

Constructions and the Other

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Let me start with repeating some central points of the post-analytical (I mean “inferentialist” here, for the most part) view on language. In fact, most of these points were anticipated by Ludwig Wittgenstein in some form. Wittgenstein’s terminology also makes it possible to treat things in a less formal way and suits (I think) my topic better.

First of all, language philosophy is talking about is ordinary, natural language. Hence, it is *intersubjective*, that is: a matter of many people’s ((linguistic) community members’) communication with each other. According to this, language is never “private”. Which means, no segment of language (such that can be communicated) can be one person’s exclusive property, genuinely inaccessible (incomprehensible) to anyone else (see e.g. Wittgenstein 1958).

Secondly, the intersubjective language space is constituted by commonly shared *rules* of language. Rules govern the use of language in various “games” of which the body of language consists. Following/non-following the rule decides whether someone plays the game or not, and whether she plays it well (correctly) or not. Rules codify which steps, moves, transitions (in the broadest sense: inferences) a speaker can do are correct, and which are not – that is, which imply any incompatibility (“incompatibility” is meant here not strictly logically, as a contradiction; but just as incompatibility/inadequacy in terms of the respective game). Rules are usually present in the linguistic practice (inherent) *implicitly*. But they mostly *can* be made explicit, at least approximately (though it is not at always easy or equally easy) (see e.g. Brandom 1994).

Thirdly, the meaning of the spoken does not depend on the speaker’s “intention”. Nor does the fact whether she plays (correctly, i.e. successfully) the respective game. It is always the linguistic community who “decides” about it, that is, *other* people than the speaker. Inferentialism calls this a “stance attitude” – the *stance* of the others is what is decisive. What one says means what the others take it to mean; I am who *I am taken to be* by the others (Lance and White 2007).

Now let me introduce certain dissenting voice, from quite distant domain of 20th century philosophy: Emmanuel Lévinas says that to reduce the Other to the one who we take her to be, is a core of human freedom, foundation for the ontological attitude. But the metaphysical and ultimately the *ethical* stance means to doubt and limit my (our) own interpretative freedom with respect to the Other. That is: to accept that the Other is always something more than we take her to be. This fact becomes obvious in the Other’s *face* (Lévinas 1980).

Hence: what is more important: the community’s interpretative stance, or the signs of the Other’s transcendence, visible in her face? These two types of approach represent two different sides of one phenomenon, and ultimately supplement each other. The transition zone between them can be made perspicuous using the example of “private language”.

Originally, “private language” is Wittgenstein’s (1958) thought experiment: let us call “private language” a set of signs labeling someone’s inner experiences. The problem with such a language is following: no one, except its

speaker, has an access to this inner domain, so the only and ultimate authority as to whether the signs of this language are used correctly is the speaker herself. So there is no difference between her correct use (following the rules) and her only thinking she uses the language correctly (only seemingly following the rules). Hence, to speak here of meaning, rules etc. cannot make any sense. Wittgenstein concludes: there is nothing like private language, or rather: we would not call anything of this sort “language” in our sense (since in language, we can make mistakes and be corrected by others).

However, if we do not insist on private language’s being directed “inside”, into the speaker’s mental domain in the way sketched in Wittgenstein’s example, “private language” will be a good classification for each language game, where the speaker cannot know whether she plays it correctly and where rules cannot be identified, or at least identified easily. (Let us not remember that it is a devise of inferentialism that each game’s constitutive inferential rules can be, after all, made explicit).

There are several linguistic phenomena, that would be probable called “language games” (or least, that wouldn’t be claimed to not exist), where the abovementioned criteria of privacy seem to be fulfilled. One of them is literature: It is not at all easy to state any necessary and sufficient criteria for a text to be a piece of literature. Most of those criteria that are the less problematic are also the less informative: a novel is a text filling some number of papers, or the like. The most of more ambitious and informative delimitations of literature suffer from the subversive nature of literature – whenever a general rule of what literature is (or should do) is stated, some author will try to break it. However, the “private” nature of literary language games has a deeper cause. Quite in accord with private language’s difficulties with rules, neither the author, nor anyone else can tell (and be sure as to) what are the respective rules in operation, and whether the author follows them.

This uncertainty about rules and correctness, marking the privacy, is characteristic also e.g. for “schizophrenese” (Wolcott 1970). In the speech of schizophrenic patients, there is no certainty about the meaning of the “words” or the rules – the speaker can quite well only *think* that she is saying something and that she knows what she is saying. Nobody can decide here, what is the meaning (if any) of the said.

Nevertheless, it is interesting that private languages of this kind need not to be necessarily a property of *one* speaker. The condition that neither the others can discover the meaning and rules, nor the speaker is (or is liable to) any transcendent authority, is fulfilled in the case of “secret” languages of twins (cryptophasia). However, neither the scientists can set an agreement as to whether it is a real language (though secret, indecipherable or private), or just a phonological disorder (see Bakker 1987 vs. Dodd and McEvoy 1994).

The cryptophasia example shows the peculiar nature of all the *folies en deux*. They all represent a kind of self-contained world – the others are mostly unable to understand (to play competently) the game, since for them, it is

not sure whether it is a game and what are its rules. The players of such crazy binary game, however, *are* able to understand and *correct* each other. But the nature of the game normativity differs from usual language games. The correcture is not warranted by non-personal community lending the corrective authority to the person, but is directly personal – embodied in particular (only one) person, the speaker's counterpart. In this sense, such a game is much more "authentic" (in Heidegger's (1977) sense) than are more usual games.

