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A Case for Private Language

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A. J. Ayer, in his paper "Can There Be a Private Language?", argues that there are really two different ways for a language to be private. The first is a language in which the objects of the terms in the language are only subjectively accessible, a language of private sensation. This is the sense of private language he feels most philosophers have taken in the debate over the possibility of private language. The way Ayer wishes to interpret private language is as a language which is developed and used by a single speaker, where the terms can refer to objects which are externally observable as well as to objects which are only subjectively accessible. To distinguish this sense of a private language, I shall call it a *solitary language* and oppose it to a language with more than one speaker, a *social language*. Ayer argues that a solitary language is logically possible and extrapolates from this that a language of private sensation might also be logically possible.

Ayer's defense of private and solitary language depends on his diffusing an argument from Wittgenstein on the impossibility of language of private sensation. Ayer relies on his arguments for the possibility of solitary language to do this. I think that Ayer has taken Wittgenstein's argument too strictly and that by extending the implications of Wittgenstein's argument it can be shown that a solitary language is epistemically impossible, at least in the fashion that is required by Ayer. I will show that while it might be logically or metaphysically possible for a solitary individual to devise a language, it is epistemically impossible for a solitary speaker to fix the terms of language to the degree required for it to qualify as a language for that speaker.

Wittgenstein's argument against the possibility of a private language is generally taken to be an argument against a language of private sensation. This interpretation takes it that a language of private sensation will be epistemically impossible because the references of the terms are not externally observable. I think that what his argument really amounts to is showing the epistemic impossibility of any solitary language, regardless of the observability of the referents. I think that Wittgenstein discusses private sensations because this is a clear example of a case of allegedly private meaning, where the referents are solipsistic. But Ayer points out that an individual such as Robinson Crusoe, if he were to shipwreck before having acquired a language, would be in a position to develop a language capable of describing

publicly observable objects without a public. Thus, Robinson Crusoe would speak a solitary language which would only have meaning for him. According to Ayer, Crusoe's language could become a social language; it just happens to be solitary because there is no one else around to speak it. If we take Ayer at his word, then for a solitary language to exist it must meet the criteria for a social language, yet be created and used by only one individual. For the purposes of this paper, I take a language to be a set of terms or symbols and rules which are attached to meanings and referents in a way that allows a speaker to express his/her beliefs about his/her world of experience. The epistemic criteria for such a language is that a speaker must be able to use the terms and rules correctly and be able to verify that s/he has done so.

In his *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein argues that a private language is impossible because an individual cannot verify the correctness of his own use of a term or sign. Since correctness becomes arbitrary, so does meaning. Wittgenstein's example goes like this:

> I want keep a diary about the recurrence of a certain sensation. To this end I associate it with the sign 'S' and write this sign in a calendar for every day on which I have the sensation. I will remark first of all that a definition of the sign cannot be formulated.—But still I can give myself a kind of ostensive definition.—How? Can I point to the sensation? Not in the ordinary sense. But I speak, or write the sign down, and at the same time I concentrate my attention on the sensation—and so, as it were, point to it inwardly.—But what is this ceremony for? For that is all it seems to be! A definition surely serves to establish the meaning of a sign.—Well, that is done precisely by the concentration of my attention; for in this way I impress on myself the connection between the sign and the sensation.—But 'I impress it on myself' can only mean: this process brings it about that I remember the connexion *right* in the future. But in the present case I have no criterion of correctness. One would like to say: whatever is going to seem right to me is right. And that only means one can't talk about 'right'...Let us imagine a table (something like a dictionary) that exists only in our imagination. A dictionary can be used to justify the translation of a word X into a word Y. But are we also to call it a justification if such a table is to be looked up only in the imagination?—'Well, yes: then it is a subjective justification',—But justification consists in

appealing to something independent.—'But surely I can
appeal from one memory to another. For example, I
don't know if I have remembered the time of departure
of a train right and to check it I call to mind how a page
of the time-table looked. Isn't it the same here?' No; for
this process has got to produce a memory which is
actually *correct*. If the mental image of the time-table
could not itself be *tested* for correctness, how could it
confirm the correctness of the first memory? (As if
someone were to buy several copies of the morning
paper to assure himself that what it said was true.)
Looking up a table in the imagination is no more
looking up a table than the image of an imagined
experiment is the result of and experiment. (Trans.
Ayer, 450-451)

Wittgenstein concludes from his argument that we can have a
language of private sensation but it will be in the terms of public
language. Thus, a private sensation will be identified by a public
description.

