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'The British drive on the left': A contrastive approach to language learning

Abstract

The aim of this research is to show that some English grammatical constructions can be symmetrically contrasted with their French counterparts. Overall, it amounts to describing opposites in order to ease language learning and provide an embryonic method for students to shift from analytic French to synthetic English. Learners of a foreign language tend to use their mother tongue as a basis and see the new language as the mirror image of their own linguistic system.

A number of grammatical phenomena correspond to this reasoning, for example the syntactic placement of attributive adjectives (a *rich man* > *un homme riche*) and of some categories of adverbs (*he sometimes plays tennis* > *il joue parfois au tennis*), genitive constructions (*Paul's car* > *la voiture de Paul*) which place the inflected noun first while the prepositional *de*-genitive is the only option in French, compound nouns (*the Trump administration* > *le gouvernement Trump*), comparison (*it's cheaper* > *c'est moins cher*), etc.

In the verbal domain, one may want to compare *être/be* and *avoir/have* constructions (*I am hungry* > *j'ai faim*) and the use of aspects in both systems. Finally, the idea of symmetrical progression can be extended to translation and phonology.

Keywords: Linguistics, language learning, contrastive grammar, syntax, word order

Introduction

One of my recurring preoccupations as a teacher is to ease the acquisition and understanding of English grammar. The teaching techniques that I try to develop are not in themselves original, but I feel that the main problem of learners is their lack of reference in the acquisition of a foreign language[2]. It is common knowledge that to speak a language well, one must think in the language. But how can you do that when you do not know the language? The example of African slaves brought to North America is quite significant. They relied on their own native languages while copying the prosody and syntax of English, the only concrete element that they could interpret (Jones, 1963, pp. 21–22). What we need, then, is a reliable landmark, and

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[2] In a previous publication (Larroque, 2015), I suggest that the prosody of a culture's native language should be reflected in the rhythm of its music, in order to help French students in their learning of English.

it will be our mother tongue and some of its specific grammatical and phonological features.

My guiding principle is to say that the British drive on the left side of the road. The expression may appear to be trivial, but it freely translates a reality which overtakes the simple rules of the relevant road traffic regulations. On the European continent in general, and in France in particular, people drive on the right side of the road, while across the British Isles and in the United Kingdom they drive on the left side of the road. This difference not only concerns the habits and customs of a country relative to another, but it also bears upon the conception of lifestyle and the way people think and speak.

A language, recall, plays a social role. It is a means of communication between individuals based on the same conceptual system. This involves the creation of a number of principles with which speakers must comply. A language, therefore, necessarily translates what Pinker (1994, p. 56) calls "mentalese" (i.e. a language of thought) into syntactic constructions, a way to apprehend and represent the outer world common to a group of individuals. Thus, the same reality can have two (or more) distinct representations, depending on the language used.

English and French are two closely related systems. They have a common history and mutual influences (cf. Walter, 2001). For example, the core vocabulary of Present-day English has a large number of originally French words, borrowings which have, over time, been assimilated into English (Freeborn 1998, p. 96); the periphrastic noun-complement structure, N of N is a common grammatical feature to both languages, etc. But, even if English has abundantly dipped into the French language to enrich its own system, it is still a Germanic language, with the grammatical features of Germanic languages. One may say that English and French are sister languages, but they are also rivals in view of the tensions which have arisen between the two communities. In addition, the two languages have long been in competition worldwide, and still are; today, French seems to be losing ground. The Germanic grammatical features of English sometimes stand in stark contrast to those of Romance languages, including French. Both systems, however, share many aspects which are mostly lexical. Differences are predominantly grammatical and phonological.

The aim of this study is to show that some grammatical and phonological phenomena in English can be systematically contrasted with those belonging to French. Overall, it boils down to describing opposites in order to ease learning and provide an embryonic method enabling students to shift from one system to the other without too much difficulty. Some learners generally use their mother tongue as a basis, as it is the case with French students, seeing the new language as the mirror image of their own linguistic system. The reasoning can be illustrated by a series of examples, where commonly used grammatical constructions can be contrasted. These examples belong to such various grammatical domains as noun phrase determination, verbal representation, or constructions which entail semantic developments in both languages. But, let us first begin by examining the different systems.

