

## COMPARATIVE STUDY OF THE EPISTEMOLOGICAL ASSUMPTIONS ESTABLISHED BY CHOMSKY AND BAKHTIN ABOUT LANGUAGE ACQUISITION IN HUMAN BEINGS



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### ABSTRACT

The article presents two opposing epistemological bases concerning the development of human language: Noam Chomsky's generativism and Mikhail Bakhtin's discursive enunciative theory. Generativism conceives of the development of language from the innate point of view and presents arguments for doing so; according to Chomsky, there is a genetic predisposition in the human organism that triggers the linguistic constitution. Bakhtin, on the other hand, argues that human language is a product of the social environment, ideologically constituted in the interactions of subjects among themselves, being the basis of power relations in life in society. The objective is to confront the two theories, establishing main differences, while highlighting that both are densely constructed, based on solid and coherent arguments. The last stage of the article establishes a comparison between these epistemological bases to facilitate the understanding of the differences. The methodology of production of this text was bibliographic, using deductive research based on readings and textual interpretations.

**Keywords:** Language, Gerativism, Enunciation/Discourse, Dialogicity.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Language plays a fundamental role in the formation of society and, undeniably, has been the subject of philosophical, sociological and linguistic studies since its earliest existence. Commonly, studies seek to find ways to explain it scientifically, given its complexity and importance for humanity, since all life in society permeates the use of language, whether orally or through the written record.

In this sense, there are theses from different currents of thought, which include opposite ways to unveil it, such as: the generativism of Noam Chomsky, considered a precursor of modern linguistics, who addresses an innatist conception of language and language, and Mikhail Bakhtin, with his discursive enunciative thesis, which defends the idea that language is ideologically and socially constituted, but never innate.

Thus, based on the assumption that Chomsky's work on language implies polemics both for linguistics and for other areas of knowledge, such as philosophy and psychology, it is necessary to know the origin of his thought, as well as the arguments that support it, in order to clarify certain prejudices in relation to his study. Thus, according to Chomsky (2009), when knowing the origin of language in humans "[...] we can begin to describe the system of knowledge that is achieved and to formulate plausible hypotheses about the intrinsic human capacities that make this feat possible; Chomsky (2009, p. 20).

On the other hand, Bakhtin (2006) builds his arguments based on the idea that language as an instrument of discourse and signification is constituted in the interactions that subjects establish within the social group to which they belong and, therefore, it is the bearer of an ideology, a way of thinking and seeing the world that is not optional to the subject, but rather shaped by the social group to which he belongs.

Therefore, in this article, some of the basic concepts that permeate Chomsky's conception of language in humans will be presented. In a second moment, Bakhtin's discursive enunciative epistemological basis will be explained, and then a comparison between the two strands will be established, in order to elucidate their main differences.

## **CHOMSKYNIAN CONCEPTIONS ABOUT LANGUAGE AND ITS USE: AN INNATIST APPROACH**

The processes by which language is constituted and acquired, as well as its influence on the organization of society and communication between peoples, have always implied curiosity and research on the subject, so that studies have been developed in the field of

linguistics, philosophy, among other sciences, to try to understand this human phenomenon. Because many linguists point to language as being an innate product, considering it a biological adaptation exclusive to the human being. One of the greatest defenders of language as a human instinct is the linguist Noam Chomsky (2009) who, in his Generative Theory, states that the acquisition of language comes from a mental organ, as if it were a psychological faculty present in each individual.

For Chomsky (2004), language is a product of human intelligence and indispensable not only for the elaboration of thought, but also for the construction of perception, both of which constitute an intelligible, spiritual and moral communion. Thus, Chomsky (2005) supposes that the language faculty starts from an initial state, the same for all, and assumes other states, which would be the different languages constituted by different social groups. In other words, "the only structure shared (virtually) among human beings is the initial state of the language faculty. Other than that, we do not expect to find more than approximations [...]" (Chomsky, 2005, p.72).

Chomsky (2004) also observes that the act of communicating occurs by understanding what another person is saying and has in mind because, in this interactive process, the listener would have the ability to anticipate the discourse of that other, being able to "guess" what will be said next, based on the assumption that humans are similar, then this other introduces necessary modifications to language, highly reflective, beyond consciousness. In other words, in Chomsky's conception, there is a "publicly shared meaning," because of the inactive properties of the language faculty that allow for little variation.