This argument rests upon the fact that if the use of a term or sign
cannot be checked or verified to be correct, then the term's use is
indeterminate. A language with indeterminant terms simply doesn't
qualify as a language. In public languages there is a clear way of
determining the correctness of a speaker's use of the language, namely,
being corrected by other speaker according to the conventions of the
language. Wittgenstein's point is not that we cannot make up terms for
or talk about private sensations. His point is that so long as language is
'kept to oneself' as it were, there is no way for linguistic connections to
arise which could stabilize the language and save it from indeterminacy.

In giving his account of Robinson Crusoe making up an entire
language on his own, Ayer takes it that Crusoe's achievement would be
logically possible though likely not psychologically possible. Ayer tells
us to imagine someone, such as Robinson Crusoe, who is stranded alone
on an island, and to further imagine that the stranding occurred at an
early, prelinguistic age and the Crusoe baby was raised by wolves so
that Crusoe has not yet acquired a language nor does he come in contact
with any language. Ayer maintains that Crusoe might well develop his
own language which could refer to various externally observable objects
on his island, and in a similar manner this language might contain terms
with refer to Crusoe's private sensations. I think that if we extend
Wittgenstein's argument to Robinson Crusoe, we will see that Robinson
will not be able to determine the terms of his language for public objects
adequately, and will therefore not be able to use his own solitary

language correctly.

Certainly for any purely "mental language", one whose terms are unspoken and unwritten and exist solely in his head, which Crusoe comes up with, he will be in the very same situation as the diary-of-sensations keeper. His use of a term at any time will rely on his memories about what the term meant before and whether it applies now. This leaves Crusoe's terms meaning whatever he wants them to mean; he can never make a linguistic "mistake" and so his use of a term will be indeterminant. But as the referents of his language are public, so might the terms become public by being written down, presenting us with a more interesting challenge to claim that and individual could not use a solitary language with certainty.

So let us imagine that Cursoe is able to assign symbols to objects on his island. In this way his ascriptions will be public and, according to Ayer, should be satisfactorily checkable. Crusoe's doing this amounts to making a public dictionary for his language. This would make his language public, but as long as he is able on the island the language will be solitary. The question now is whether Crusoe will be able to determine the terms of this language by this dictionary.

I believe that such a public dictionary will not be able to fix his terms, as the following example will demonstrate. Imagine that on a particular day Crusoe eats the fruit of a tree on his island and leaves a mark on that tree to indicate whether the fruit was edible or poisonous. Some time later, Crusoe returns to the tree and sees the marking. He takes the marking to mean that the fruit is edible, but upon eating the fruit becomes quite ill. Crusoe has make a mistake, but the fundamental problem is deciding what kind of mistake he has make. if his sign did mean that the tree bore edible fruit, then he made a linguistic mistake when he marked the tree incorrectly. If his sign meant that the tree bore poisonous fruit, then his linguistic mistake was in misinterpreting his marking. How is Crusoe to decide which mistake he made? He will have to depend on his memories about the meaning he wished to mark to have when he made it. While he might be inclined to decide one way or the other, he has nothing but his memory to verify the correctness of his decision; he cannot ask anyone what the marking mean. Depending on his decision, the marking can either mean "poisonous" or "edible" and since he cannot verify which it means, the marking is left meaning whatever he wants it to mean *now*. He is again no better off than our diary-of-sensations keeper.

The only way to verify the proper use and meaning of a term is to have an objective standard for its correct use. Public dictionaries will not help Crusoe's problem is not that the referents or symbols of his language are private it is that the *meanings* of his symbols are private. And so long as there are no other speakers of his language, there is no

way of making his meanings public. And is his meanings are private, then they are dependent on his memory alone and therefore indeterminant. only another speaker can determine if Crusoe's symbols match his meanings correctly.