"Facing" systems

Synthetic versus analytic types

There are two different ways in which we can classify languages: according to their original language family, or according to several grammatical and linguistic criteria. There are, in fact, common sets of patterns shared by the various systems, which will enable us to draw up types. Thus, analytic and synthetic languages can be distinguished, whence the necessity to determine more precisely the morphological and syntactic properties of each of the systems in question. Although it is sometimes difficult to classify a language as being solely synthetic or analytic, it is possible to say whether a language has systemic features which correspond to either of these two language types.

A synthetic language is a language with predominantly morphological modifications; syntactic functions are generally marked by inflections. Conversely, an analytic language is characterized by few morphological modifications, and grammatical relationships mainly depend upon the placement of the words in the sentence. From that point of view, we may say that French and English are analytic languages. Indeed, both languages rely on a fixed syntactic word order and on the use of grammatical words such as determiners, prepositions, auxiliaries, etc.

There are, however, different degrees of analysis or synthesis in the two languages. English, for instance, exhibits synthetic aspects, especially when it comes to lexical modification, while French remains totally analytic in this domain. On this point, Picone (1992, p. 10) opposes the genius of the two languages. French favors the analytic or "progressive" modification order, that is, from the determined to the determining item (*récif de corail, changement climatique*), with a head-initial noun phrase. English, on the contrary, reverses that modification order, with a head-final noun phrase ("regressive" order): *coral reef, climate change*, which according to Picone (1992, pp. 10–11) corresponds to a synthetic approach[3].

In some cases, French also rests on regressive modification order to synthesize the association, using the final-head placement to express the intrinsic and/or abstract value of the determination. Phrases such as *un grand homme* and *un homme grand* are frequently opposed: in the former, the preposed adjective refers to a defining quality of the person, in the latter, *grand* is postposed and determines the noun from a strictly objective and classifying viewpoint. In order to render this difference in meaning, English, which almost exclusively relies on the use of regressive modification order, will settle the problem lexically, with two different adjectives: *a great man* (= *un grand homme*) and *a tall man* (= *un homme grand*). Sometimes, this difference in meaning is difficult to obtain, for example, *dangerous terrorists* can refer to *de dangereux terroristes* and *des terroristes dangereux*, which does not mean exactly the same thing. In this case, analyzing the context may help to remove the ambiguity. In addition, the absence of determiner (especially in plural

[3] Picone (1992, pp. 10–11) suggests that "l'anglais est synthétique en ce sens qu'il brouille la hiérarchie de l'association en la renversant par l'ordre de modification «régressive»" (English is synthetic in the sense that it blurs the association's hierarchy by reversing it into the "regressive" modification order).

noun phrases) in English can also be interpreted as a synthetic feature and be a source of ambiguity, as in [*Withdrawal* of *Israel armed forces*] *from occupied territories* [*in the recent conflict*] translated in French as [*Le retrait des forces armées Israéliennes*] ***des*** *territories occupés* [*dans le recent conflit*][4], and exhibits the determiner *des* (= *de les*), which suggests that all the territories occupied by Israel armed forces should be liberated. The nuance is not explicit in *occupied territories*. This tends to reinforce the idea that the French language is more precise and clearer[5] than English, which is more synthetic, but judged more efficient and thus more capable of coming up to the expectations of a western culture centered on new technologies, trade and consumption in a globalized economy.

This synthetic feature can be seen in noun complement constructions. In the phrase *coral reef*, for instance, the relationship between the two nouns is established in the regressive order by simple juxtaposition. The French structure, on the contrary, requires the presence of a preposition to mark the nature of the relation between the nouns: *récif de corail*. This turn of phrase correlates with an analytic pattern. It is the same for more complex constructions such as the French sentence *gaz à effet de serre,* which can be translated into English as *greenhouse gas*. The pattern here is, as it were, doubly synthetic, in that the preposition and the explicit cause-effect semantics (cf. *à effet de*) are deleted in English, making it more concise. One last example illustrating the synthetic/concise character of English is supplied by new technologies. Take the phrase *goal-line technology* recently coined to account for a device to help referees to determine whether or not the whole of the ball has crossed the goal line during soccer games. The analytic character and grammatical constraints of the French system will impose the progressive modification order and squeeze prepositions between the nouns to determine the exact nature of their grammatical relationship as in *technologie sur la ligne de but*. Note the effectiveness and concision of the synthetic English construction as opposed to the analytic French phrase which may appear to be heavier. To conclude this brief overview of grammatical constraints in both systems, we may point out that the English inflected genitive (e.g. *the borough's social services*) also bears witness to the synthetic character of the language and will be rendered in the same way by a *de*-genitive in French as in *les services sociaux de la municipalité*.