Chomsky (2004) argues that an "internalist" approach can offer an adequate basis for the study of language, our interactions with other people, and the external environment, so that,

The child's language 'grows in the mind' as the visual system develops binocular vision capacity, or as the child enters puberty at a certain stage of maturity. Language acquisition is something that happens to a child placed in a certain environment, not something that the child does (Chomsky, 2004, p. 29).

The same author points out that the faculty of language is one of the components of the mind/brain, dedicated to its use, as well as other components of the human body, which are responsible for its functioning, and the language discussed here is human language, in

all its complexity. In other words, language exists to the extent of its use. The more we exercise language, the more it develops in us. Therefore,

The collapse of the traditional uniformity hypothesis should not come as a surprise. We have not found anything like it in the study of other complex systems: the visual cortex, the kidney, the circulatory system, and others. Each of these organs of the body has its properties. They fit, presumably, at the level of cell biology, but no organ theory deals with the properties of organs in general. The various faculties and cognitive systems of the mind can be practically the same. If so, there will be no field of cognitive science that deals with the general properties of cognitive systems. Specifically, the study of language will not provide a useful model for other parts of the study of the mind [...] (Chomsky, 2004, p. 34).

Chomsky exposes an understanding that goes beyond the surface, consisting of a special structure and design, calling attention to the fact that, even though many theories about language have been developed, there is still much to be investigated, as there are gaps that have not yet been filled. Chomsky (2004) defends a deepening of the historical perspective on the development and function of language, starting by considering the first cognitive revolution, here understood as the Cartesian theory of body and mind which, according to Aguiar (2017) can be understood as the separation of the material body and the soul and considers the imperfection of the thinking subject who, Because it is imperfect, it doubts and has limited knowledge, and is therefore finite. Aguiar (2017) considers that, in the Cartesian theory, the body is a machine that was built by God and that this body also has a soul. From this perspective, man can only constitute himself if he has these two elements: body and soul. Like this

[...] The study of the mind is an inquiry into certain aspects of the natural world, including what we traditionally call mental events, processes, and states, and that we should investigate these aspects of the world as we do any others, attempting to construct intelligible explanatory theories, which provide insight and understanding of phenomena that are selected to advance the search into deeper principles (Chomsky, 2004, p.41).

Therefore, the apex of the creative use of language is through artistic productions; that is, those who write or express themselves artistically through the use of language, are the ones who manage, with a limited number of structures, to make unlimited combinations and adaptations to express the thought and way of being of human beings. Thus, if we want to know human thought, it is possible to do so by reading literature and by contact with art, as well as by historical study, because the essence of human behavior is registered in these productions, and considering that we are all naturally similar, our behaviors and beliefs may even differ by our culture, but they do not differ as radically as many imagine. Hence one of

the reasons why the author defends the idea that the capacity for language in humans is, in a way, innate. Like this

[...] Such an approach does not exclude other ways of trying to understand the world. Someone committed to this (as I do) may consistently believe (as I do) that we learn much more about human interest, about how people think, feel, and act by reading novels or studying history than we do from all naturalistic psychology. [...] in the same way, the arts can offer an appreciation of the heavens to which astrophysics cannot aspire (Chomsky, 2004, p. 42).

In his innate conception of language acquisition, considering the possibilities of constructing a theory of human nature, in a perspective of questioning the reason for studying language and, fascinated by the elements that compose it, with the intention of discovering the arrangements that it enables, its historical origin and in the individual, or the ways in which it is used in thought, in the sciences or the arts, or in normal social exchange, Chomsky (2004) argues that,

The work of the last few years has succeeded, to some extent, in identifying general principles of language that can be attributed to the initial endowment, with options for variation restricted to subparts of the lexicon. The 'computation system' of language that determines the forms and relations of linguistic expressions may indeed be invariable; In this sense, there is only one human language, as a rational Martian observing humans would have assumed. The acquisition of a given language is the process of fixing lexical options based on simple and accessible data (CHOMSKY, 2004, p. 50).

Furthermore, the study of language enables us to discover the abstract principles that govern its structure and use; These principles would be universal by biological necessity and not by mere historical accident that derive from mental characteristics of the human species, being extremely complex. Chomsky starts from the observation that human language is an extraordinary intellectual achievement, using the term "mirror of the mind" to define it (Chomsky, 2004).

