type of knowledge can be found in philosophy as well as in the study of language.

*Cognitio clara distincta adaequata* is the kind of reliable and founded knowledge justified in full. In all fields of knowledge, in all sciences, the justification of knowledge goes up to the last of all justifications. That is, all sciences are justified in themselves and the justifications given of them are justified as well. So when in a science we can say that it is *cognitio clara distincta adaequata* there is a process of justification in which all statements in them are justified on other statements and these ones on other statements. Eventually one can find a principle, an axiom, a synthetic *a priori* statement (Kant 2004) beyond which there cannot be found any further justification. It is the type of knowledge justified twice or more times going back on its own and systematically answering the whys and the whys of the whys. It is *reflexive knowledge* corresponding to scientific and philosophic knowledge (Coseriu, 1992).

## 7. Idiomatic Knowledge

Idiomatic knowledge is a knowhow knowledge, a type of knowledge primarily to be found in doing something, a pragmatic knowledge manifesting itself in the activity of speaking and understanding, activity of speaking, saying and knowing. It is a type of knowledge completely reliable, a type of knowledge that can or cannot be justified or at the most that can have some primary justification. But it does not have justification of the reasons given to justify it.

Idiomatic knowledge must be separated from *reflexive knowledge*, the knowledge of linguists. But in this it is important to remark that speakers at the same time that they know how to use the means of expression in a language they can justify and thus give reasons for the motivation of their speech. In this sense speakers are linguists, the same as with linguists who are necessarily speakers of a particular language. The problem thus consists in *separating* both types of idiomatic knowledge. The knowledge of speakers is the basis of speech. The knowledge of linguists constitutes science. The object of study in linguistics is idiomatic knowledge, the knowledge of speakers to speech, the production of speech. The object of study of linguists consists in the explanation and justification of speech, that is, it consists in the interpretation of the idiomatic knowledge of speakers with a double method of study: first

with self-reflection since linguists are necessarily speakers of a particular language, that is, *intuitively*, method *a priori*. Idiomatic knowledge is previous to the act of speaking and thus previous to studying it; second, with reflection thus formulating a theory, that is, creating *analytic* or *synthetic a priori* statements (Kant) to interpret what has intuitively been known; and third and simultaneously, with verifying the theory created in the verbal behavior of speakers (Coseriu 1999), method *a posteriori*. With this idiomatic knowledge after being known becomes acknowledged (Hegel).

The idiomatic knowledge of speakers then, *cognitio, clara, confusa* or *cognitio clara distincta inadaequata*, is a type of knowledge with a primary justification or with no justification, but the idiomatic knowledge of linguists, *cognitio, clara distincta adaequata*, that is, *reflexive knowledge*, is a type of knowledge with at least a double justification, the justification of it and the justification of its justification.

The idiomatic knowledge of speakers is *cognitio clara confusa* because in some cases it has no justification but in other cases it has. It is *cognitio clara distincta inadaequata*, a type of knowledge that can be justified only with an immediate or intuitive motivation. In both cases it is a reliable knowledge, that is, *cognitio clara*.

This type of knowledge is, for Coseriu, *a technical knowledge* (Coseriu 1992). To know how to speak is part of a knowhow knowledge. It is *téchne*, a type of knowledge manifest in doing something, in the execution of speaking. It is a reliable knowledge not necessarily justified in full but primarily justified although simple reasons may be given to justify it. It is *téchne grammatiké*, the type of knowledge about how the activity of speaking is performed. As such it is not the object of description: it is not grammar in itself but the thing described in grammar. *Téchne* does not refer to the description of something but the thing being described. *Téchne grammatiké* or *ars grammatica* deals with the art of speaking, a technique, a kind of reliable knowledge manifest in the activity of speaking, a *technical knowledge*, that is, linguistic competence (Coseriu, 1992).

## 8. The Nature of Idiomatic Knowledge

The most immediate conclusion of this is that competence can be deduced from performance. Performance is by no means anything affected

“by such grammatically irrelevant conditions as memory limitations, distractions, shifts of attention and interest, and errors (random or characteristic) in applying the speaker’s knowledge of the language” (Chomsky, 1965, 3).

Linguistic competence is a technical knowledge with a primary justification.

## 9. The Justification of Idiomatic Knowledge

Speakers justify their speech in two ways:

a) because of the function of the forms and meanings used.

It is the justification relating to the question, *what is this form used for?* The answer given by speakers can usually be *this form is used to express this or that idea*, or *this or that meaning*. This justification is not valid for linguists but part of the object of study of linguistics. This justification can be called the *functional justification*. And

b) because of the community.

This justification is the answer to the question, *why is this form used to mean this or that?* The answer by speakers could be just like this one: *because in English it is said this in this or that way, in English it is said so.* It is the justification of the reason why. This justification is referred to the tradition of speaking, to be called the *traditional justification*.

### **10. The Knowledge of Linguists**

The knowledge of linguists, that is, the knowledge in language study (linguistics) on the contrary is about the nature of linguistic competence or idiomatic knowledge. Linguistics consists in explaining the competence speakers have about their language. It is a *reflexive* knowledge made on the *intuitive* competence or primarily justified knowledge of speakers. It is a reflexive knowledge about a technical knowledge, *cognitio clara distincta adaequata*. Linguistics has two purposes:

- a) to formulate linguistic competence, that is, to formulate the technical knowledge of speakers; and
- b) to justify that knowledge, that is, to justify linguistic competence.

The type of knowledge of language study is thus *cognitio clara distincta adaequata*, a type of knowledge that justifies the competence of speakers. Linguists say what speakers know but with full justification and security. Since linguistic competence constitutes previous knowledge (to linguists and speakers), linguistics consists in explaining and justifying what has already been performed. Linguistics thus is *hermeneutics*, the explanation of speech in terms of the human life.

The method in linguistics consists in making idiomatic knowledge into reflexive and justified knowledge. But since the reality of language is both material and abstract the method of linguistics must be in accordance with the purposes and aims of the aspect of language studied. If the object of study is speech sounds the method must be adequate to the material nature of sounds but if the object of study is meaning, the method must be adequate to meaning something social but with a basis in the human conscience.

### **11. Conclusion**

Idiomatic knowledge is a technical knowledge, the competence of speakers to speak. As such it is an intuitive, creative, reliable and primarily justified knowledge, known previously to its execution. It is intuitively known but can become a fully justified knowledge or acknowledged.

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