However, it would be wrong to say that the synthetic modification of nouns is the only choice in English. As mentioned earlier, this option exists in French, with a slight difference in meaning (as shown above in the English translation), and of course the opposite is also true in English. Indeed, the analytic *of*-genitive, for example, which is in competition with the regressive modification order, spread in English during the 12th century under the influence of French and replaces the synthetic pattern, in partitive uses (e.g. *a loaf of bread, a pride of lions,* cf. Stevanovitch, 1997, p. 62) and lexical duplicates (compare *the house's foundations* and *the foundations of the house* described below). In the phrase *bands of schoolchildren*

[4] Taken from resolution 242 of the UN Security Council (Nov. 22, 1967).

[5] The writer and journalist Antoine de Rivarol (1753–1801), for instance, used to say that clarity was the main quality of the French language, and thus justified its universal value.

(= *des groupes d'écoliers*), both the analytic (*bands of*) and the synthetic modification order (*schoolchildren*) are represented.

It is clear, at this point, that the degrees of analysis or of synthesis, which are manifest in both languages are "facing" each other in the making of sense. But we can also perceive other notions in this difference, depending on whether the placement of the constituents in the progressive or regressive modification order should be syntactically to the right or to the left of the modified item. This representation involves two levels: that of the given, which has been alluded to herein, on the one hand, and the new information, on the other.

The linear ordering of words

The "Standard Average European" (Whorf [1956] 2012, p. 178) concept of time is usually represented on a horizontal line which reads from left to right, with three divisions: the past, the present and the future. The past is positioned to the left, it relates to the given, what has been experienced, the present is placed medially and the future, the unknown, to the right. This is the way our thinking system works, starting from what is known toward new things. In discourse, this translates as a left-right lean, that is, a mental and, therefore, linguistic representation that places the given to the left of the head of a phrase, relative to the meaning of the sentence, the new information will come to the right. For example, in English, attributive adjectives occur before the head noun because they refer to its intrinsic (given) properties. Conversely, predicative adjectives occur after the noun as they add new information to it.

This dichotomy which concerns the informational content of the sentence rests on what can be called the thematic-rhematic axis (cf. Adamczewski, 1982) which generally applies to the domain of mentalese and is supposed to translate into strings of words and the making of sense. We posit that the surface structure of sentences reflects, more or less exactly, the underlying mental operations which support it. It is generally admitted by most linguists that what is thematic can be associated with the given while what is new information is referred to as rhematic or the providing of information. In other words, on following the left-right logic, the elements which represent the theme will be fronted in the construction of the sentence or phrase and syntactically placed to the left; conversely, the information-providing elements will occur in final position, that is to the right.

Take the phrase *Paul's car.* The modification order of the construction shows that the fronted element is given information (it is a proper noun), it modifies the element to its right. In inverted order, *the car of Paul* is infelicitous in English, because the self-determined nature of the proper noun makes it a theme, not a new element. The French translation of the phrase, *la voiture de Paul*, is the only possible choice on account of the analytic character of the French system which will favor the kind (*voiture*) relative to its location (*Paul*), with the link between the two constituents being made explicit by the preposition *de*. This does not really challenge the orientation or the information status (given > new information) of the segments. *Paul* remains the pivotal entity of the phrase. If a new piece of information

is added to *Paul's car*, it will occur to the right of the genitive structure which in turn becomes the theme of the new sentence as in *Paul's car is blue*.

Once the information-providing item (*blue*) is uttered, it will then be placed to the left of the head of the noun phrase, and it will be possible to augment the construction to its right with a new element as in *Paul's blue car is a two-seater*. In French, the analytic progressive modification order will impose its syntactic constraints and yield *la voiture bleue de Paul*, a symmetrically inverted order relative to the English grammatical system. But the new information-providing element added to the construction will naturally occur to the right: *la voiture bleue de Paul est une deux-places*.