Chomsky (2007) observes that the acquisition of language in children occurs in an extremely natural, intuitive and fast way, without them having to make great efforts to learn it. Like this

A normal child acquires this knowledge with relatively light exposure and no specific training. He can easily make use of an intricate structure of specific rules and guiding principles to convey his thoughts and feelings, awakening new ideas and subtle perceptions and judgments (CHOMSKY, 2007, p. 4).

In fact, Chomsky (2005) argues that "[...] our knowledge of a language is much more innate than previously suspected." Chomsky (2005, p. 14) because, in his understanding, it seems obvious that specific languages, such as English and Japanese, for example, are not innate, by the simple observation of their differences, which are related to the environment in which they are constituted, but, even presenting differences and having been constituted without, supposedly, any contact with each other. Such languages resemble each other in sound and structure. In other words, for Chomsky, there are essential properties in languages that make it clear that a large amount of the language that humans use must be innate. In his theory, Chomsky observes that the child, in his process of linguistic acquisition, does not need to formally learn, at first, the properties of the language to which he is exposed. She learns them intuitively.

Succinctly, Chomsky (2007) starts from an essential question for development that guides all his study of language acquisition in humans, instrumentalized in the following question: "How is it that human beings, whose contact with the world is brief, personal and limited, are able to know as much as they know?" Chomsky (2007, p. 5). The author answers this question by arguing that there are linguistic elements in our brain, programmed for such knowledge. Only in the process of interaction, which favors the acquisition of a certain language, is this knowledge activated.

In addition to the ideas mentioned above, Chomsky (2005) also highlights that the faculty of language has a decisive influence on all aspects of life, thought and human interaction. It is only due to language that humans have a history, a cultural evolution, and a complex and rich diversity.

However, even though the entire Chomskynian theory argues that the language system in humans is innate, the same author argues that,

[...] What a person does depends on the broad measure of what he knows, believes, and anticipates. A study of human behavior that is not based on at least a provisional formulation of the relevant systems of knowledge and belief is doomed to triviality and irrelevance. The study of human learning can only begin, in a serious way, when such a provisional formulation of knowledge and belief systems is presented (Chomsky, 2009, p. 20).

Therefore, in Chomsky's (2009) understanding, the study of language can be a fundamental element for the study of human learning and behavior. Thus, knowledge of the language is obtained by the subject's exposure to it, and the character of the knowledge acquired can be largely predetermined. For the author, language is a mirror of the mind that

reflects the characteristics of human intellectual capacities, while the belief system of a subject cannot be characterized as such because it is directly related to the social environment in which it is inserted.

To detail, in his definitions of language, Chomsky (2009) argues that,

Human language is deliberate 'because there is almost always in human speech a definite intention to convey something to another person, altering their behavior, their thoughts or their general attitude towards a situation'. Human language is syntactic, because an utterance is a performance with an internal organization, with structure and coherence. It is deliberate, because it transmits information. Chomsky (2009, p. 126).

Given the above, it is emphasized that the epistemological basis developed by Chomsky about the constitution of language in humans is controversial, because there is no scientific evidence that proves that there is an organ in the human brain that contains this linguistic basis observed by him. In addition, other scholars present opposing ideas, which are not in line with the innate generativism established by the author. In this sense, the next section will bring Bakhtin's conceptions about the constitution of language in humans.

## **THE DEVELOPMENT OF LANGUAGE IN THE BAKHTINIAN CONCEPTION: THE WORD AS A PRIMARY TOOL IN THE FORMATION OF HUMAN CONSCIOUSNESS**

As we saw with Chomsky, language exerts an undeniable influence on the formative process of the human being, characterized by the universal need for social and cultural construction, present in the path of subjects who constantly reveal, in their linguistic experiences, the marks of their social groups. Therefore, the Russian philosopher Mikhael Bakhtin brings reflections on language from the discursive perspective of language, from a more social and ideological perspective. In the Bakhtinian conception, languages are democratic, simple and free. For Bakhtin (2017), the word does not exist outside the dialogue and languages are constituted as scars of the boundaries of the other's word and as vestiges in the syntactic structure.