Within this list of "private language", a particular position is occupied by the linguistic situation of people who understand themselves to be constantly misunderstood by the others (to be notoriously unable to express themselves the way they *want* the others to understand the utterance). Unlike the other examples of "private languages" which are apparent (in the case of literature, twin talk, or "schizophrenese", the other speakers know very well that they deal with something strange, not to say pathological), this one is *hidden*. The speaker's discontentment stems from the fact that the others indeed *understand* her (and are quite satisfied with it), but *otherwise* than she wants. In such cases, there is no precaution or suspicion on the linguistic community's part.

The speaker's situation becomes private here – for after some time, she cannot be sure whether what (she thinks) she says makes any sense, and what sense. And the private speech intention remains hidden by virtue of public interpretative simulacra constructed.

What is noteworthy here is the fact that this situation is often multiple (mutual): Two people can live together each rather with her/his "construction" of the counterpart, than really with one another. If there is some "who the other really is, as opposed to who do I just think she is", this remains private.

This example makes the disagreement between post-analytical philosophy and Lévinas' view more striking. Inferentialism is certainly right: in the speakers community's linguistic practice, a person is who she is taken to be by the other people – she adopts various roles, and even when she turns out to be individual or unique, "individuality" and "uniqueness" are *public* interpretative schemes (roles), too. To be individual, unique means to fulfill generally given public criteria. This doesn't mean that inferentialism proposes averaging and leveling of the individual by tyrannical community. This is much rather a semantic phenomenon: in order that the concepts of "individuality" or "uniqueness" have some content (either reasonable or not), there must be some criteria and criteria are always intersubjective, hence public in a sense.

Yet this position is reductive. Lévinas is right, too: there is something remaining behind the public interpretative scheme – at least the notoriously misunderstood speaker's despair and frustration is *real*. There must be something where it stems from. Despite a possible "ontology" of this "something", it is relevant from the pragmatist standpoint, since it "causes" (?) something that is operating in the intersubjective space of discourse (usually it is not observed – that's why the intention/interpretation discrepancy remains mostly hidden – but definitely it is observable).

Of course, a question is possible whether this remnant is of linguistic nature, or of extra-linguistic. Language, presented in the manner of analytical philosophy is in its core interpretative, thematizing, pragmatic. The remnant frustration doesn't enter into the space of discourse as a *move* in language game. Its presence is mostly negative. The frustrated misunderstood speaker is not remarkable by

her virtuous ability in whatever linguistic activity. Much rather she quarrels fruitlessly and turns out to be less skillful and able than other speakers. If there is something "private", the privacy exhausts the speakers discursive "energy" – much of it is consumed before it can enter the space of discourse and become manifest there. From the "public" perspective, the speaker burdened by the private onus seems to be just a little "slow" and dull person whose utterances are rather pointless (but quite comprehensible, at least because she usually doesn't seem to tell much).

Certainly, analytical philosophy of language not only can do away with postulating such private remnants, they even present a problem for it – documented clearly enough in Wittgenstein's considerations about the alleged "private language". Yet, what is this remnant's space-of-discourse importance (if any)?

For the sake of an answer, let's introduce another – quite particular – type of "private language". I mean here all the cases when privacy – or perhaps exclusivity – is a matter of task or claim. An example is private discourse between a psycho-therapist and a patient (Sussman 1995); or more generally, all "confidential" contexts of this kind: intimating secrets with the closest friend, confessional secret kept by the priest, etc. The privacy doesn't consist here in the impossibility to divulge the secret – it *can* well be divulged. But the game, by its very nature, stops existing in this moment. In divulging secrets entrusted to me by my closest friend, under the condition of strict discretion, I don't play the game of close friends' secrecy anymore and begin to play e.g. the game of betraying a pretended friendship (in the worst case).

Most of these games of "willing privacy" are not necessary for the pragmatic well-functioning of language. If they contribute anything, it is not a matter of quantity (an augmentation of (the number of) games constituting the space of discourse), but rather *quality*. Their cancellation probably wouldn't diminish notably the number of practical purposes that can be realized by means of language – if anything, it can cause rather some frustration or despair.

What about the case of mutual misunderstanding one another (constructing the fake Other)? Such misunderstanding can persist even whole life long. The point is not to attempt any de-construction of the constructed fake-Other. Any understanding I reach is always my understanding, i.e. still in a sense "public" with respect to the Other's "private" domain. Of course, understandings are not at all equal (and it is very desirable to try to reach as sympathetic one as possible), but the purpose of Lévinas' appeal is to bring myself to doubt my own understanding whatever is it – in order to make myself realize that my counterpart is so to speak "end in itself", someone who transcends whatever I can invent to catch her. Which is a way – of course unwarranted – of alleviating her feelings of frustration and despair.

Hence, Lévinas is quite right in claiming that his analyses are ultimately a matter of *ethics*: the point of his analysis is not to propose an epistemology of the Other (a method of finding who she really is), but an ethics of diminishing myself for the sake of the Other. From the interpretative point of view, it is an ego-central redefining my world: in uncritical (mis)construal of the Other, I conceived her as something naturally present in the world ontology. Now I come to know that only I am present in the world this simple way. In order to meet the Other, I must realize that she doesn't occur in the world that straightforwardly. However, the mechanism of this meeting is a linguistic mystery. The Other lurks beyond what the others (including me) can say about her.

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