Gods, prophets, and subjective consciousness

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There are a number of reasons why a linguist can address himself to the study of religion. I have already discussed this in a programmatic way (Samarin 1972a) and have demonstrated, I think, that religious behavior could be misunderstood when linguistic facts were not correctly interpreted. The latter is found in my work on Pentecostalism, with special reference to the phenomenon known as glossolalia (Samarin 1972b and several other works). A wider perspective is found in the collection of papers in Samarin 1976.

Language, I say, is one of the phenomena of religion. In that language a linguist finds data that he can analyze with profit.

When religion is analyzed and interpreted by others in terms of language, that analysis is subject to the scrutiny of linguistics. This is what this paper is concerned with. It takes a certain 'theory' about belief in gods and about revelation from gods and suggests the kinds of reservations that a linguist might have.

I would like to consider some assertions made by Julian Jaynes in his The origin of consciousness in the breakdown of the bicameral mind, in which there is a
considerable amount of reference to gods and religion. For example, Jaynes claims that the gods were "a mere side effect of language evolution" (202).

This work starts with the empirically demonstrated differences between the right and left hemispheres of the human brain. The right, for example, is the main locus of melodies, chords, environmental sounds, sonar signals, expressive vocalizations, nonlinguistic tones, and intonation features. (The list is my own from my own sources. It should be noted that specialists do not insist on a strict dichotomization of the hemispheres, only on their specializations.) According to Jaynes this 'division of labor' is correlated with two 'signals' (the expressions are mine): "The language of men was involved with only one hemisphere [the left] in order to leave the other [the right] free for the language of gods" (103-104). From an evolutionary and psychohistorical point of view, then, 'gods' and religion have a physical basis. Things became more complicated when, for different reasons, this compartmentalization 'broke down,' which led to human consciousness.

It is not my purpose to argue against the hypothesis, because that would require a more extensive essay than this one. My objectives are very limited: to identify some of the problems I as a linguist have with Jaynes' hypothesis and to suggest the reasons for my discomfort.
I would like to address myself to two aspects of the book—the linguistic and the anthropological, the latter in so far as it concerns itself with culture. These two preoccupations are actually comprehended optically in a single prescription—the linguistic-anthropological one. These two adjectives are not separated by a comma but are united by a hyphen. This is a conjoined, stereoscopic if one wants, point of view, where human behavior and human institutions are seen from the point of view of language. People like myself—referred to as anthropological linguists or linguistic anthropologists—are concerned with studying both language and also language usage, or what one may call situated language—language in the context of culture and society.

The point of view that I take is not an arbitrary one. The book itself calls for linguistic and cultural-historical criticism. The author does not merely insinuate these perspectives; he asserts or presupposes what I believe should not be taken for granted. He makes it quite clear that his explanation for the origin of the consciousness is explained linguistically, that no discussion of consciousness can ignore the fact of language. The author says not only that consciousness is based on language but also that it came after
language (66). According to him, consciousness, as a human phenomenon, presupposes language. (This last statement is not, of course, new or original. It is as old as the earliest speculation about thought and language in the western tradition. There is no need to document here the history of this discussion.)

It would be reasonable, in a book of this kind, to expect the author to sketch his understanding of what language is; or he might refer his readers to a scientific literature that constitutes the foundation or ground of his own thinking. He does not do this.

What is critical in what the author says is the relationship between language and consciousness. It is a deterministic one, language being the cause and consciousness the effect. Since these two phenomena co-exist in our present state, and as far back as writing can take us, we cannot deduce from present experiments or introspection the etiology of consciousness or language. The process has to be a speculative one.

What the author speculates is that semantic changes took place in language and that these changes led to
subjective consciousness with its self-reference, mind-space, and narratization (320). (The word language here in the singular refers to the human-specific and universal skill in communicating with a symbolic—or symbolizing—and vocally-realized code. He says, for example, that the bicameral mind "was evolved as a final stage of [notice, not in] the evolution of language" (126). Elsewhere it is not so clear that he is talking about language in the abstract, as if both language and the bicameral mind were monogenetic, implying, as he does in fact, plurigenesis. I have something to say about this further along.) He calls this hypothetical stage in language a "new language construction" (320), but he does not mean at all anything similar to what linguists conceive as linguistic structure. For him "language construction" is nothing more than word meanings. This is made quite clear at one point, where he characterizes his thinking as similar to archeology (292), where, by studying potsherds, he says, one can reconstruct series of migrations. Therefore, by looking at words in their contexts "from text to text" (as the archeologist goes from site to site) one can "demonstrate that a huge complex series of changes in mentality was going on" (292). This characterizes the methodology. His determinism is
explicit in the following: "Let no one think these are just word changes. Word changes are concept changes and concept changes are behavioral changes. ... Without words like soul, liberty, or truth, the pageant of this human condition would have been filled with different roles, different climaxes" (292).

