

Can One Person Have a Language?

As Ayer points out in his article, "Can There Be a Private Language?", there is an ordinary sense in which there can be private languages.¹⁰ There are languages which are understood by a limited number of people. Likewise a person can devise a code, keeping it secret, for a diary. These languages can be viewed as private in that, in fact, they are understood only by one person, or a limited number of people. Such languages could become public; the person can give the key to the code away. As Ayer says, this isn't what philosophers have had in mind when speaking of a private language.¹

In this paper, I am not concerned primarily with the possibility of a private language, if a private language is taken to be one that it is impossible for another person to understand. I am concerned with whether or not one person can have a language. This question has become tangled with the question about private languages mentioned above, and in this way has some philosophical importance. I believe its importance is somewhat less than the first question, which is the deep one. However, it gains importance from its entanglement with the deeper question. Ayer poises this question in arguing against Wittgenstein, and Rhee responds against Ayer in order to defend Wittgenstein.² Could a Robinson Crusoe, left alone on an island from birth, develop a language? My view is that, although it may be psychologically impossible or improbable, so far as philosophy is concerned, Ayer's Crusoe could have a language. In my dis-

cussion of this subject, I will refer to Ayer's Crusoe, a person who has a language in isolation from other people, as A. I will refer to Defoe's Crusoe, a person who uses language first in a society and later in isolation from society, as D.

D grows up in a very primitive society. The people in this society very commonly travel through caves in the area. It is easy to become lost in these caves, as there are many places where the caves branch off and also many turns in the passages. It is a practice of the people of the tribe to scratch marks on the bark of a certain tree, as they make their way through the caves on a journey. Observation of their behavior reveals a rule describing the behavior, although no expression of this rule enters into their behavior.³ Whenever the person traveling through the cave makes a change in the direction he is traveling, he stops and makes two marks on the bark. These marks are each one of our numerals. It is found that the first numeral they write down corresponds to the number of steps they took in the last direction. The second numeral corresponds to the number of degrees they change their direction, measuring clockwise. If they become lost, they use the record to find their way back. They change their direction the number of degrees, measuring counter-clockwise, as was recorded, and walk back the number of steps recorded. This is the only sort of language used by the people of the tribe. They train their children to use this language by a system of rewards and punishments, although no expression of the rule enters into the training. D grows up in this society and learns the language. Then he

somehow becomes separated from the society. However, there are also caves in his new habitat. He travels through these caves, and makes the same use of marks on bark as before. Is this a use of language?

*Why do you
take it as
obvious that
the marks are
a use of language*

Consider a somewhat similar example. This time the tribe, which D lives with, makes the same use of language as described above. However the children are not trained in any way to make this use of language. It is a natural response. Wittgenstein acknowledges that training is not a necessary prerequisite to the use of language. "Teaching as the hypothetical history of our subsequent actions...drops out of our considerations. The rule which has been taught and is subsequently applied interests us only so far as it is involved in the application. A rule, so far as it interests us, does not act at a distance."⁴ It seems puzzling to suppose that the use of language described could be a natural response. How do they know how to respond? Well, how does the child in the previous know how to respond to the training?⁵

Consider D now. He is born in the community, and is later separated. He made the use of language described while a member of the community continues to behave in the same way after being separated. Is this a use of language?

Consider A in this case. He is separated upon birth from the community, and never makes use of language while a member of the community. However he behaves just as D does above, after D was separated from the community. ~~Is this~~ a use of language?

If we observe an individual separated from the community

behaving as both A and D do, is it impossible for us to decide whether or not the person is using language because we don't know whether the person was separated from the community at birth or later?

Consider now another hypothetical natural history. The people in this natural history reproduce in an unusual way. At a certain age, they simply explode. The parts of their bodies serve as spores, and travel long distances in the wind. They eventually settle and, if the soil is moist and the sun is warm, the spore grows into a huge plant. The plant develops a large pod. Eventually, this pod splits open and out drops a person. Upon such birth, the person, without any training, behaves as the people do in the previous examples. No two people are ever born within one hundred miles of each other. This may be due to chance, or due to some causal mechanism concerning the growth of plants from spores. (The people never come into social contact, but they all behave, as regards the use of marks on bark, in the same way.) Is this a use of language?

Suppose all of the people in this example die of some disease. One spore happens to be blown to a distant island, and develops so that a person is born. This person behaves as the others have. Is this a use of language?

Suppose a being who behaves as described comes into being through an accidental chain of events. There never have been and never will be any other beings like this one. It has no means of reproduction. Can its use of marks on bark be described as a use of language?

Is this one of the criteria? You have simply stipulated that it is a use of language. Can you call it a language? 5

One of the criteria of using language is to use marks

on bark, as has been described in these examples. This behavior has been described in a variety of contexts. That the behavior is not possible in any of these contexts would be a hypothesis and thus does not concern the philosophical point. Some of the other criteria of language may conflict, or appear to conflict, with this one. It is not essential for something to satisfy these criteria in order for it to be language. It would be arbitrary to draw a line between language and non-language on these criteria, as this would rest upon a hypothesis. A line could be drawn there, but I could not acknowledge it as where I would have drawn a line. It is the most natural extension of the use of the word 'language' to say that the behavior described in the contexts given are uses of language. We have never applied the word 'language' to a language like the one Wittgenstein describes in (2) in the Philosophical Investigations, but there also it is the most natural extension of the use of the word 'language' to call it a language. *How does one decide such an issue*

"If language is to be a means of communication there must be agreement not only in definitions but also (queer as this may sound) in judgements."⁶ There is no agreement between A and others in judgements--and A's language does not serve as a means of communication. A has a language however. It is not essential for a language to be a means of communication.

