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Sensualism for Dummies

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1. From sensualism to intentionalism. Four examples.

What do *Wilhelm Wundt* (1832-1920), *Jacques van Ginneken* (1877-1945), *Ernst Cassirer* (1894-1945) and *Martinus Langeveld* (1905-1989) have in common?

Apart from the fact that they were all men, prominent scholars, and active in the first half of the 20th century, there seem to be few common features at first sight. Wundt was a pioneer German psychologist, Van Ginneken was a well-known Dutch linguist, Cassirer was a famous German neo-Kantian philosopher, and the Dutchman Langeveld was one of the founders of pedagogy as a scientific discipline.

However, they shared one interest: language, and its relation to thought. In Wundt's most famous work, the ten-volume *Völkerpsychologie*, two volumes are devoted to language and its psychological foundations. For Van Ginneken, this issue was the central theme of his internationally recognized *Principes de linguistique psychologique*. Also Cassirer's three-volume *Philosophie der Symbolischen Formen* deals with this theme and is regarded as his most original

work. Finally, Langeveld started his successful career with his influential thesis *Taal en denken* (*Language and thought*), written when he was still a language teacher, which explains what connects the theme to problems of language education at secondary schools.

What is more, the positions of the four scholars in the contemporary language philosophy are similar. In very general terms, this debate concerned the transition from sensualism to *intentionalism*.

According to sensualism, mental life mainly consists of representations based upon sense data and internal sensations; language exteriorizes these representations, which are mainly equated with successive representations. This view became dominant in the 19th century and, despite criticism (for example by Humboldt), it continued to be dominant in the 20th century. Condillac, Steinthal and Paul are well-known defenders. From the 1920s onwards, this view was gradually abandoned in favor of a more active view of language.

Meanings of words and sentences were no longer seen as purely representational. As their mental counterparts, more complex volitional acts were assumed. Initially these acts were conceived as purely intra-psychical. Later on, genuine *intentional* acts were assumed: acts not definable solely in terms of internal occurrences in the speaker's mind, but also in terms of their *purpose*, their appeal to the listener, and, moreover, in terms of their being *about* objects and states-of-affairs. The work of Marty and especially Bühler exemplifies this transition. Bühler's famous triangular organon-model can be regarded as the pinnacle of this development: linguistic signs are not only *symptoms*, expressing the speaker's mental state, but also purposeful *signals*, appealing to the listener, and *symbols*, representing external objects and states of affairs (Bühler 1990 [1934]: 34).

The four scholars all participated in this general transition, each in his own way. They took steps away from sensualism, and towards a more active and intentionalist view of mental life and linguistic semantics. But the main reason why I focus on these four scholars is that *they all exhibit remarkable and similar ideas about special, allegedly "lower-level" types of language and thought; for example the language and thought of small children, of so-called primitive people, or of mentally deficient people. The language and thought of these groups is described in purely sensualistic terms.*

This is somewhat surprising: the four scholars all regard non-sensualistic features as *essential* for human language and thought in general. At the same time there appears to be residual sensualism in their description of these special types of human language: *sensualism for dummies*.^[2]

How did they defend these seemingly paradoxical views?

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2. Intentionalism for normal people, sensualism for dummies.

2.1 Wundt

In general, Wundt's view of language and thought is still near to sensualism. He regards language as a pure exteriorization of the speaker's inner mental processes, in which representations and associations are central elements.

A non-sensualistic aspect is, however, his appeal to *apperception*, an active inner process that is essential to language. Wundt rejects the earlier idea of sentences as simple concatenations of words, each word corresponding to a representation. Separate representations (*Einzelvorstellungen*) are not regarded as the basic elements of thought, they come about through isolation from a holistic substrate, the *Gesamtvorstellung*, by means of apperception, which is an act of willful focusing on specific mental elements. In the act of apperception [during word isolation], there is a "voluntary isolation of [...] elements, which results in separate representations.[...] If there is an inclination to communication, an outward reaction necessarily accompanies this apperception as a natural expressive movement" (Wundt 1911³: 615).[3]

But Wundt also claims that primitive people ("*Naturmenschen*") proceed in a quite different way. They lack the essential capacity of breaking up a holistic *Gesamtvorstellung* into elements. "It is different for primitive people, in whose thought words do not exist as isolated elements; only sentences appear as units of thought" (Wundt 1911³: 611).

So there is a paradox about primitive language: there are sentences but they lack the main feature attributed to sentences by Wundt: their being an outward reaction to the *analysis* of a *Gesamtvorstellung*.