The case of the 's-genitive, which is traditionally used with humans and animate nouns (Quirk & Greenbaum, 1973, pp. 94–97) can also be extended to common nouns and inanimate objects as shown in the following example:

> *The house that surrounds me while I sleep is built on undermined ground, far beneath my bed, the floor,* ***the house's foundations****, the slopes and passages of gold mines have hollowed the rock…*
> (Nadine Godimer, *Once upon a Time,* Afrique du Sud, 1972)

In the underlined structure, the *'s*-genitive marker signals a tight link between the two elements which form, as it were, a whole. It denotes a previous notional identification. The noun *house* constitutes the given information (cf. *the house that surrounds me…*), and it occurs to the left of the phrase. *Foundations* is the new information, it logically occurs to the right. The analytic construction *the foundations of the house*, copied from French exhibits a separating preposition, *of,* indicating that the relation between the two nouns is loose and in the meantime *house* becomes the new information (it occurs to the right as in *the slopes and passages* ***of gold mines***). Now, *house* has already been brought up in the aforementioned text, so the choice of the *'s*-genitive is all the more justified. In French, the analytic structure, *les fondations de la maison* is the only possible option.

To end with this point, the English sequence illustrated below is, I argue, a good example of the thematic-rhematic shift as it is described herein.

> *Jenny was playing with her doll. The toy was operated by a battery.*

In these sentences, the pivotal entity is represented by *the toy*, which is located relative to the situation (*Jenny was playing with her doll*). *The toy* points back to *her doll*, which is the information-providing item in the preceding sentence. The phrase *operated by a battery* constitutes the main information which determines the source of power of the toy. Once this quality has been identified (cf. *was*) and assigned to the theme, it becomes a given, an intrinsic property of the pivotal entity *doll/toy*. The next step may then be *the battery-operated doll can speak*. In French, the compound adjective *battery-operated* will be rendered by an analytic structure which imposes a preposition: *la poupée à pile parle,* according to the French-specific progressive modification order. Thus in English, it may be possible to distinguish such noun phrases as:

a) *A girl from Liverpool*
b) *A Liverpool girl*

In (a), the analytic progressive modification order is quite flexible and exhibits a preposition which indicates precisely the nature of the link between the two nouns: it represents a relation established in discourse, that is, at the moment of coding together with the prepositional phrase *from Liverpool,* can be construed as a piece of new information which modifies and determines the noun *girl*. The English-specific synthetic construction, in (b), signals a relation which is acquired, preconstructed or presupposed, the term *Liverpool* (to the left) being part the given information (= *a Liverpudlian*). The structure, then, functions as a compound noun. In French, the difference in meaning will be rendered at the semantic level: *une fille de Liverpool* in (a) and *une (jeune) habitante de Liverpool* in (b), in accordance with the French analytic mental pathway.

In the above examples, it has been possible to see how the determination process of lexical elements is represented: new information is brought to the theme of the sentence, shifting toward the sphere of the given. Syntactically, it translates into a modification of the word order. The informational status of the constituents of the sentence is, indeed, determined by the site they occupy in the sequential arrangement of elements (pre-head for the given information and post-head for the new). This configuration is quite clear in English; the analytic character of the French linguistic system imposes a mental reordering of the speech data. This may lead us to consider another type of determination process, that is, the mental operations underlying the making of sense.

In the following section, the reader will be presented with the description of some aspects of the French and English systems from the aforementioned point of view. As stated in the introduction these aspects regard such grammatical domains as noun-phrase determination and verbal representation, translation, and the basic phonological features of both languages. The actual method consists in analyzing a number of occurrences used in everyday English and/or French, and which exhibit symmetrical, grammatical and phonological constructions. Notice that these structures do not always function symmetrically. They constitute, however, a reference point on which any student of English or French can rely when learning either one of these linguistic systems.

