

On Poetic Language

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1. Chomsky says: "From now on I will consider a language to be a set (finite or infinite) of sentences, each finite in length and constructed out of a finite set of elements. All natural languages in their spoken or written form are languages in this sense." (*Syntactic Structures*, p.13) Poetic language is a proper subset of a language thus defined. It does not seem to have some special kind of grammar. Even such a wording as "inversion" or "ellipsis", which often appears in poems, is a commonplace one in ordinary language. In fact, there can be no poem that aims at dissolving linguistic structures entirely, for if then the poem can not have communication with us. In reality, ordinary language sometimes contains poetic language and some poems are constructed out of ordinary language. In this case, poetic language means "poetic sentences" and ordinary language "ordinary sentences". A poem is distinguished from a mere set of ordinary sentences in that it is a product of art. That is, a poem is a work of art by means of words, where it does not matter whether a sentence as a set of words is "poetic" or "ordinary". But by "poetic language" I'd like to mean "poetic sentences" rather than sentences used in poems, including ordinary sentences. In any case, it is true that what I call "poetic language" appears mainly in poems. To state about it will make clear some aspect of poems.

2. First, by what do we judge a linguistic expression to be poetic? The answer can not be found in linguistic structures, nor in whether it is used in poems or not. In order to know it, we must begin with ordinary language which forms a contrast to poetic language. According to Chomsky, our ordinary linguistic activities are innovative. He says: "Innovation is the rule in ordinary day-by-day performance." (The Formal Nature of Language, *Mind*, p.118) Transformational generative grammar has been stressing "creative aspect of language use". These mean that we create innovative sentences ordinarily. Being "innovative" or "creative" is, however, essential to poetic language. To Chomsky ordinary language is poetic. Further he says: "Poetic quality is characteristic of the ordinary use of language." (*Cartesian Linguistics*, p.17) But none of us feel that our ordinary use of language is poetic. There is some qualitative difference of these terms: "innovative" and "creative" between "ordinary language" and "poetic language". To me it seems that being "innovative" by analysis is one thing and being "innovative" in our consciousness is another. Ordinary language is innovative in the sense that it turns out to be innovative by linguistic analysis, not so in our consciousness. I think it is because there is something unchangeable or constancy in the deep of our mind when we utter or hear ordinary sentences. I call it "primitive fact."¹ A primitive fact underlies some set of ordinary sentences. For example, a primitive fact: "animate things die" exists behind the following two sentences: (1) "The man died." and (2) "The cat died." Syntactically (1) and (2) have the same structures and they have the same grammatical history. Hence it may be said that the two sentences are understood in the same way.

But such understanding is formal. Sometimes an explanation like that is a mistake. For instance, (3) "The stone died" has the same syntactic structures as (1) and (2), which does not mean that it is understood likewise. On the contrary, we can say that (1) and (2) are understood substantially in the same way by the reason that they have a primitive fact in common. This is only one simple example. There are many other primitive facts and a real sentence has more than one primitive fact. A primitive fact is, however, not a linguistic knowledge. It does not belong to what they call "competence." It is a man's knowledge about the world. Even a man who can neither utter nor hear sentences would have such knowledge. We gain a set of primitive facts a priori or a posteriori. In either case, it is highly probable that we human beings have in common almost the same number of primitive facts, through which we can understand each other and a language can be translated into another language. Though it is not a linguistic knowledge, it is another kind of tacit knowledge in linguistic activities. As long as the primitive facts do not change, we do not feel that sentences uttered or heard are innovative. In other words, we report or receive commonplace facts by means of brand-new sentences. This is a characteristic of ordinary language. That is why a literary work written in ordinary language can gain a reality even if it is a fiction.

3. On the contrary, poetic language destroys the very primitive fact, which I think is "innovation" or "creativity" of poetic language. It is when we meet with an unknown occurrence through poetic language that we have a truly innovative linguistic experience.

- (4): The baby cries.
 (5): The girl cries.
 (6): The boy laughs.
 (7): The cat cries.
 (8): The dog laughs.
 (9): The house laughs.

In these sentences, (4) has in common a primitive fact that "human beings cry" with (5). Between (4), (5) and (6), there is a deeper primitive fact that "human beings have emotions and express them." (7): "The cat cries" makes us feel as when we hear "The baby cries." In this case, there exists a much deeper primitive fact that "animals cry." These sentences are elements of the set of ordinary language. On the other hand, (8): "The dog laughs" is not understood by us like (7) is understood, for there is not such a primitive fact as "mammals but mankind laughs, too." This sentence is a kind of poetic language. (9): "The house laughs" is no longer ordinary language; there is no primitive fact that "an inanimate object laughs." Both (8) and (9) destroy primitive facts. Of the two, (9) is the more destructive. As a result, (9) is more poetic than (8). Let's pick up some examples among English poems.