2.2 Van Ginneken

Like Wundt, Van Ginneken still defends some sensualistic ideas. For example, in a book about child language, he describes children's sentences as direct reflexes of what the child "sees" through the "window" of its consciousness. Van Ginneken owed a lot to Wundt but he also wanted to surpass him. For example, he rejected Wundt's concept "apperception" as too vague and confusing. Instead, he developed a concept "assent" ("*adhésion*" in his *Principes*), which refers to active claims about states-of-affairs. This goes beyond Wundt, because it relates language to extra-mental entities.

Van Ginneken argues that language cannot exist without *reality-assent*: "The question is: are representations of words and objects sufficient to make language possible? [...] Our answer is: they are not sufficient. The facts of language show that assent is necessary as well" (Van

Ginneken 1904-1906: 54).

He even ridicules the idea that speakers only want to convey their mental images to their listeners. As an example, he refers to the soldiers in Xenophon's *Anabasis*, who began running to the sea after hearing the joyous cry "*Thalassa!*" His comment: "Of course they did not run because of a mental image, but because of the expectation of the real sea" (Van Ginneken 1904-1906: 62). In all its simplicity, this is a substantial step towards intentionalism.

At the same time, we are told that feeble-minded people lack the capacity of reality-assent. Van Ginneken extensively studied the work of pioneer psychiatrists of his day, such as Janet and Binet. Janet observed that during the progression of mental deficiency, psychical functions disappear in a strict hierarchical sequence: first the more exacting and complex functions, later the simpler ones. The first function to disappear is the "reality function" (*la fonction du réel*). Van Ginneken equates this function with reality-assent and thus concludes that mentally disabled people lack this capacity, whereas representations and especially visual images, remain available: "Until the last stages of [mental] illness, representations are staying, they even become more clear and vivid, but reality-assent has disappeared." (Van Ginneken 1904-1906: 57-58). So their language conforms to the sensualist mode of pure expression of representations.

Again the paradox: a non-sensualistic feature regarded as inherent in language is denied to the language of a specific group of people.

2.3 Cassirer

Cassirer is the first of our four scholars who explicitly rejects a sensualist approach to linguistics. Discussing the complexities of language and thought, his conclusion is: "Sensualism strives in vain to derive them from the immediate content of particular impressions" (Cassirer 1968⁷: 94).

His own view reflects many ideas of Wundt, but also of Humboldt. His central claim about language and art is that they do not *copy* reality but *create* reality. Especially linguistic symbolism implies an active grasp of the world through conceptual schemes. Against passive sensualism, and in line with intentionalism, he claims that even a sense datum is inherently symbolic, it "reaches beyond itself". For language this implies that "...not in proximity to the immediately given, but in progressive *removal* from it, lie the value and the specific character of linguistic as of artistic formation, [...] Language [...] *begins* only where our immediate relation to sensory expression [...] *ceases*"(Cassirer 1968⁷: 106).

Nevertheless, for Cassirer, the language of small children and primitive people consists of an exact copy of the speaker's sense data. Precisely the situation which, according to Cassirer himself, makes impossible even the beginnings of language, applies to these groups: "Here the

sounds seeks to approach the sensory impression and reproduce its diversity as faithfully as possible. This striving plays an important part in the speech both of children and “primitive” people” (Cassirer 1968⁷: 190). Again the same paradox.

2.4 Langeveld

Langeveld is the latest of our four scholars. When he wrote *Taal en denken*, he could, unlike the others, benefit from Bühler’s most elaborate versions of his views of language and thought (esp. Bühler 1934). Like Cassirer and Bühler himself, Langeveld explicitly rejects sensualism. He sharply criticizes the view of a colleague-teacher who regards language as a kind of inner storehouse, with perception-based “photo-images” of objects and their associations with words: “This has nothing to do with language [...] Word comprehension does not consist in the appearance of a visual image of the object referred to [...], as one should expect according to sensualistic ideas” (Langeveld 1934: 88-90). Langeveld claims that language embodies intentional acts of thought, which are guided by abstract conceptual schemes, corresponding to grammatical structures.