The grammatical domains

Word order in the noun phrase

A number of grammatical phenomena correspond to this view. Regarding noun phrase determination, one may first suggest the placement of the attributive adjective (*a rich man > un homme riche*) and of a few adverbs (*he sometimes plays tennis > il joue parfois au tennis; he often takes the bus > il prend souvent le bus,* etc.) which are preposed relative to the verb in English and postposed in French. We may then mention genitives (*Paul's car > la voiture de Paul; the mailman's bicycle > la bicyclette du facteur*) which place the inflected noun first (giving it focal prominence), whereas

the prepositional *of*-genitive is the only choice in French (cf. *la bicyclette du facteur*). Note that English also shares the *of*-genitive form with French: e.g. *the car of the man I had an accident with*. The same observation can be made with compound nouns (*the Trump administration > le gouvernement Trump*; *Sunday school > l'école du dimanche*). Finally, It can observed (though it cannot be construed as a rule) that in many instances English tends to favor comparison (comparatives and superlatives) of superiority where French naturally uses comparison of inferiority (*it's cheaper > c'est moins cher*; *it's more difficult than I thought > c'est moins facile que je ne le pensais*; *he is five years younger than she is > il a cinq ans de moins qu'elle*; *ce sont les fleurs les moins chères du marché > they are the cheapest flowers on the market; there are fewer apples than pears > il y a moins de pommes que de poires*)[6].

The verbal domain

In the verbal domain, one may want to compare, for instance, *be* and *have* constructions in English and structures with *être* and *avoir* in French. This more or less correlates with Benveniste's view (1966, pp. 197–200) that *être* (*be*) and *avoir* (*have*) can be in a reversed relation: "ce qu'ils ont de pareil et ce qui les distingue apparaît dans la symétrie de leur function d'auxiliaire et dans la non symétrie de leur fonction de verbe libre."("what they have in common and what distinguishes them occurs in the symmetry of their function as auxiliary, and in the non-symmetry of their function as free verb."). On comparing English and French, that idea of symmetry can be seen in expressions like *I am sleepy > j'ai sommeil*; *I am hungry > j'ai faim*; *he is prejudiced against women > il a des préjugés sur les femmes*; etc. Both constructions exhibit a reversed relation denoting a different viewpoint on the verbal event. The relevance of this symmetry rests on the fact that in English, the construction is predicative while it appears to be transitive in French. But the transitivity between the subject and the object is only an illusion: *avoir* does not denote a happening and cannot form a passive sentence (cf. Benveniste, 1966, p. 194). The English and the French constructions, therefore, indicate a state, but not the same kind of state: *be* refers to an intrinsic identity, albeit temporary, *avoir* to an acquired property. Thus, in the above pairs, the former sentence expresses a state which is a result and the latter a state which is an implicit evolution. The constructions do not apply to the same stage of being.

Furthermore, efforts to compare English to French have an additional interest in the sense that the verbal systems of both languages have not developed in the same way and are at different levels of expression. English, for instance, gives prominence to aspects carried with the verb form. This linguistic representation denotes greater speaker involvement and mirrors concrete reality. Conversely, the manner of French expression shows reality in a more abstract light (Vinay & Darbelnet, 1995, p. 51). Again, these observations about the verb forms are consonant with our contrastive vision of the two systems. Thus, shifting from one language to the other adds practical and technical difficulty, and students may be tempted to translate directly from their mother tongue.

[6] Fr. moins = Eng. less.

Translation

This notion of symmetrical progression in both languages can actually be seen in translation and its problems. For example, it can be observed in the presentation of the course of events in discourse. In English as well as in French, events are generally presented in the same order. In some English constructions, however, events are presented as they occur in the real world, whereas in French they undergo a logical reanalysis, thus creating differences in conceptual organization. Recourse to transposition and/or modulation (which equates to a semantic transposition) to shift from one system to the other are devices which bear witness to this inverted vision. Let us consider, for instance, the best-known translation pattern called "chassé-croisé". It is a translation device which refers to a double grammatical transposition and concerns phrasal verbs in particular. Unlike English, the verb in French indicates the direction of the movement and the adverb or prepositional phrase expresses the manner in which the movement is made. In the sentence *He headed the ball away*, the actions are expressed in order of performance: first the cause, denoted by *headed*, and then the effect of the act, *away.* Conversely, French gives the facts in a logical order: the intention comes first, followed by the means, which yields: *Il détourna le ballon de la tête.* The pattern may also stem from the flexibility of the English system which can make grammatical conversions much easier: *head* can be used either as a noun, or as a verb, something that is impossible in French. Also notice the adverbial function of the particle (*away*). Additional examples illustrating the *chassé-croisé* pattern are given below:

- Three murderers tunneled out of a New York prison (*Time* 2016) > Trois meurtriers se sont évades d'une prison de New York en creusant un tunnel.
- Again, they were stumbling across the field (I. Mc Ewan, *Atonement*) > Ils retraversaient le champ en trébuchant.
- They struggled up the stairs > Ils gravirent les escaliers avec difficulté.

