

On the impossibility of a private language:

The role of the community

Leonardo Allegri

Graduate School of Social Sciences
Waseda University

Wittgenstein's argument against the possibility of a private language is well known and had a large influence over philosophy of language. The argument is strictly connected with Wittgenstein's analysis of rule following and the importance of normativity in our language. All these topics emphasize the importance of the community, and it should come as no surprise that philosophers of the social sciences carefully considered them. Peter Winch, in particular, dedicated a wide section of his most notable work *The Idea of a Social Science and Its Relation to Philosophy* to analyzing the Wittgensteinian argument and dismissing some of its critics. As often with Wittgenstein's philosophy, it is sometimes hard to clearly understand what exactly Wittgenstein meant, and a variety of interpretations is available for discussion.

The aims of my presentation are to better clarify the context in which Wittgenstein's argument against a private language was introduced, and to assess some of the most notable interpretations while presenting my own. In the conclusion of my presentation, I will also focus on the importance that giving a proper interpretation to Wittgenstein's argument can have for an appropriate approach to intercultural research.

There are three main lines of reasoning that I will follow in my presentation. First of all, some of the confusions surrounding the argument against a private language can be dissolved by carefully looking at the context in which Wittgenstein introduced this argument, to say, in answering the question: "How are the words we utter related to the things we mean by them?" Wittgenstein criticizes a theory according to which such a relation can be explained in terms of mental images or processes. According to Wittgenstein, there is nothing in our minds that allows us to identify a correct use of our words. Briefly, Wittgenstein's argument goes as follows: without normativity, namely, without correct and incorrect uses of a term, our language would not make sense. Rules are needed for a meaningful language, but establishing which interpretation of a rule is to be considered correct is still an issue. According to Wittgenstein, a specific interpretation of a rule is taken as

standard by the community. Thus, without a community there cannot be a meaningful language.

Secondly, it is very important to understand what is meant by “private language.” Wittgenstein himself offers two very different examples: a person talking to him/herself during a variety of actions, such as to encourage him/herself or even blame or punish him/herself, and a person creating a language that can express internal experiences, such as emotions and sensations. Many of his critics elaborated more detailed and problematic examples. Cannot we imagine a “Robinson Crusoe” stranded on a desert island and using a language to refer to the things and animals he encounters? Does it make a difference whether he was born and educated in a social context or never experienced one? In my opinion, the key element is the distinction between a language that is locally isolated and contingently private and one that is globally isolated and necessarily private, only in this second case we would face the issue of a private language.

Thirdly, an element often overlooked is the importance of our common nature. According to Wittgenstein, all explanations must eventually come to an end, when discussing the issue of multiple interpretations in rule following behavior. Wittgenstein tells us that there must be an application of the rule that is taken as a standard or paradigm. There are two consequences: without a community there cannot be a standard application of a rule but, at the same time, which interpretation is taken as standard is not the outcome of an arbitrary choice. In my opinion, Wittgenstein would argue that the ultimate reason for us to follow *these* rules rather than others stands in our common human nature, that is, in our form of life. Hence, in the conclusion of my presentation I will briefly highlight some of the key passages in which Wittgenstein refers to the concepts of form of life and common human nature. The definition of form of life, and whether it should be applied to all human beings or we should consider different communities as different forms of life, are particularly relevant for a correct approach to intercultural research.

My presentation will be entirely in English, and the Q&A is also expected to be in English.