However, in a later passage Langeveld again refers to this colleague’s ideas, this time not to reject them, but to *apply* them, namely to specific types of language use: the language of small children and of primitive people. But in Langeveld’s case, there are other “dummies” as well. Due to his practice as a teacher and his wide reading of psychological and pedagogical literature, he includes the language of deaf and dumb people, and especially the language of what he calls “eloquent stupids”: unintelligent children who talk fluently and impeccably, but go off the rails in tasks such as retelling a story. According to Langeveld, all these types of language use are direct reflexes of chaotic explosions of images, uncontrolled by the abstract organizing schemes.^[4] Again, several types of languages use are characterized in terms of sensualistic ideas, in Langeveld’s case: ideas characterized by himself as “having nothing to do with language”.

3. Explaining the paradox

How can these paradoxical views be explained? I can go into this question only in a tentative way. First, we have to take into account that the entire transition from sensualism to intentionalism was a difficult and complex development, which proceeded not at all smoothly and coherently. There were more paradoxes than the one just discussed. Knobloch (1988: 298), in his outstanding book about linguistics and psychology in 19th-century Germany, justifiably characterizes the transition as “a long process, beset with contradictions”.

Of course, the paradox was also facilitated by the contemporary intellectual climate, which allowed labeling peoples and groups as “primitive” and “incapable of abstract and logical thought”.

But more specific triggers must be relevant, if only because these remnants of sensualism are not

at all omnipresent. For example, they are entirely absent in Bühler's work, and also in the work of the contemporary linguist Reichling (Bühler 1990 [1934], Reichling 1967² [1935]).

A crucial factor seems to be *the presence or absence of some rudimentary sensualistic elements in the total theory of language and thought*. If present, such elements are located in a *sensualistic substrate*, a "primitive" bottom layer of representations and associations, *upon which* intentional acts take place. Such a view facilitates and is facilitated by ideas about *levels* in the *development* of language and thought.

Precisely this is what we find in the work of the four scholars. I mentioned Van Ginneken's appeal to Janet's hierarchy of psychological functions. The others defend their own hierarchies. In Wundt's developmental model, the very first stage, preceding conscious thought and *Gesamtvorstellungen*, consists of a substrate of representations. Cassirer presents his own well-known layered view of *mimetic*, *analogical* and *symbolic* expression. Finally, Langeveld appeals to layered models of human consciousness, developed by contemporary psychologists (especially Sassenfeld), whose first layer consists of separate representations. Given such a stratified view of language and thought, and the assumption of a sensualist lowest level, it is a small step towards applying the levels in the way we observed to allegedly lesser developed forms of language.

For Bühler and Reichling, such levels don't exist. For Bühler (1990 [1934]: 45), the purposive appeal function of language is essential, even in animal language: "[...] all forms of learning, ranging from those encountered in the infusoria to human learning, involve [...] objectively detectable reactions to *signals*." For Reichling (1967² [1935]: 123), the very first words of infants are intentionally directed: "it [the child] utters its strivings towards a purpose, a purpose that can consist in a "thing" or an "action", or, better formulated, a "thing to be acted upon".

My tentative conclusion: a fundamental and broad intentionalism prevents all sensualism. In the works of our four scholars, intentionalism is either only rudimentarily present (Wundt and Van Ginneken) or present in the narrow intellectualistic variety of abstract conceptual schemes (Cassirer and Langeveld). In both cases, "sensualism for dummies" may appear, especially in relation to a layered model of language.

Notes

[1] Full titles:

W. Wundt – *Die Sprache* (vol. 1 and 2 of *Völkerpsychologie. Eine Untersuchung der Entwicklungsgesetze von Sprache, Mythos und Sitte*). Leipzig 1900.

J. van Ginneken – *Principes de linguistique psychologique. Essay synthétique*. Amsterdam 1907.

E. Cassirer – *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen*. Vol.1-3. Berlin 1923-1929.

M. Langeveld – *Taal en denken. Een theoretische en didactische bijdrage tot het voortgezet*

onderwijs in de moedertaal, inzonderheid tot dat der grammatika. Groningen 1934.

[2] There may be more scholars whose work contains remnants of sensualism. These are the four I know about; further research may reveal other examples.

[3] Translations from German and Dutch into English are mine (E.E.), if published translations were not available (see the References).

[4] Language performance can, therefore, be improved through grammatical training, according to Langeveld. He thus provided a rather influential *pro*-argument in the contemporary debate about the usefulness or uselessness of school grammar.

References (see also note 1)

Bühler, K. 1990 [1934]. *Theory of language: the representational function of language*. Transl. by D.F Goodwin, with an introd. by A. Eschbach. Amsterdam etc.

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Knobloch, C. 1988. *Geschichte der psychologischen Sprachauffassung in Deutschland von 1850 bis 1920*. Tübingen.

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