

Review of: "How to cure the Wittgensteinian anxiety? A two-dimensional approach to speakers' intuitions in linguistics"

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The paper makes a worthwhile contribution to existing linguistic theories and should be published. However, my work on consciousness, thought and language, as published recently (Peper, 2020, 2022), challenges many of the views expressed in the paper. I do realize that my theory of language is as yet not well known. I will therefore briefly discuss my theory before commenting on some points made in the paper. I propose that the writer takes note of and, if possible, incorporates my observations and reservations.

A short resume of my theory.

Thinking is a neural process. The outcome of this neural cognitive process - a thought - becomes conscious. The natural way to become conscious of neural information is to translate it into environmental images which were the cause of the thought process: the outcome of the neural cognitive process is translated back into sensory images which are fundamentally conscious. Note: I'm not stating what consciousness is, only how it is incited. The sensory images, of which the visual images are dominant, are necessarily of a complexity comparable to that of the neural process as they developed concurrently in the evolution of the human brain. When a thought is translated into language, major problems occur. While the visual images of the natural process are 2- or even 3-dimensional, language is 1-dimensional: what is a complex neural cognitive activity is encoded into language tokens which are positioned sequentially as a string of symbols and somehow must express something comparable. The fundamental problem with verbal communication is that thoughts cannot be expressed accurately in language. When the verbal message is translated into a thought in a listener, a comparable indeterminate transformation takes place.

In addition to the problematic nature of verbal communication, there is the complication that most humans think in language. Instead of relying on the natural translation of thoughts into sensory images, most humans translate their cognitive activity into audible language: the voice in one's head. This has all the disadvantages of verbal communication and the result is that what becomes conscious in humans of their thoughts are deformed and often very divergent

versions of those thoughts.

The consequence of using language for communication and thinking is that the resulting information is never exact or even adequate. Verbal thinking and verbal communication lead to misunderstanding; communicating a thought in any exact way is elusive. In addition, the natural sensory way of becoming conscious of thoughts is scarcely accessible anymore in verbal thinkers as it has largely become unconscious. What remains are our feelings, which are a form of sensory thinking, and instances of sudden knowledge, like intuition, of which the source remains unknown to us, as it is unconscious sensory thinking.

Most people are more or less verbal thinkers, but there are numerous well known visual thinkers, like Einstein, Wittgenstein and Sartre, to name a few. But they all use language too, although at different levels of excellence.

Some comments on the paper

A main subject of the present paper is the assumed alleviation of the problems in verbal communication by way of intuition. The word intuition is not univocal. The paper states:

'If the term "intuition" is understood broadly as any subjective evaluation of linguistic expressions performed by a speaker.'

Lieberman (2000) defines it as: '[...] intuition is the subjective experience of a mostly nonconscious process that is fast, a-logical, and inaccessible to consciousness.'

Sensory thinking, as I define it above and in my papers on consciousness and language, covers intuition and comparable phenomena and my papers may give insight into how intuition is conceived. In verbal thinkers, sensory thinking is still present, but not consciously accessible, which explains its obscure nature.

'Wittgensteinian anxiety, the unobservability of mental phenomena and the mysterious nature of the human mind.'

Wittgenstein's approach was hampered by the fact that he could not well understand where thoughts come from before one gets conscious of them in language; see e.g. his investigations ' 305 onwards. The current writer has the same difficulty; hence the '*mysterious nature of the human mind*'.

Thoughts are neural processes which are made conscious via translation into sensory images - the natural way - or artificially, via translation into words in spoken language. How the neural cognitive process itself works, or what is the 'nature of the human mind', we do not know much about, and we should simply accept it as a given. However, if we did know, it wouldn't change my explanation of how we experience thoughts in any way or my conclusion about the fundamental inaccuracy of verbal communication and verbal thinking. And rather than contemplating the problems of the mysterious mind, one should worry about the problems of language. Our thoughts are not mysterious; the medium through which we try to understand them is incomprehensible. Of course, in simple examples language works adequately,

but if a thought has any complexity, the result is confusion and misunderstanding.