For Bakhtin (2017), language is dialogical and always presupposes the existence of an utterance. So

There can be no isolated statement. It always presupposes statements that precede and follow it. No utterance can be the first and the last. It is only the link in the chain and outside this chain it cannot be studied. Between the utterances there are relations that cannot be defined in either mechanical or linguistic categories. There are no analogies with them (Bakhtin, 2017, p. 27).



In other words, in Bakhtin's (2017) conception, in the chain of discursive communication there is an inner sociality, a meeting of two consciousnesses in the process of interpretation and study of the utterance.

Bakhtin (2017) argues that the linguistic sign is always dialogical; that is, languages are constituted in social relations and thought is shaped by language, which is always ideological. This leads us to the understanding that what we think and believe shapes our behavior, which in turn is shaped by language. Language is always conditioned to a social and cultural space. It is language that is primarily responsible for the emergence of consciousness in humans. Like this

Who conscientizes coincides with the conscientizable? In other words, would man be alone with himself, that is, alone? Does it not radically change the whole event of man's existence? That's what actually happens. Here something absolutely new arises: the superman, the super-ego, that is, the witness and judge of the total man (of the total ego); therefore, it is no longer man, it is no longer the self, but the other. The reflection of myself in the empirical other, through which I need to pass in order to go out in the direction of the I-for-me (Bakhtin, 2017, p. 29).

Bakhtin (2017) conceives language in a constant process of interaction with the other, so that we live in a world of words of the other, and our whole life is a reaction to the words of the other, starting with the assimilation of them and the riches of human culture. Thus, Bakhtin (2017) argues that human consciousness is,

For each individual, this disintegration of all that is expressed in the word into a little world of his words (felt as his own) and the immense infinite world of the words of the other are the primary fact of human consciousness and of human life which, like all that is primary and natural, has hitherto been little studied (apprehended) or at least not apprehended in its immense essential meaning. Bakhtin (2017, p. 38).

In other words, Bakhtin understands language as an essential tool in the formation of human consciousness and, in the complex relationships established by dialogue in all fields of culture and activity, all human life is constituted. Thus, "I live in a space world and in this one lies the other" (Bakhtin, 2017, p. 43).

Considering that human interactions can only be constituted by language and given its complexity, Bakhtin argues that the utterance (discourse) is always fed by intentionality, that is, whoever says what he says, always has a reason to say it, from the social place he occupies. Like this

It is a reflection of the relations between men and discourse, their social hierarchy. Interrelation of the units of discourse. Acute sensation of myself and of the other in the life of the discourse. Exceptional tone paper. The world of injury and praise (and



their derivatives: flattery, flattery, hypocrisy, humiliation, rudeness, pinpricks, allusions, etc.) [...]. The tone is not determined by the concrete content of the utterance or by the speaker's experiences, but by the speaker's relationship with the person of the interlocutor (with their category, importance, etc.) (Bakhtin, 2017, p. 55).

Bakhtin (2006) observes that enunciation is the replica of social dialogue, it is the basic unit of language, being characterized by inner (dialogue with oneself) or exterior discourse, making it clear that dialogue is always an essential characteristic of interactionist conceptions of language, even if such dialogue happens with oneself. For the author, language is of a social and ideological nature. Therefore, "it does not exist outside a social context, since each speaker has a 'social horizon'. There is always an interlocutor, at least potential. The speaker thinks and expresses himself for a well-defined social audience" (Bakhtin, 2006, p. 17).

In Bakhtin's conception, man is a being of a social nature and what makes him so is exactly the fact that he has developed such a complex language system and capable of lexicalizing almost everything he feels and thinks. In this sense, Bakhtin distinguishes between,

The mental activity of the self (not ideologically modeled, close to the physiological reaction of the animal, characteristic of the poorly socialized individual) and the mental activity of the we (higher form that implies class consciousness). Thought does not exist outside its potential expression and, consequently, outside the social orientation of this expression and of thought itself (Bakhtin, 2006, p. 18).

Consequently, Bakhtin (2006) argues that, because language is always ideological, consciousness and, therefore, thought are conditioned by language and, consequently, shaped by ideology. Language is an expression of social relations and struggles, conveying and suffering the effects of this struggle, serving at the same time as an instrument and material. For Bakhtin,

Signs emerge decisively only from the process of interaction between one individual consciousness and another. And the individual consciousness itself is full of signs. Consciousness only becomes consciousness when it is impregnated with ideological (semiotic) content and, consequently, only in the process of social interaction (Bakhtin, 2006, p. 32).

