

On Public Language and Private Language¹

Rohit Parikh

I am driving along on I95 after teaching a late evening class and a truck driver, annoyed at the fact that I am driving only 65, gives me a nudge. When I wake up in the hospital, something strange has happened. Objects that looked blue before, look green, and vice versa. I can see out the window, and if I could still speak as before, I would say “My God! The sky is green”. However, I have quite forgotten my use of color words and all my memories are black and white.

Of course, I have to relearn my use of color words. I find that the color of the sky is called “blue” and the color of leaves is called “green”. Pretty soon, I seem to be back to normal and I go off to the Bahamas to enjoy the hefty payment that I receive from the trucking company. Of course, I am now using the words “blue” and “green” in a different way; one might almost say that I am unwittingly speaking Hinglish, a language that sounds like English but the color words are different. And no one knows the difference, not even I.

“But hold on”, you say. “You *are* still speaking English. The fact that no one can tell the difference is proof that you belong to the same linguistic community. English is not a private language! The words ‘blue’ and ‘green’ were meant to be the names of colors. What monstrous arrogance to think that they were names for *your sensations!* And anyway, what sense does it make to talk of a change having taken place, if no one knows that it did?”

Perhaps you are right, but things do not stop there. I return from the Bahamas and have another accident. This time I am the one who nudges the truck driver. When I am released from the emergency room after being treated for cuts and lacerations, I find that my memory has returned and I

¹A familiar device in Philosophy takes the following form. If two things or situations resemble each other in aspect *A* but not in aspect *B*, then *B* cannot be defined in terms of *A*. An example of this technique occurs in Putnam’s twin earth example, “the Meaning of Meaning”, *Mind, Language and Reality*, Cambridge University Press 1975, esp. pp. 223-227. Here Putnam uses the “twin earth” to argue that if meanings determine extension, then meanings cannot be “in the head”. Another example occurs in Dennett’s “Where am I?”, *the Mind’s Eye*, Ed. Hofstadter and Dennett, pp. 217-229, Bantam books 1981. Here Dennett seems to argue that Dennett is not necessarily where his brain is. In this paper I am using a similar device to argue that arguments against private language, for all their force, are not decisive.

am suddenly struck by amazement. Now I remember that the sky used to look green to me (I am now talking in Hinglish), but that I used to call it “blue”. All the facts fall into place and I understand exactly what happened after the first accident. Since my sensations do not go back to the old state, I continue to speak Hinglish, but my utterances are regarded as normal by English speakers².

But now I am troubled by another worry. If I think of *myself* as having color perceptions of type X before the first accident, and of type Y after, what about *other people*? Is everyone born an X or are some people Y? Or is everyone different from everyone else? There seems to be no way to find out. *Talking about* the matter is useless since the difference in perceptions, if any, would be cancelled out by a corresponding difference in the process of learning the color words.

Before we proceed any further with this problem, let me convince you, by a second example, that the sort of events I have imagined as taking place are not logically incoherent, and that we need not depend on the malevolence of truck drivers to discover philosophical puzzles.

Suppose that some time when I am asleep, tiny television cameras are implanted in my eyes, tiny mikes in my ears and a micromoog in my throat. (The Cognitive Science group at CUNY has received a huge grant to carry out this experiment and they are doing this whole bit in great secrecy.) The cameras project the same image on my retina that a lens would have projected, and the mike sends the same electrical impulses to my brain that my eardrums would have sent. To combine two of Quine’s felicitous phrases, they are *observationally transparent*. The micromoog picks up the signals going to my vocal cords and makes the same sounds that I was intending to make. When I wake up, I notice no difference.

A few days later, a switch is thrown and the cameras start projecting green for blue and blue for green on my retina. Of course I *notice* the difference at once. But I am unable to *tell* anyone about it. The mike and the moog are now coding and decoding sounds in a strange way.

²Wittgenstein, at the beginning of *Philosophical Investigations*, gives us a quote from Augustine’s account of language acquisition by children, and says (section 32) “Augustine describes the learning of human language as if the child came into a strange country and did not understand the language of the country; that is, as if it already had a language, only not this one.” However, Wittgenstein does not consider the question of what would happen if the child *did* have a language, only not this one.

Let X be the set of all words of English plus the set of possible nonsense words which can be constructed using the sounds of English. Thus the sounds “brillig” and “tove” belong to X , but not, say, “Uberhaupt”. Let f be a one-one function from X onto X such that if w is a meaningful word of English then $f(w)$ is not. g is the inverse of f . g also converts meaningful words to nonsense words. This is possible since meaningful words are a minority among all possible words of a reasonable length.

Now, after the switch is thrown, the mike and the moog have the following properties. If I try to say w , the moog says $f(w)$. If someone says x to me, I hear $g(x)$. So I try to tell people that the sky has turned green, I hear myself saying “the sky has turned green”, but no one seems to understand me. Also, for some strange reason, people seem to me to have started speaking some strange language whose sounds convey nothing to me.

However, slowly, I learn to talk. I come to know that the sky is a color that people call “brup”, where “brup” is g (“blue”). I also see that if I point to the sky and say “brup”, people smile at me and pat me on the back. I do not realise that when I try to say “brup”, the moog says “blue”, and people are happy to see that I am relearning some English. As far as I am concerned, “blue” is useless. It only brings frowns. But if I say “brup”, I hear “brup”, and everyone is happy. Am I still speaking in English?

The two examples above seem to describe a sort of middle ground between public and private domain. They fall in the public domain in the sense that other people could have a similar experience, the TV camera, the mike and the moog would be available for inspection, and anyway, I did describe them to you in English (the language of this paper) didn’t I?

On the other hand, If another person described a similar experience and I trusted him (why shouldn’t I? I had it myself too) I still would not have any way of knowing if he went from being an X to a Y , like me, or from Y to X , or perhaps from U to V , where U and V might be sensations that I have never had at all! It looks as if I can know that his sensations have changed, but he and I cannot coherently talk about what it is that has changed.

The conclusion seems to be that one cannot talk of sensations in a purely behavioristic way or claim that they do not exist. It does seem as if it does not make sense to talk of the sensation blue as being the same as the color blue, for my experience changed the one and not the other.

At the same time, the sensations themselves can never be talked about, since it seems impossible to have words describing them in English or in

any other language. So the common way of talking, where we assume that other people have the same or similar sensations, seems also to be flawed. One alternative that is left seems to be a semi-solipsistic one, that when I talk about other people's sensations, then I am only talking about my own, projected onto other people. So, for that matter, are they, and we really are not speaking the same language.

What then can be the public function of language and what kind of uniformity can a linguistic community have? A picture that has been very tempting in semantics is that of a sentence as a kind of wrapping for the real thing, which is the meaning of the sentence. When I speak to you and you understand me, then I have succeeded in *passing on* to you the meaning, which is the contents of the package. Thus what you got from the communication is *the same as* what I gave. Even Quine might grant that this picture is justified at least for purely observational sentences. But now it looks as if this picture cannot be right. Perhaps what I say to you influences your behavior (in the best cases) in a direction that I had anticipated, but what I say means more to you than just that, and what that "more" is, is something that we cannot share or talk about.

Department of Computer Science, Brooklyn College of CUNY
and

Departments of Computer Science, Mathematics and Philosophy,
City University Graduate Center