If it were then Wittgenstein should have said "If there is a language, then there must be agreement in judgements." The

clause mentioning language as a means of communication would

** Perhaps not, but if anything were essential to language, its being a mean of communication is at least a good candidate as any. When this feature drops out, is it still "natural" to call something a language? Even if so, is it what is a means of communication, or something that is not one radically different, regardless of whether one compares*

** But the issue isn't whether communication takes place, but whether their language is (suitable) as a means of communication!*

6

have been redundant. The concept of language is contained in the concept of communication, but the concept of communication is not contained in the concept of language.

*15h 2
if?*

Wittgenstein says, "We could even imagine human beings who spoke only in monologue...." Is there communication in this language? Then, in contrast, he asks if there could be a private language: "But could we also imagine...." Wittgenstein is not disclosing a point hidden somehow about the first language described either. The important feature of the second language described is that it cannot be understood by others. This is not a feature of the first as it is described, nor is it a feature of the languages I have described.

*isn't it?
what would it be for someone to understand A's language?*

In some of the examples A obeys a rule, but does he obey a rule privately? If A were obeying a rule privately, then his obeying the rule would be the same as his thinking that he is obeying a rule.⁸ Does A think he is obeying a rule? So far nothing has been said about this. So far nothing has been said about whether or not it is possible to obey a rule privately.

Suppose a mental picture occurs to A when he sees the mark on the bark, when he is using it to go back. The mental picture cannot determine which direction A is to move in order to be obeying the rule. Movement in any direction can be made to accord with the mental picture, thus the mental picture does not determine what movement will count as obeying the rule.⁹

Does thinking you are obeying a rule consist in having

circumlocution not
a certain mental picture? Someone who claims that a private
language is possible must think so. Thinking you are obeying
a rule does not take time, but obeying a rule takes time.
"Thinking you are obeying a rule" fits the grammar of "Having
a mental picture" in that neither takes time. "The balance
on which impressions are weighed is not the impression of a
balance."¹⁰ In a private language however, the impression
of a balance would have to serve to weigh impressions. The
impression of a balance a person has at one time does not deter-
mine what impression of a balance the person will have at
any later time. Thus the impression of a balance may alter
so that one calls different impressions the same. Also, the
impression of a balance will not serve to determine an action,
e.g. which way to go in order to follow an arrow. A's obeying
a rule does not consist in his thinking he obeys a rule, although
A may think he obeys a rule (nothing has been said about this).
A does not obey a rule privately.

How could language have originated? The same problem
exists with the origin of life. A causal account might be given
describing the gradual development of living organisms from
inanimate matter. There would be a span of time in which it
would be impossible to say whether or not the beings were living,
but this does not make the description of the origin of life
unintelligible. Likewise a causal account could be given descri-
bing the change from clearly non-linguistic behavior to clearly
linguistic behavior, but there would be a span of time in this
description where it would be unclear whether or not the behavior

why? 7
so does 2+2=4
How is this relevant?
is this a causal claim? for any case, how is it relevant?

is linguistic. As a causal account of the origin of linguistic behavior, the account will be perfectly intellegable. There is a use already existing for the description of the behavior in the account. However there is not a use existing for the application of the concepts linguistic or non-linguistic to the behavior during a span of time. (Am I denying the law of the excluded middle?) Thus there is no place in the language for the question "What was the first linguistic behavior?," although this has no bearing upon the possibility of the origin of language.

*Substituting point,
but it needs
a function*

I have considered the possibility of one person having a language, and have attempted to show that it would be completely arbitrary to draw a boundary around language to exclude this possibility. This possibility has been somehow tangled with the possibility of a private language in some philosophical discussions. What is a private language in the philosophically important sense? I believe that this notion of a private language can never be made clear. The answer to the question "Can there be a private language?" is not no. There is no answer. Various grammatical misunderstandings lead philosophers to suggest that there are or could be private languages. Wittgenstein examines some of these grammatical misunderstandings, and when he does so, the notion of a private language is found to be unintelligable. The misunderstandings Wittgenstein explores are those surrounding the privacy of sensations. The lack of applicability of the concept of language to the behavior during a span of time in the description of the origin of language

is of a different sort. There an application could arise for some practical reason. However no practical reason could arise in the case of a "private language." I have explored some misunderstandings exemplified by Ayer's suggestion of a Robinson Crusoe. (As Wittgenstein does not deny that sensations are private, or that there are sensations, I do not deny that such a Robinson Crusoe could exist.) However it is found that this Robinson Crusoe does not have a private language any more than English is a private language. The misunderstandings I explore are not as deep as the ones explored by Wittgenstein, but are found in Ayer's and Rhees' articles "Can There Be a Private Language?" Thus some of the fog obstructing a clear view of Wittgenstein's accomplishment may be dissipated.

is this from the case

Dennis Barland

Your main argument is clear and convincing. You say that public-and-usable behavior is naturally called language, but give no reason at all for doing so. I can only guess that you take any word that is used in a regular way to be linguistic. But such a notion of language is obviously too broad.

As for really interesting (deaf) sign systems you make me all rather confused and really in need of development (e.g. what is to be made of the fact that both 'having a mental picture' and 'thinking one is obeying a rule' have been in Germanic such that they can't be taken?)

B. — / CT

Footnotes

1 Ayer, "Can There Be a Private Language?"

2 Rhees, "Can There Be a Private Language?"

3 The Blue and Brown Books, pp. 95-98.

4 Ibid, p.14.

5 Ibid, p.97.

6 Philosophical Investigations, 242

7 Ibid, 243.

8 Ibid, 202.

9 Ibid, 201.

10 Ibid, 259.