In this way, Bakhtin assumes that individual consciousness cannot explain anything, as it itself can only be explained from the social and ideological milieu. In other words, it is not enough to put two *homo sapiens* face to face for the signs to be constituted. "It is

fundamental that these two individuals are socially organized, that they form a group (a social unit): only in this way can a system of signs be constituted" (Bakhtin, 2006, p. 33).

Because the social factor is essential to the formation of language, for Bakhtin (2006), the word is an ideological phenomenon par excellence: "the word does not contain anything that is not linked to this function, nothing that has not been generated by it. The word is the purest and most sensitive mode of social relation" Bakhtin (2006, p. 34). Thus, the privileged material of communication in everyday life is the word, because it is through it that conversation and its discursive forms are situated.

In his dialogical approach to language, Bakhtin (2006) observes that every cultural sign, when understood and endowed with a meaning, becomes part of the unity of verbally constituted consciousness. Consciousness has the ability to verbally approach this sign, that is, the word is present in all acts of understanding and interpretation as a manifestation of signs. Like this:

Words are woven from a multitude of ideological threads and serve as the weave of all social relations in all domains. It is therefore clear that the word will always be the most sensitive indicator of all social transformations, even those that are just emerging, that have not yet taken shape, that have not yet paved the way for structured and well-formed ideological systems. The word is the means by which slow quantitative accumulations of changes are produced which have not yet had time to acquire a new ideological quality, which have not yet had time to engender a new and finished ideological form. The word is capable of registering the most intimate, most ephemeral transitory phases of social changes (Bakhtin, 2006, p. 40).

Considering Bakhtin's conception of language, it can be inferred that it is only through the process of interaction with other subjects that it is constituted, always ideologically, from a social organization. From this premise, a vicious circle is formed in which word and social organization influence each other, one being a consequence of the other, in a process of resignification that occurs in parallel in the daily life in society. In this way, linguistic and ideological signs are marked by the social horizon of a given epoch and social group.

For all these reasons, it can be said that "[...] If we lose sight of the meaning of the word, we lose the word itself, which is thus reduced to its physical reality, accompanied by the physiological process of its production. What makes a word a word is its meaning" (Bakhtin, 2006, p. 48). Therefore, the linguistic sign is transformed, it evolves in the process of historical evolution of a given linguistic community, and the normative identity of the phoneme is different at different times in the evolution of languages. In other words, language has its history, because there is no other way to constitute it than historically;

Therefore, in order to explain it, it is necessary to place it at a given moment in its history. (Bakhtin, 2006).

Therefore, in the next section, a reflection on the conceptions of language discussed so far will be presented, considering possible contributions of both epistemological assumptions presented, in a search for the understanding of human language and its influence on the dynamics of social and cultural organization, as well as on the identity formation of the subjects who appropriate it.

### **COMPARATIVE ASPECTS BETWEEN CHOMSKYNIAN AND BAKHTINIAN THEORIES**

After having presented the basic concepts established by the aforementioned authors, the guiding thread of this section will be the confrontation between these two strands of language studies: Noam Chomsky's generativism and Mikhail Bakhtin's enunciative-discursive approach, establishing their main differences with regard to the following aspects: the human being and the social environment, the universal grammar and ideological content, the language/sense and the meaning/sense.

Thus, with regard to the development of human language in its social environment, Gonçalves and Covezzi (2016) show that the main differences between the two theoretical strands are related to the way the authors approach issues related to language acquisition, and Chomsky developed the thesis that the human being, taken as a biological being, It presents innate universal linguistic principles that develop in the child as in any other biological function and, for such a function to develop, the child must be in contact with the speakers of a given language in order to learn its system.

On the other hand, in the Bakhtinian approach, Gonçalves and Covezzi (2016) observe that the human being is a "[...] individual subject whose consciousness is impregnated with ideological contents forged in the social reality of the individual". Gates; Covezzi (2016, p. 69). From this perspective, the acquisition of language and consciousness are not reduced to internal and biological processes, but take place through historical and sociological processes.