"A sweet disorder in the dress kindles in clothes a wantonness."
 (R. Herrick)

"The night has a thousand eyes." (F. W. Bourdillon)

"The mountain and the squirrel had a quarrel." (R. W. Emerson)

"A tree whose hungry mouth is prest against the earth's sweet flowing breast." (Joyce Kilmer)

We can find out such examples not only in English poems but also

in poems written in other languages. A poetic sentence here is, in other words, a "metaphor." I do not mean that to be poetic is equal to be metaphorical. Perhaps there are some other elements that constitute the connotation of "poetic." But it will not be too much to say that to make a metaphor has been a main theme in poetry" and that "poetic" means something metaphorical in our linguistic sense.

4. Bunyan says: "The prophets used much by metaphors to set forth truth." A destruction of a primitive fact does not always bring about a destruction of a truth, sometimes it discovers another truth which is not transparent in ordinary world or hidden there. It is shown by some proverbs that belong to poetic language rather than to ordinary language. For example, a proverb: "Care killed the cat" is poetic in that it destroys a primitive fact which underlies such a sentence as: "Tom killed the cat." Though it upsets a primitive fact as a truth, it expresses some truth. Such a proverb is a special case of poetic language, to be sure. But every poetic sentence has a possibility to discover some truth. In this sense, poetic language is hypothetical. It describes the world hypothetically. On the contrary, ordinary language can give only realistic pictures of the world.

5. From a historical point of view, poetic language seems to have much oldness. Perhaps it is far older than poems. In ancient times, it may be that there was not much difference between ordinary language and poetic language, for it is doubtful whether the same number of what I have been calling "primitive facts" existed then or

not. Many of them are historical products (hence they are relative with their truth values). So if we can find out the same primitive facts among different linguistic communities, they are historical, accidental coincidences, though some of them may exist a priori (in this case, their truth values are absolute).

Child language is also considered to be an amalgam of poetic language and ordinary language. A child often utters senseless but grammatical sentences, which are a kind of poetic sentences. But he does not aim at destruction of primitive facts as poets do. It is because he has not acquired them yet. Acquiring of some set of primitive facts is prior to acquiring of language we use ordinarily. In other words, it is a "readiness" to language acquisition. In conclusion, a set of primitive facts accumulated by a child gives him a map on which his linguistic life is to be planned.

6. Transformational generative grammar has taught us that the set of sentences is infinite and that there is no superficial similarity between two arbitrary sentences. But at least with regard to ordinary language there is some analogy of facts among a certain set of sentences. It is regularity in what sentences mean. So we cannot but think that there work some kind of semantic rules⁹, perhaps both in production of sentences and in interpretation of them. To repeat the same thing, the primitive facts are tacit knowledges, the existence of which is unconscious as that of grammatical rules. These two kinds of tacit knowledge construct our ordinary language. On the contrary, poetic language is generated by destroying one of the two tacit knowledges. The ability working there is not linguistic. It is

similar to an ability to paint an unreal picture. This poetic ability is, however, not peculiar to poets. We have such ability more or less. So we can make quite a new poetic sentence arbitrarily. This is another positive proof that language is infinite.

Notes

1) This term: "primitive fact" may have a resemblance to what Wittgenstein means by "Sachverhalt" or by "Elementarsatz" or to "atomic fact", their translation by Russel. But what I mean by "primitive fact" is a general fact which makes it possible for an "Elementarsatz" to be generated.

A primitive fact can be considered to be a kind of "function." But it is different from "primitive function" in mathematics. It is rather similar to "derived function." For example, let us give three functions: $f(x)=x^2$, $g(x)=x^2+1$, $h(x)=x^2+2$, then their derived function is $2x$.

2) Junzaburo Nishiwaki says: "Poésie lies in discovering a new relation of things, which poets have been trying since ancient times. Even Aristotle says that the main construction in Poetry is 'metaphor'." (*Shigaku*, p. 20)

3) To explain these rules is beyond this paper. The primitive facts concerned there are, in other words, "presuppositions." But they are different from what some transformationalists mean by "presuppositions." For example, in a sentence: "Is it John who writes poetry?", some say that "John" is a "focus" and that the "presupposition" is "Someone writes poetry." This is a presupposition in a shallow level. "Presupposition" I mean can be found in a much deeper level (perhaps, such level is deeper than what Chomsky calls "deep

structure"). There it will be realized as a proposition which is constructed out of primitive concepts. Then the rules imaginable that map it into a level of language will be a kind of "substitutions." In this sense, they are transformational.

References

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