Arild Utaker
University of Bergen

Comment on Henry's Paper: On the Difficulties in Thinking of Language

Some years ago both linguistics and the linguistic turn in philosophy promised a new and well-grounded start for the sciences of language and for philosophy. As you all know, things did not turn out that way. Neither linguistics nor philosophy of language succeeded with their "revolutions". But this situation is of course more dramatic within linguistics than within philosophy. Different positions and theories of the same object, as well as different positions on how to talk about it, is normal in philosophy but not in a science. Therefore this situation may be confronted more seriously by a linguist than by a philosopher; the linguist may feel more dramatically that he cannot cope with what is supposed to be his object. Furthermore, within philosophy of language the reference to language has been mostly subordinated to questions as how we can justify that a proposition is true – or in what sense our words or sentences have references. Thus, with respect to language proper, it is perhaps the linguist which is the philosopher on the condition that he is not absorbed by methodological issues, on the condition that he experiences the difficulties in thinking of language.

The "misadventures" of linguistics and philosophy of language reveals the obvious fact that language is not any kind of object. It might be that this situation is not an effect of insufficient methods and procedures; that a linguistics can satisfy all the demands for scientificity and still be unsuccessful – or that a theory within philosophy of language can satisfy the most sophisticated formal

logic and still be unsuccessful: Object and method may pass by one another. Anyway, it seems that language poses itself as the obstacle we meet when we try to reflect upon it – thus the confusions and mystifications in our talk on language. But if we grant that this obstacle is something inherent in language, eluding ("le contourner") it amounts to loose language and thereby to think about something different. In my reading of Paul Henry's paper, this is the important point. What is more, Paul Henry proposes here an original explanation of the constant recurrence of reductionism both in linguistics and in philosophy of language. The explanation is not only that our language is experienced as an obstacle when we try to think it, something to be clarified by a light outside of language. But, furthermore, this obstacle is closely related to the way we are made subjects in being turned into speaking beings: "Language has something to do with our existence as subjects, if not with our existence as living beings, then studying language concerns our existence as subjects". The same can be said of "madness". Thus it is not a pure coincidence that some of those who have been closest to think of language without reducing it to something else, have in some way or another been close to "madness". There is something which, with the terms of Michel Deguy, could be called "La folie de Saussure". Particularly, the link between "madness" and the study of language, may appear when the stress is put upon the unconscious feature of the forces operating within language (as Saussure did in his way of thinking of language). And this will easily be reinforced if, quoting Henry's paper, "it might be that linguists, in the last resort, never can be sure that the knowledge to which they put all their efforts is not purely illusionary".

Within this picture, Paul Henry, poses the relationship between Wittgenstein and the linguists in a new way. The point is not the traditional one in using Wittgenstein in referring to the pragmatics

of language as an argument against for example Chomsky. The point is rather the opposite one. For granted that Wittgenstein exposes the traps of reductionism with respect to language, he compels linguists to be faithful to themselves. But this is a position where Wittgenstein only can tell the linguist what not to do. If this is some form of support, however, it might be a diabolical one; "his position may be understood as denying the possibility of any linguistics whatsoever". Cling to your object, but your science is illusionary. A message that should be received by the linguist as "Cling to your object, but your science may be illusionary".

I accept the paper's argument: Neither can Wittgenstein demonstrate that the linguists are wrong, nor can the linguists demonstrate that Wittgenstein is wrong. This follows from the radical difference between Wittgenstein and the linguists – a difference that makes the importance of the relationship between Wittgenstein and linguists. I wonder however, if this difference may even be greater than envisaged by Henry and if in making it so we may also, in some sense, get them closer to each other. This is the question that occurred to me when I read Paul Henry's paper. My answer will be affirmative. But I have neither sufficient time nor space in order to develop it in some detail. I will limit myself to two issues: 1) The question of the structural homogeneity of language. 2) The question of the presuppositions underlying linguistic and philosophical perspectives on language.

1) In what sense does Wittgenstein deny the thesis of the structural homogeneity of language presupposed in linguistics?
If we claim that Wittgenstein is offering descriptions – assembling reminders – of different ways we are using language, it is in no sense obvious how such would-be descriptions could serve as arguments against a theory; theories being on another level than the

one Wittgenstein is creating for his own thought. There are at least two possibilities: Wittgenstein and the linguists are doing radically different things. So different that we could imagine Wittgenstein accepting the right for the linguist to speak for instance of a language as Norwegian or French. I think this interpretation can be substantiated, and substantiated in a way that can clarify Wittgenstein's philosophical discovery: Even if I understand a sentence in its linguistic sense (because I speak the same language), it might be that I do not understand it. The question of the linguist is thus; I understand my own language and how am I to explain that? The Wittgensteinian question is on the contrary; I do not — in many cases — understand my own language and how am I to explain that? Language and culture (the cultural conditions for the use of language) are consequently of primary importance for Wittgenstein. The same is not the case for the linguist. In this reading Wittgenstein is interested in discourses, not in languages (in different languages).

The other possibility is the following one: Granted that Wittgenstein does something radically different from the linguist, this is just what can make him into the unhappy consciousness of the linguist — of constantly reminding him of what his science might blind him from. In this sense a reading of Wittgenstein could liberate the linguist by bringing him to a reflection of his own object. Thus, he may see his own science as a possible illusion. But this does not necessarily mean that a science of language for Wittgenstein is an illusion. The liberating effect of seeing one's own science as a possible illusion, could quite simply amount to a realization of its contingency: There could be another science — another theory — of language. For this reason the linguist could very well stick to his thesis of the structural homogeneity of language, but he could add that he did not have any proper theory for it. The condition — of course — is to accept Wittgenstein's voice as the voice of the foreigner. Chomsky does not:

"One difficulty, however, in interpreting Wittgenstein, is that it is unclear when what he says is to be taken literally. Some remarks are so outrageous that one can only suppose that something else was intended (e. g. when he asserts that thinking may be an activity performed by the hand, when we think by writing)" (in Morgenbesser: *Essays in Honor of Ernst Nagel* p. 283). Chomsky states here clearly how we can avoid listening to someone foreign to one's own profession: Do not take it literally, something else must have been intended, or it must be taken in a metaphorical sense. Chomsky will not be interrupted – but how can he then have a hope of thinking something he has not thought before? How may Wittgenstein awaken the philosopher in the linguist?