The only way to determine the meanings of linguistic tokens is to establish to connection between tokens and meanings publicly. This connection must be established through convention. Conventions require multiple speakers to be objective standards; if conventions are solipsistic they will be indeterminant. The terms of language are determinant when they are maintained by public conventions because when a mistake is made, it is corrected by other members of the linguistic community according to the conventions. Language is a tool for communicating meaning. If an individual speaker violates the conventional use of a term s/he will fail to communicate with other speakers. The mistaken speaker will be corrected in order to get his/her meaning across. By establishing and maintaining conventions, the members of a linguistic community can insure the proper use of their language. Thus, public linguistic community can insure the proper use of their language. Thus, public linguistic convention is the means by which the semantics of a language are stabilized and determined.

A possible objection to this line of argument against solitary languages would be that it is too strong for *any* language to exist. but this is not the case. In a social language, the connection between tokens and meanings will be established by convention. This is pointed out in David Lewis' account to how a language is implemented:

> A language L is used by a population P is and only if
> there prevails in P a convention of truthfulness and trust
> in L, sustained by and interest in communication.
> (Lewis,293).

When a linguistic mistake is made, the party in error is corrected by other members of the linguistic community. This is how semantics arise and are stabilized. Granted, it is possible for the entire linguistic community to make a "mistake", but for the language to still succeed. This is reflected in the etymological evolution of words. "Nice" once meant *foolish*, and now it means *pleasant* —its meaning has changed. What happens is that the convention maintaining the word's use breaks down or changes. The word's meaning changes as its conventions changes. Quite simply, a word means what it does because of how it is used in communication. Even though the convention use of a term can change, there is a still a method for discovering linguistic mistakes. You have made a mistake when you fail to communicate your meaning with other speakers. But with other speakers you can correct the mistake thought clarifications. There is not way to clarity mistakes

solipsistically.

The linguistic checkability of language is reflected in how language is psychologically acquired. We learn language by trial and error. We are corrected when we make mistakes until we make no or few mistakes. We need an external *speaker* of the language in order to do this; only an intelligent speaker of a language can comprehend the meanings of the terms of the language. A dictionary can never access the linguistic meanings of the terms which it contains in the way that a speaker can. A solitary language could be devised, but it could never be justifiably knowable. This should seem to imply that the only way to learn a language is from a source which has already mastered the language, and hence that a natural language such as English could have never developed unless it had always been spoken. But this is not the case. So long as there is a desire to communicate, two or more individuals can give rise to language through trial and error because of the success or failure of their communication with each other. In general, words came to mean what they did not by the decision of single person but by their successes in communicating. Hence, any two or more speakers could establish public conventions and therefore a social language from scratch.

All that remains is to clarify some cases which Ayer takes to be examples of solitary languages. The first is the case of an individual who is the last speaker of a once social language. Quite obviously, this individual is the only person who speaks the language, but the language arose socially and hence is really a social language. Such and individual, in mastering the social language, has adequately learned the conventions of that language and so the language is adequately determined.

The second example Ayer gives is of someone developing a secret code for a diary or such, which she alone uses. This is the case of a solitary natural language. The real meaning of the terms in such a code depends on the meanings of the decoded terms in the natural language. The code is of symbolic manipulation on terms of the natural language and does not add to or change any of the meanings from what could be written in the natural uncoded language. Formal languages contain only syntax; they have no semantics. There would be no difficulty in developing a solitary formal language, because it does not try to connect the tokens to any meanings. The rules for the manipulations of the formal language could be written in the natural language, a decoder as it were, and thus remain determinant. The only way for a formal language to have any meaning is for it to be a syntactic manipulation of a natural language which has meaning. In this way, a formal language could not develop without a natural language which is in turn dependent on social convention.

Ayer's final case is that of solitary terms or jargon, which only mean something to a single individual. This is really a case of augmenting an already existing and mastered social language. We can certainly make up a novel word and before we use it, it is quite private. But it will be describable in the existing terms of the language. This is what happens when we coin a new them. When we first use it, it is given an ostensive definition or description in a social language. Plus, this novel term is dependent on the inventor's natural language for its syntax and use. It does not constitute a language; it is simply an addition to a language.

I have shown how I think Wittgenstein's argument extends to solitary languages. Solitary languages do not meet the criterion of a language proper, at least in being epistemically verifiable. I have also shown how this criterion is not so strict as to preclude any language at all. While there are cases of solitary linguistic practice, these practices do not constitute a genuine natural language. You can talk to yourself all you wish, but you language is not your own.

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