The paper reminds me of a paper by Nini Praetorius (2010) entitled *Intersubjectivity, Cognition, and Language*, where she gives a brilliant analysis of everything that is wrong with language, and then concludes that, notwithstanding her convincing arguments, language is OK, due to the effects of social interaction, which makes verbal communication understandable. In the present paper, verbal communication is saved by intuition. The disturbing fact, however, is that, although indeed the problematic nature of verbal communication can be ameliorated to a certain extent by the effects of social interaction and intuition, language remains a fundamentally inaccurate tool and the outcome of conversations generally involve a high degree of misunderstanding (Peper, 2022).

So, when the paper states

'[...] a strong commonsense conviction that we successfully communicate details of our subjective experiences in everyday situations',

I can only say that in my opinion such a conviction is not justifiable. Humans grow up in a world defined by language, a world where language is idealized and worshipped. The great mystery is that humans are convinced that verbal communication is a brilliant way of communicating thoughts to others. When a statement is then not perceived or understood as was intended, the speaker generally attributes the miscommunication to dubious intentions or a lack of intelligence on the part of the listener, with all the consequences we see, read or hear about every day.

The assumption that intuition can cure the 'Wittgensteinian anxiety' is in my view not justified. Intuition, Intersubjectivity, additional information or the context of a discussion somewhat ameliorate what is a difficult or often even impossible situation, but the essence of a verbal message in say politics or scientific discourse, will never be exact or even functional. The countless endeavours to exegete Wittgenstein's *Investigations*, for instance, are all based on the same text yet all provide a more or less different interpretation of his work.

The paper states:

'[...] some aspects of speakers' mental experiences can be studied indirectly through reports and these aspects suffice for capturing some structural properties of the experience.'

I do contest the suggestion that mental experiences can be captured in language in any accurate way. As discussed above and in my papers on the subject, there are two translation processes active when a mental experience is reported. The first takes place in the speaker, when the neural activity is transformed into language. The second, when the listener tries to understand the resulting verbal message. These two transformations are similar, although of opposite direction. What the transformation of the neural cognitive activity of the speaker into language yields is as ill-defined as the transformation of his statements into understanding by the listener.

Simple examples are given in the paper, as they are often used to prove theories and to suggest their relevancy. But in any verbal interaction of any substance, what happens is fundamentally different from simple examples and, generally speaking, the outcome of verbal interactions is fundamentally flawed.

The paper does more or less support this view when it states:

'[...] mental entities are not publicly observable and the mind itself is too mysterious and nebulous to be used as an explanans of concrete linguistic phenomena.'

Rather than regard the mind as mysterious and nebulous, I prefer to see it as an extremely complex system whose functioning we are not able to understand. In itself, the mind, or rather, the neural cognitive process, is fully intelligible. That we don't know very well how it works does not make it mysterious, but rather unknown. That we also don't know very well what our thoughts are is because we try to understand them through language. It is the translation into language of the outcome of the cognitive process which causes all the problems. When thoughts are translated into sensory images the natural way, as visual thinkers do, the thoughts become much more understandable. However, when visual thinkers then communicate them verbally, they find themselves in a situation comparable to that of verbal thinkers.

'Some 1-intensional properties of mental experience can be revealed in acts of public communication, so that the hearer can become intersubjectively familiar with some aspects of the speaker=s subjective experience.'

Again, the hearer can't. There is no way he can evaluate the true cognitive activity in the speaker's brain. The specifics of the situation - I suppose what the writer calls the 1-intensional properties - may help him to gain some understanding, but it is never unequivocal and it can never make a verbally communicated thought really clear to the listener. Even the speaker himself doesn't fully know what the neural cognitive information is he tries to communicate. The accurate, sensory way of understanding his actual thoughts has become largely unconscious.

References

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