Therefore it is not excluded that the linguist may try to think his thesis of the structural homogeneity of language in directions indirectly inspired by Wittgenstein. He might for instance turn skeptical to his concepts of codes and rules – suspect that they on the one hand might be empty (in explaining nothing) on the other hand that their popularity might be linked to the relative ease by which they can enter into formalization. In this case, Wittgenstein is not only the philosopher telling what not to do. He might shed a new – unexpected – light on what you are doing and at the same time open up new possibilities (which of course do not follow directly from Wittgenstein as some sort of an alternative). This could be a "therapy" for linguists, having a foreigner to express their problems and distress to and through. It might even be that such a relation would be better than the one between Wittgenstein and the philosopher: This one can turn too narcissistic by abolishing the difference between Wittgenstein and the philosopher (reading him or trying to listen to him). Or we can simply say that Wittgenstein is a philosopher only for someone who can feel at the same time

both the fascination and the resistance of his thought (we cannot repeat it but we can think against it).

2) Much has been written on the common grounds of linguistics and philosophy. It has been argued that the concepts of sign and name have constituted such a common core. The question is then if linguistics — I'm thinking primarily of Saussure — has broken with those traditional conditions and if Wittgenstein in another way also can also be said to inaugurate such a rupture. This question is of course too vague and too general. And furthermore; even if we should reflect upon the history of our concepts, this does not mean that we can neatly circumscribe the current conditions for our thinking about language. Of course there are such conditions, as the distinctions between expression and meaning, and between expression and form (structure). And these are functioning in our discourses on language both within philosophy and within linguistics. But if we say that this is all, if we say that this can make what we say about language transparent, we cannot but fool ourselves. What is more, it might be that both modern linguistics and the linguistic turn in philosophy arose precisely at that moment where there was no more common ground for our culture's way of thinking language; thus what is reflected is perhaps that it is language itself that has been a problem. Nothing in our culture is thought about in so many different ways as we think about language. It is enough to be reminded of the difference between Frege and Saussure in order to realize this. And if we agree that Chomsky is closer to Frege than to Saussure, we realize that this difference is not simply a difference between philosophy and linguistics.

So it seems that the modern discovery of language as a groundless ground implies at the same time the dispersions in our efforts to

think it – that our thinking it makes us realize that this thinking has no ground either – or that its foundation in our concepts is groundless. But this is only one side of the coin. Because granted what has just been said, we may encounter language and our thinking about language as something grounded in ourselves. Or as something that concerns ourselves in our existence as subjects. And this means that not anything can be said about language. We have good reasons for distinguishing between right and wrong perspectives on language; Wittgenstein as an argument against reductionistic (and psychologistic) views of language – without claiming for this a scientific or a transcendental basis (a basis that again might be of such a type that we thereby can loose the specificity of language).

Finally, Wittgenstein might help the linguist (and his reader) to ask the following question: Do I understand what I am writing (reading), is it comprehensible? One of my favorite quotations from Chomsky is the following one: "We have practically no understanding of the semantic component – no one has even been able to devise a really good terminology for the semantic representation of sentences, let alone the rules that apply to them" (*Studies on Semantics in Generative Grammar*, 1972, p. 58). Is there a semantic component in language that the linguist has practically no understanding of? Maybe Chomsky assumes something like that. But then he seems to forget that he as a linguist is using words and inventing terms – among them the expression "semantic component". In this case there is no semantic component that awaits a discovery in such a way as to make a proper semantic representation of sentences possible. There is only a hope – and perhaps an illusion – created by a certain term and more generally by a certain discourse. If we do not see such a simple fact the linguist is unable to read himself on the level of his own words, of his own language. The consequence is conceptual

confusions. But this conceptual confusion is made invisible through the concentration on methodology; methods of formalization, rewriting rules etc. And this connection appears to be systematic; Methodology and conceptual confusions are mutually supporting and reinforcing each others. His concept of science makes him blind for his own concepts as they are given in his own discourse. This leads the linguist to a preoccupation with the methodology of linguistics, not to a preoccupation with the ontology of language (what is language? what is our concept of a language?), not to a preoccupation with the history of his own concepts. But saying this implies that it is not necessarily linguistics as linguistics that is problematic. It might be that there is something wrong with our conception of science granted that a science turns so easily idle and so easily into confusions when confronted with an object as language. Otherwise we have to conclude that language is *the* philosophical object. Or maybe this is not the alternative. Maybe language as a philosophical object has to be considered from a linguistic perspective.

However, I'm not quite happy with my last sentence. Let me add a word on the relationship between Wittgenstein and the linguists (as I interpret it in Henry's paper). Both, Wittgenstein and the linguists, are aware of a blindness in language; In Wittgenstein this is thought of as a surface given within our language-games, in linguistics this is thought of as a depth in our grammar. But this is perhaps the lesson of Wittgenstein: The surface of language is as difficult to see as it is easy to go wrong in its depth. Does this mean that the surface and the depth of language (the heterogeneity and the homogeneity of language) are one the same thing?