It is clear that the author assumes that language evolved from specific (objective) reference to abstract (subjective) reference and that the latter produced consciousness. He argues like this: Because in the text attributed to the Hebrew prophet Amos "there are no words for mind or think or feel or understand or anything similar whatever" Amos therefore has a bicameral mind (296). Although here the author is writing about a single individual, he in other places assumes this kind of relationship for a whole society or civilization. He calls this a learning process, "on the basis of language" (220), a curious statement when compared with others, as seen below.

The author assumes determinism elsewhere in his speculations. In an apparent contradiction to his assertion that language leads to change, he says, for example, that "language ... is a brake upon social
change" (216). This happens first because vocabulary demands attention. (When you think about that statement, even if you are not a linguist, you see immediately how untrue it is. Giving attention to the words one uses is a very self-conscious activity. And unless one is a linguist--giving full attention to sounds, vocabulary, and syntax--one notices, recalls, and reflects on what one has or might say in rather haphazard ways.)

I have just been talking about speech--that is, the oral manifestation of language. Let that be clear. Writing is a different channel, and its use leads to different effects, although not necessarily those that the author believes in. As an artifact of civilization (my own terms), the appearance of writing, he says, is "tremendously important" in the breakdown of bicameral voices: "What had to be spoken is now silent and carved upon a stone to be taken visually" (302).

The effects of language and writing are not at all necessarily what the author suggests they are. He will find no support for his views in linguistics. In fact, we linguists find it curious that our colleagues in the behavioral and social sciences continue to believe in linguistic determinism when there is so little to
support it, especially in its psychological dimensions and in the form antiquatedly espoused by Jaynes.

The author's notion is a very old one, certainly as old as evolutionary speculation. It was taken for granted in that period when all of human history was interpreted evolutionistically that languages developed from a period when words had concrete meanings to that stage when abstractness appeared. He says, for example, that because ancient Egyptian and Sumerian were "concrete from first to last" (which is to say, idiomatically, 'wholly' or entirely') abstract thought was not possible (186). He provides metaphor as the mechanism by which language (he really means vocabulary) grows and grows (49, 275). The author believes that metaphors increase perception and attention (138)—in other words, that there is a cognitive effect of metaphoricalness. He calls this an "added linguistic mentality" that had "an overwhelming importance" in the development of human culture in Mesolithic times (138).

It should be understood that things are not as sure as the author would like them to be. "Abstractization" and determinism are not premises on which one can build psycholinguistic speculations.
Similarly, we do not have to believe the assumption that a word’s frequency of occurrence in a specific text indicates its importance in a society; (he says culture). He makes this assumption in talking about the fragments of texts (not even a continuous text) attributed to Solon. He considers it highly significant that noos occurs eight times in 280 lines of text (286). We are not told how many words the fragments contained, only that this would be 44 per 10,000 words. I am not impressed by this extrapolated calculation, whatever it is based on. More to the point is the observation, a perfectly obvious one, that words occur as a function of context, topic, and use—among other factors. This is surely a realization required in any serious examination of the use of language, one that forms the foundation of the disciplines of philology and literary criticism.

Jaynes brings his linguistically naive thinking to an interpretation of the Hebrew prophet Amos.

In Amos there are no words for mind or think or feel or understand or anything similar whatever; Amos never ponders anything in his heart; he can’t, he would not know what it meant. In the few times he refers to himself, he is abrupt and informative without qualification; he is no prophet, but a mere 'gatherer of sycamore
fruit'; he does not consciously think before he speaks; in fact, he does not think as we do at all: his thought is done for him. He feels his bicameral voice about to speak and shushes those about him with a 'Thus speaks the Lord!' and follows with an angry forceful speech which he probably does not understand himself (296).

The kinds of data that Jaynes uses as evidence of his "theory of the bicameral mind" are illustrated in that quotation. Like a drama critic he sees Amos as "fiercely righteous, absolutely assured, nobly rude, speaking a blustering god-speech with the unconscious rhetoric of an Achilles or a Hammurabi" (296). He is not a "subjective conscious man"; instead, he is "an almost bicameral man" (295).

Amos is classed with other Old Testament nabiim, the root of which he associates with the idea of flowing and becoming bright. Therefore,

... we may think of a nabi as one who metaphorically was flowing forth or welling up with speech and visions. They [the nabiim or prophets] were transitional men, partly subjective and partly bicameral. And once the bright torrent was released and the call came, the nabi must deliver his bicameral message, however unsuspecting (Amos 7:14-15), however unworthy the nabi
felt (Exodus 3:11; Isaiah 6; Jeremiah 1:6), however distrustful at times of his own hearing (Jeremiah 20:7-10). What does it feel like to be a nabi at the beginning of one of his bicameral periods? Like a red hot coal in one's mouth (Isaiah 6:7) or a raging fire shut up in one's bones that cannot be contained (Jeremiah 20:9) and that only the flowing forth of divine speech can quench (300).

