

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

Jarosław Boruszewski¹

¹ Adam Mickiewicz University of Poznań

Potential competing interests: No potential competing interests to declare.

The Mentalist Linguist on Twin Earth

The article addresses the problem of the role of speakers' subjective judgments in linguistics. The author draws attention to the ambivalent status of these judgments. On the one hand, they are useful in linguistic research, particularly when speakers' subjective judgments about linguistic data are communicated in the form of verbal reports. On the other hand, their status is methodologically suspect, due to the reference in scientific research to private mental experiences of language users. The author's intention is to provide an argument justifying the first approach, while at the same time undermining at least some of the objections to the second approach.

The argumentative strategy used in the article seems to be as follows: in linguistic research we can indirectly refer to speakers' subjective judgments, and this suffices for researchers to grasp some of their properties. The conclusion is that these speakers' subjective judgments are useful in linguistic research. As the author expressed:

"some aspects of speakers' mental experiences can be studied indirectly through reports and these aspects suffice for capturing some structural properties of the experience. Hence, it appears that intuitions about linguistic data can be used fruitfully in structure-oriented linguistics" (p. 4).

Thus, we can reconstruct the content of the article in the form of an argument with two premises. It should be noted that the conclusion of the above argumentation is independently confirmed by the author's earlier inquiries, in which he convincingly demonstrated the irreducibility of the first-person perspective to neurolinguistic research. In the reviewed article, however, the goal is much more ambitious: speakers' subjective judgments are not just an irreducible neurological residuum, but: "I argue that linguistic meanings are primarily mental" (p. 14). In this regard, it can be said that the author's argumentation is insufficient and, at this stage of the inquiry, unconvincing.

The author's use of two-dimensional semantics is undoubtedly an apt idea. It enables constructing of argumentative narrative aimed at casting doubt on the "Wittgensteinian anxiety". This helps to provide support for the first premise of the above argumentation. However, two-dimensional semantics alone is not enough and the author is fully aware of this. Here, his considerations are supplemented with ideas of structuralist philosophy of science. However, in this case the thesis proclaiming that "intuitions are isomorphic to empirical substructures embedded in a larger model of language" (p.

13) is a “blank check.” Thus, the second premise is not justified. To be more precise, there is a yawning gap between “some aspects” and “structural properties.” This gap can be imagined as the situation of the mentalist linguist on Twin Earth.

Take the first premise of the above argument: “some aspects of speakers' mental experiences can be studied indirectly through reports”. From considerations based on two-dimensional semantics, we know that mental experiences have a two-fold character and that the above premise cannot apply to the phenomenal content of these experiences. A concretization of this thesis is a matter of linguistic intuitions:

“Linguistic intuitions have a similar two-fold character. For instance, when a consultant *reports the intuition that sentence X is ungrammatical in language Y*, the consultant cannot report what this intuition “feels like” phenomenally and the linguist cannot investigate the “feel” through direct observation. [...] Yet both the linguist and the *consultant may agree that the intuition about sentence X in language Y* is such that the rules of language Y prevent speakers from producing sentence X” (p. 12; emphasis added).

So far so good. The consultant reports the content of their intuitive judgments about language, and they can communicate about this content with the linguistic researcher. In other words, the consultant formulates verbal reports about what their subjective judgments are about. In this sense, one can speak of intersubjective communicability of the content of the speaker's subjective judgments about linguistic data.

However, the author goes further: “I will defend the view than some non-phenomenal *aspects of mental experience are communicable* through reports and can be used for public science” (p. 4; emphasis added).

Here, however, we have an equivocation of the term “communicability.” In other words, we have a conflation of *communicability of the content* of subjective judgments with *communicability of the properties* of these judgments. The first situation concerns “reports from intuitions” (p. 14), while the second situation concerns “reports about intuitions” (p. 13). Thus, we have a conflation of content reporting with property reporting. The consultant communicates content, that is, what their judgments are about, but they do not communicate the structural properties of these judgments. The consultant says what their judgments are about, not what properties they have. In other words, we have a conflation of talking about the content with talking about the vehicle. From the intersubjective communicability of intuitive judgments' content it cannot be inferred that the structural properties of these judgments are intersubjectively communicable. This is in line with the principle of intersubjective communicability, which is concerned with the content, not the properties of the vehicle.

Therefore, it is necessary to show how “reports from intuitions” are at the same time “reports about intuitions”. Two-dimensional semantics does not suffice here, because 2-intentional properties of intuitive judgments are ineffable, and the issue is how the reports reveal 1-intentional properties. What is needed here is a structuralist thesis: “the reports may reveal structural aspects of mental experience” (p. 13). However, we are dealing here with a different semiotic function of the reports, different from communication of content. This is suggested by the last sentence of the reviewed article: “In mentalist linguistics, a verbal report is not taken to be the data for linguistic analysis, but a means of indirect access to mental phenomena, which are the data proper” (p. 15). Without a detailed elaboration of this semiotic function, the

structuralist dimension of the author's considerations remains an act of philosophical faith. It cannot be the basis of a methodological directive for studying the properties of mental experience through reports. Perhaps it is a specific function of manifestation, perhaps some kind of indirect exemplification, but it is certainly not communication understood according to the principle of intersubjective communicability.

In his investigations, the author outlined "[t]he similarity between the mentalist linguist and a scientist on Twin Earth (given the ignorance of advanced chemistry)" (p. 12). This assumed ignorance is important here – it is the ignorance regarding the methods of structural analysis used in chemistry on Earth. This is the situation in which the mentalist linguist finds themselves: on Twin Earth with a missing premise.