Regarding the idea of the existence of a universal grammar, defended by Chomsky, and the ideological content, the fulcrum of Bakhtin's theory, Gonçalves and Covezzi (2016) highlight that, from the point of view of generativism, "[...] The cognitive structure of the human brain has certain innate genetic properties, the basis of a system of linguistic rules

common to all languages that predisposes us to a systematic perception of the language around us." Gates; Covezzi (2016, p. 70).

In the perspective established by Bakhtin, Gonçalves and Covezzi (2016) highlight that language and its ideological content develop outside the biological organism - even if the individual organism participates in this process - from the interaction with a social group, whose ideology will form the argumentative basis of this subject. That is, the subject, a member of a social group, perceives and understands the world from his class positioning, because his individual consciousness is related to his social life, therefore, ideological.

As for the concepts of language and language, for Chomsky (2009), language can be defined as the human capacity to reason without the use of words and to produce oral or written sentences, and language is a system organized in the minds of the subjects and through which their linguistic competence is constituted.

However, Bakhtin (2006) argues that the speaker's subjective consciousness uses language - which is a system of abstract normative forms - for its concrete enunciative needs, in an intrinsic relationship between meaning and sense, with meaning referring to passive comprehension, decoding the listener, while meaning refers to contextual meaning, in which the listener not only decodes, but makes inferences about what is said in the interaction.

Regarding the meaning of language, Chomsky (2009), in his innatist theory, argues that the grammar of natural languages is responsible for the linguistic competence of speakers, but does not consider meaning as a fundamental element of linguistic activity. On the other hand, Bakhtin (2006) considers that every enunciation presupposes a meaning and it is in the dialogical relations between interlocutors that meanings are constituted.

Thus, Gonçalves and Covezzi (2016) conclude that,

[...] The dialogical conception is in line with the view of language as an acquired system, since for it it is the interlocutors who, when producing utterances, mobilize linguistic resources. Meaning only happens with the audience, being produced in interaction, pointing to the discourse. For the discursive enunciative perspective, meaning is in the encounter with the other, between social historical subjects (Gonçalves; Covezzi, 2016, p. 72).

From this perspective, it is clearly perceived that both theories do not dialogue with each other, presenting opposite perspectives. However, even though the generativism established by Chomsky considers human language as biologically innate, there is a point at which the author considers that, in order to trigger it, it is necessary to expose the subject

to the language of his social environment, and there is a similarity with the discursive enunciative theory established by Bakhtin, whose central idea revolves around social interactions, in a dialogical, ideological and meaning-bearing conception.

## **FINAL CONSIDERATIONS**

The objective of the article was to present the conceptions of language in the light of two theorists who clearly develop concepts that do not establish a direct relationship between them; therefore, this should be treated as a justification for the opposition between the theories. However, what is intended to be evidenced, in addition to contributing to the understanding of the epistemological assumptions of the aforementioned authors, is exactly the idea that the acquisition of language in humans and all its complexity still remains a mystery to science, that is, there are gaps that have not yet been filled when the subject in question is language.

In this sense, we highlight the fact that Chomsky's thought on language differs totally from the ideas related to his political activism, in which he deals directly with power relations and the effects of ideology on society. However, his generativist theory describes language as an innate characteristic, abstracted from the processes and social relations to which he fervently emphasizes.

Bakhtin's conceptions, on the other hand, deal with language in its philosophical, social and cultural aspects, seeking to describe its process of formation and use, in the light of life in society, which presupposes power relations and ideologies, conceived in the form of social organization of groups which, in turn, depending on the cultural space in which they are found, They differ in the way they see and understand the world. In this sense, language and ideology are intertwined, mixed and formed, one influencing the other, always based on dialogical processes. In other words, for Bakhtin, language can only be explained by the understanding that the human being is, above all, a social being, who is constructed by interaction with his peers and, from this interaction, derives all the social organization that one has and all the meaning and meaning that characterize language.

From the conceptual knots evidenced here, it is worth considering that, even establishing opposite conceptions, both authors present significant contributions in the field of applied linguistics and it is necessary to understand them because, from such thoughts, it is possible to establish reflections that contribute to the process of teaching and learning languages that takes place in the daily life of the classroom, showing that both are densely

constituted, with logically established arguments and with pertinent observations for the understanding of the "invention" of language.



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