We proceed, as the author does, from considering the implications of the parts of language for the mind of man to the products of language. (That is, admittedly, a strange way of putting it--strange, awkward, perhaps naive to the linguist anyway. Language is a critical whole for human cognitive gifts.)

The products of language are comprehended, of course, by speech or, if you want, linguistic activity or behavior. This activity can be classified on purely formal grounds into various genres, such as conversation, narrative, poetry, and so forth—although each genre can be subclassified: for conversation there are intimate, guarded, and formal types, just by way of example. Conversation is, as we all know from personal experience, the most ubiquitous genre; poetry, as a formally identified and societally recognized genre, on the other hand, is less common both with respect to the number
of persons who engage in it and the frequency of occurrence in the total number of hours of usage every day over a period of years.

Keeping in mind what I have just said, consider what the author says: "The Greek subjective conscious mind .. has been born out of song and poetry" (292). Remember, incidentally, what I had to say about the critical difference between language and languages. The author here is implying the Greek language. And again: "I shall state my thesis plain. The first poets were gods. Poetry began with the bicameral mind. ... most men at one time, throughout the day, were hearing poetry (of a sort) composed and spoken within their own minds" (361).

This is all very confusing. We are left with a lot of questions unanswered: What does he really mean by poetry? He says "of a sort", but he is talking about the very few classic, literary texts that have come down to us from the past. Were all of these "at one time" part of the thinking and internalized speaking of ordinary slaves and peasants as well as protégés of wealthy landowners and lords? Who are "most men"? Perhaps he does not really mean that at all, for he talks most about the aoidoi, as he calls them—the poets or bards, as when the first of them, still bicameral, wandered, he says, "entranced from ruined camp to camp of refugees" (215). What a sad picture! Especially
sad, because they did not understand what they were saying. (Were they saying—for the first time—or were they reciting? The distinction is important.) They must not have understood since they were as cognitively handicapped as the prophet Amos was, and we are told that Amos probably did not understand what he said (296).

This is all simply incredible. All that we know about poetry (today, of course; we have no way of knowing about the past) leads inescapably to the conclusion that poetry is a conscious speech activity—that it requires a sensitivity to, if not a knowledge of, the resources of one's language. It requires all of that, even if it does not require genius. But for the author "Poems are rafts clutched at by men drowning in inadequate minds" (246). These are minds, as far as Jaynes is concerned, without a subjective consciousness: inadequate because their languages were poor in words, but inadequate for what purposes?—we are not told. In any case, they were helped by meter in poetry, which drove the electrical activity of the brain (73).

If we try to deduce something about language learning, which has its social and psychological aspects, and language contact—where people speaking different languages come in contact with each other and which also has its social and psychological aspects—we are once again left in confusion.
The author gives a lot of hints, but these lead off into obscurity.

First, we find that mentality and language are not integrated, self-contained systems. They are gradient. Although bicamerality is characterized at one point as dynamic (202), it can be weakened (99, 158, 197, 227fn). At one stage it was combined with subjective consciousness (158); the voices of the gods were less clear and less frequent (183). Moreover, it can be wholly or in part decadent (306).

Bicamerality, like language, can be learned and taught to others (220, 345). The reason subjective consciousness can be learned is, according to the author, that words, or perhaps concepts, can be learned. For example, since Solon is said to have visited countries in Asia Minor, "It is thus certainly a suggestion that his particular use of the word noos and his reification of the term into the imaginary mind-space of the consciousness was due to the influence of these more developed nations" (287). Leaving aside the problem as to whether or not this is credible, we must be reminded that the peoples of Asia Minor, far from being admired by the Greeks, were considered people without proper language--people who went blah-blah-blah or, as the Greeks probably put it, bar-bar-bar, because they
called them barbaroi.

And in a society that has lost bicamerality, as he says (307), people can seek it and can have what he calls a "nostalgic anguish" for it (297). If one suspects an inconsistency here, there are several in the book. For example, whereas consciousness is not a biological necessity (220), bicamerality was "neurologically weakened" (227fn, 99); whereas semantic changes swiftly (320) lead to subjective consciousness and with it linguistic and social consequences, culture change is slow (320). Inconsistency is found also in the author's statements about language and culture contact. He says both that bicameral traders spoke languages of other bicameral people—which is saying that they were bi-, if not, multilingual and that different bicameral people could not communicate with each other (211, 255). In certain areas, therefore, bicameral people coexisted with (215) but could not understand people with a subjective consciousness.
1. The substance of this paper was presented at a Symposium on the Bicameral Mind at the Annual Meeting of the American Psychological Association, Toronto, August 31, 1978. The oral presentation was listed as 'Language and subjective consciousness: a critical anthropological-linguistic review of The origin of consciousness in the breakdown of the bicameral mind.' Jaynes, who was present, responded by saying that I had taken statements out of context. To this I say that my analysis of the book is based on a concordance I personally made of every statement in the book that referred to language in any way whatsoever, only a little of which is used in this present paper. Numbers within parenthesis are page citations from his book.
References

