

Can we accept that a private language is possible?

Part Two: Philosophy of Language
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In order to discuss this we must first of all decide on what is meant by private language, central to which must be a detailed examination of what the essence of privacy is, and indeed what the definition of language is. These investigations will endeavour to show that, properly understood, language is necessarily public. Further there will be an examination of various arguments that have been presented both in support of and in opposition to the private language argument.

A clear definition of what private language means in a philosophical sense is necessary because as Ayer quite rightly points out, "In a quite ordinary sense, it is obvious that there can be private languages ... because there are"¹, pointing to numerous examples such as private codes and rhyming slang. As Ayer recognises, this use of 'private' crucially misses the point, because with languages that are private in this sense, there is nothing that *necessarily* precludes publicity; their privacy is merely coincidental. So then, there must be something in a private language that renders it different from a public one on a fundamental level. Wittgenstein, in arguably the first discussion of the concept, suggests that "The individual words in (private) language are to refer to what can only be known to the person speaking; to his immediate private sensations"². Wittgenstein sees the crucial nature of linguistic privacy in its being something to which the speaker alone can possibly understand.

Yet there is further ambiguity still; Mundle warns against even using the phrase 'private language', noting an inherent difficulty in that it could signify either a language used to talk to oneself about private sensations, one that is used to talk to other people about private sensations, or one whose rules are only intelligible to the speaker³. In the last case, it does not seem at all plausible that this could be so. A solitary speaker would have trouble in justifying why he thought he was adhering to his rules, being at once his own judge, witness and defendant, but also, if he is a logical being, there seems no way in which we could say there could be anything that made sense only to him. The rules would either make sense universally or not at all – 'making sense' is not a subjective thing. If in Mundle's third case we are to swap 'rules' for 'meaning', such a language would surely have to have a content so uniquely personal that it would be intelligible only to its speaker, and it is here that we find ourselves being drawn closer to Mundle's first and second possible senses.

In both of these senses, if a language were spoken only by one person, and the language was used to describe only the inner feelings and sensations of that person, then the problem of translation transcends beyond merely practical issues – the question becomes "how could we tell that what the speaker means by his word 'X' is what we mean by our word 'Y'"? In order to answer this, we must look for an external source of verification in order to avoid subjectivity and gain an independent reference point, for "justification exists in appealing to something independent"⁴. In our public language, difficulties with meaning are generally resolved by appeal to the group, yet with no group to appeal to, the speaker of a private language seems to be unable to assert that his 'X' means the same as our 'Y'. There is no external point of reference precisely because the language describes only internal phenomena.

Given that subjective validation equates to no validation at all, it could be argued that the speaker of a private language cannot in fact say anything with any sense of correctness. There is no sense for instance in which our speaker could know that what he means by a particular word today is what he meant by it yesterday. His only reference point is found internally, in his memory, which unless we are to implicitly trust every memory, renders his use of words potentially subject to continual change. Wittgenstein invites us to consider that "a person whose memory could not retain *what* the word 'pain' meant ... (would) constantly (call) different things by that name"⁵. But if, like the speaker of private language, *all* we had was our

1 Ayer: 36

2 PI: 243

3 Mundle in Jones: 105

4 PI: 265

5 PI: 271

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memory for verification, we could not be *certain* that this was not happening. External sources of verification help to ensure that we have continuity of meaning in public language, but they simply do not exist in private language. Malcolm gives a useful expression of the difficulties we may encounter in self-definition and judgement in asking "What will be the difference in my having used (a self-defined word) consistently and its *seeming* to me that I have? ... If the distinction between 'correct' and 'seems correct' has disappeared, then so has the concept *correct*"⁶.

It is important here to ask whether having an external point of reference is the only way to be assured that meaning is consistent between past and present uses of a word. To resolve this, we must examine how external points of reference help us in our public language. If an individual's memory is unreliable, then we might say we have no recourse to other people for the verification of the truth of a proposition in our public language, as the group's memories will also be subject to the same flaws. However there is an important difference in the two cases, in that the probability of both the speaker's memory and the memory of his audience failing is necessarily lower than that of just the speaker's memory failing, and further that the probability of larger groups of people all having unreliable memories in relation to the meaning of a word is lower still. Thus we can say that although we may not be able to say for certain that the verification offered by a group is accurate, we can be *more* sure that a group's memory is correct than an individual's'. It is noteworthy that a possible objection to this claim may be found in Smerud, who suggests that "the main arguments (against private language) depend upon ... a Cartesian scepticism with respect to memory"⁷. Interestingly, the Cartesian view seems to be precisely what Wittgenstein is trying to refute here; as Malcolm remarks, "The idea of a private language is ... contained in the philosophy of Descartes (and) at bottom it is the idea that there is only a contingent and not an *essential* connection between a sensation and its outward expression"⁸.

