Where Do Phonemes Come from? A View from the Bottom

I want to talk about another topic I’ve chosen for the final talk, a topic in phonology. Actually, I’ll cover a number of various topics in the course of the lecture. Obviously, phonology, first of all. I will also have something to say something about acquisition, specifically, first language acquisition, acquisition by infants, by children. I’ll also have something to say about the history of linguistics, American linguistics in particular, in the 20th century. I also have, I’ll make reference to the literature in psychology and cognitive science and computer science, so a lot of topics. The strange title has to do with the fact that phonemes are used in linguistic analysis. First of all, the phoneme concept in linguistics is somewhat controversial. Some people say you don’t need them, for others the phoneme is a basic phonological concept. That’s one reason why phonemes are interesting. Another topic I want to address is do speakers of a language actually have phonemes? do they need them? and if they do, where do they come from? what is the basis of phonemes?

For me, the beginning of linguistics goes back to when I was an undergraduate student in Cambridge and did linguistics. At that time, there wasn’t really a linguistics department. There was one professor who was on sabbatical, so basically there was no one. I went to see him and he said, “Well, here are, here are two books. Go away and read them.” The two books were Bloomfield’s *Language* published 1930, so Bloomfield’s book *Language* and the other was Saussure, his *Course in General Linguistics*. He said you can read them in English or French but doesn’t matter. That was published about 1918. And those two figures, Saussure and Bloomfield in fact, very greatly, I think, even now influence the way I think about language. Saussure is often regarded as the father of modern linguistics in the West. He is well-known for what is known as the arbitrary nature of the sign, that is, the relation between sound and meaning.
One aspect of Saussure's thought I find very attractive is that Saussure insisted that the linguistic sign did not relate a thing and the sound. The concept and an acoustic image. In other words, it was mental entity relating the concept of a thing and in fact the concept of sound. Bloomfield, as you all know, established American structuralist linguistics in the 30s and his influence has basically dominated especially North America linguistics. Basically, until the arrival of Chomsky, who then overturned everything as you see, and the rest of history as they say. So I want to draw on theses two writers.

But beginning with Saussure, I want to begin with a couple of quotations from Saussure. Read, the bottom part that’s the English translation. This is a famous passage in Saussure’s course in General Linguistics in which he points out that cognitive activity has no shape, has no form, except through the linguistic system, so “psychologically, setting aside, setting aside its expression in words, our thought is simply a vague, shapeless mass.”

Psychologiquement, abstraction faite de son expression par les mots, notre pensée n’est qu’une masse amorphe et indistincte…. [S]ans le secours des signes, nous serions incapables de distinguer deux idées d’une façon claire et constante. Prise en elle-même, la pensée est comme une nébuleuse où rien n’est nécessairement délimité. Il n’y a pas d’idées préétablies, et rien n’est distinct avant l’apparition de la langue …

La substance phonique n’est pas plus fixe ni plus rigide; ce n’est pas un moule dont la pensée doive nécessairement épouser les formes, mais une matière plastique qui se divise à son tour en parties distinctes pour fournir des signifiants dont la pensée a besoin.

Saussure 1915: 155

“Psychologically, setting aside its expression in words, our thought is simply a vague, shapeless mass…. Were it not for signs, we should be incapable of differentiating any two ideas in a clear and constant way. In itself, thought is like a swirling cloud, where no shape is intrinsically determinate. No ideas are established in advance, and nothing is distinct, before the introduction of linguistic structure …

The substance of sound is no more fixed or rigid than that of thought. It does not offer a ready-made mould, with shapes that thought must inevitably conform to. It is a malleable material which can be fashioned into separate parts in order to supply the signals which thought has need of….”

Saussure/Harris 1983: 155