These examples reflect not only a double grammatical transposition, but also an inverted way of thinking and of representing reality (concrete > abstract[7]).

Modulation also brings about many symmetrical patterns. Let us mention, for example, reversed points of view as in the sentences *Not everyone is happy > Certains se rejouissent*, or *He may be right >iI n'a peut-être pas tort*; concrete evocations in English versus abstract notions in French as in *Would you dare unseat this newly elected member of parliament? > Oseriez-vous invalider ce depute fraîchement élu?*; negated opposites: *I am well aware that… > Je ne suis pas sans savoir que…*; synedoches (a part/the special used for a whole/the general or the whole/general for the part/special) as in the sentence *Aleppo has been the scene of bloody fighting > Alep a été le théâtre de combats sanglants*; etc. In addition, the trochaic rhythm of the English sentence is of importance in the making of sense. In the sentence *He bought a red and yellow hat*, the stressed syllables fall on the lexical items (*bought,*

[7] According to Vinay and Darbelnet (1995, p. 51), "the English sentence is organized around a concrete word whereas the French sentence is organized around an abstract word".

red, yellow, hat), which gives a rhythm to the sentence, regular alternating stressed-unstressed syllables.

The phonological features

From a phonological point of view, the two systems can also be opposed. English is stress-timed, which means that "the recurring beats found in the speech of English speakers fall on stressed syllables" (Carr, 1999, p. 107), while French belongs to the category of syllable-timed languages: each syllable occurs at a more or less equal interval. For instance, the phrase *a red and yellow hat* will be preferred to *a yellow and red hat* because the latter exhibits a stress lapse (two adjacent unstressed syllables) and a stress clash (two adjacent stressed syllables), whereas the former is rhythmically well balanced (alternating stressed-unstressed syllables) and complies with the basically trochaic rhythm of English. In French, the phrase may be translated into *un chapeau rouge et jaune*, or *un chapeau jaune et rouge* because the rhythm of the language is different, yet musically, *un chapeau jaune et rouge* may sound more harmonious to a French ear. Harmony versus rhythm may be another criterion for opposing the two languages.

In English, each word/syllable has a specific contrastive stress, terms are opposed alternately. In French, on the contrary, there is only one accented syllable on the last element of the tone group (tonic placement). One may have the impression that the whole sentence is constituted of one long word, and English-speaking students learning French sometimes have difficulty in distinguishing the words in connected speech. Conversely, French-speaking learners of English have some difficulty in recognizing stressed meaningful syllables relative to unstressed or reduced ones. Attention must be paid to the alternating stressed and unstressed syllables, recurring beats that give the English sentence its specific rhythm (Carr, 1999; Huart, 2002).

We have here briefly presented the reader with what can be regarded as illustrating a set of grammatical and phonological observations in English and French, and which may need further analysis and development. Not only does the comparison rely on how two distinct linguistic systems function, but it also endeavors to define research axes in order to help learners to find their way about one or both systems. In this case, we are not dealing with two or several varieties of a language which contributes to describe its grammar, but two distinct languages, two "genii" which can be regarded symmetrically and may, to some extent, mutually clarify each other.

Conclusion

What has been sketched herein is more a research program than a complete method to learn a language. The comparison of two closely related linguistic systems is in keeping with the way people think the language. According to Pinker (1994) "language is the most accessible part of the mind" (p. 404), which means that language and thought are cognate and the latter can only be apprehended through speech.

Bringing up the synthetic-analytic opposition to characterize English and French may help learners to access the thinking underlying the discourse, and thus acquire

the other system more accurately by understanding how it functions. Challenging questions still remain regarding the progressive-regressive modification order distinction, especially when it comes to such notions as sentence structure, lexical and phrasal categories, prepositional phrases, sentence adverbials, etc.

Immediate grammatical access to language representations may sometimes be indirect and unclear. Each linguistic system has its own surface arrangement and its own complexity which correlate with human behavior and thinking. And although it may be posited that humans have the same minds (Pinker, 1994, p. 404), they have different ways of representing their environment and more generally the real world. That is why the mental mechanisms underlying speech remain to be explored in greater detail.

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