As to the question of whether there are ways to determine the validity of a proposition other than via this kind of probabilistic peer review, we may look to the way in which words are used in the language. One could say that by examining the behaviour of the speaker, we may be able to determine whether his inner experience mirrors our own, and from that start to make his private language public and thus begin to translate. The obvious counter argument to this line of thought is that as soon as we introduce use, we must also provide a way of being sure that his behaviour should be interpreted in the same way that we would interpret our own - yet how can we establish a convention without there already being an agreed use, and thus a public language? Rhees notes that if I attempt to define a colour to you by for instance showing you a sample, the intelligibility of this 'definition' "depends on the definition's being taken in a particular way"⁹ - pointing to an object only makes sense when all parties know what pointing signifies.

All of this leads us back to needing some common external factor via which to agree upon meaning. It could here be argued that one could initiate social interaction with the private linguist, in an attempt to bring social interaction into his 'language game'. The question then is whether a truly private, internally orientated language would have any kind of meaningful social use; that is, it could be said that due to the internal nature of his language, nothing in the speaker's behaviour could possibly hint at the intended meaning. Indeed, this seems to be the thought behind the notion that "Only I can know whether I am in pain; another person can only surmise it"¹⁰. It is important to recognise that the picture of others not knowing I am in pain makes sense only in the context of a private language, not in a public one.

Though the exact nature of a private object is not stated by Wittgenstein, Casteñeda lists no

6 Malcolm in Pitcher: 68

7 Smerud: 13

8 Malcolm in Pitcher: 66

9 Rhees: 58

10 PI: 246

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less than seven possible senses of a 'private object', which primarily distinguish between objects, their properties and the person encountering the object. However, these possible senses really do nothing to help our understanding of private language; as Casteñeda notes, "it is fair to see (that Wittgenstein is) attacking all types of language which involve the idea of a private language in any of the senses"¹¹. Casteñeda defines a private language as one which is only partially "designative of private objects"¹² because a private language can be similar to a public language to the extent that "Since the meaning of (logical terms has) nothing to do with whether the objects talked about are private or public"¹³, there is no reason why a private language could not share these logical terms with a public one. Vohra disagrees with this notion, stating that a private language "cannot have a single word in common with the public language"¹⁴. The argument that Vohra presents is that the rules of language are as much an integral part of the words as the letters or sounds are, that a private language, by definition, must only be capable of being understood by the speaker, and that therefore public and private languages cannot possibly share words that mean the same thing. One point that should be raised against this is that this argument is only applicable to a 'strictly' or 'purely' private language, but surely one could imagine a hybrid language, which spoke of inner sensations, but that those private words were joined together with public words, in a similar way to some of Lewis Carol's poetry, where nonsense words are intermingled with ones that we at least seem to understand. This type of hybrid language should not suffer Vohra's difficulty, but would still work for both Casteñeda and Wittgenstein purposes.

A further attack on the notion of a private language can be found in an examination of the nature of individuality. Burge makes a compelling claim that private language is necessarily impossible because there can only be a concept of individuality within a social context; "an individual's idiolect and concepts cannot be fully understood apart from considering the language and concepts of others with whom he interacts"¹⁵. It is important to note that this is not to say, due to the inherently public nature of language, that there is no room for individuality¹⁶, rather that there is no room for an individual to conceptualise his individuality outside of a social and moreover linguistic context. In effect, Burge is arguing that an individual cannot make notes of his inner sensations in the 'private language' sense, because while he does have such sensations, he cannot meaningfully *say* that he has them. Indeed, this is the thought behind Wittgenstein's statement that "You learned the *concept* 'pain' when you learned language"¹⁷ - and you could not possibly have learned it beforehand.

In conclusion, we have seen how for Wittgenstein, the concept of a private language is simply a contradiction in terms. Language is necessarily a social activity, and therefore it is not merely impossible for an individual to create a private language, but the entire notion of such a language is simply incomprehensible. This notion is backed up by the idea that a private linguist would have no way of knowing, let alone demonstrating, that what he denoted by his language fulfilled the rules of this language. Neither would he have any way of negating the idea that, as Stace puts it; "Your colour red, instead of being similar to mine, may possibly resemble what I should call toothache"¹⁸ without reference to use, which is either impossible without turning his language into a public one, or impossible because he would not behave in any way that we could understand. Finally it has been argued, for example by Burge, that a private language would be impossible because a solitary individual simply would not have any conception of his own individuality, and thus it would make no sense for him to talk of inner sensations.

11 Casteñeda in Jones: 138

12 Casteñeda in Jones: 137

13 Casteñeda in Jones: 136

14 Vohra: 37

15 Burge in George: 186

16 In fact, the implication is quite the opposite; I am an individual as a direct consequence of my standing in relation to other beings.

17 PI: 384

18 Stace, as quoted by Cook in Ambrose: 54

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