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Critique of Descartes' Linguistic View as Narrated by Chomsky

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Abstract

Descartes never explicitly discusses linguistics. We owe the very notion of "Descartes' linguistics" to the investigations of Noam Chomsky, an American philosopher of language. Chomsky infers from Descartes' direct and indirect references to language that, from Descartes' perspective, language is, firstly, innate, secondly, originates from the individual rather than society, and thirdly, is a creative, not mechanical, act. This paper, employing a descriptive-analytical method and framed as a critique, aims to clarify and analyze a specific facet of Cartesian thought. It concludes that language, as Descartes could have described it, is subjectivist, and this approach presupposes the possibility of a private language. In essence, the individual and subjective nature of language necessitates accepting a private language. However, a private language has self-destructive implications, providing grounds for serious critiques of Descartes' linguistic view (as extracted by Chomsky).

Keywords

Descartes, Chomsky, Linguistics, Relation of Language and Action, Private Language.

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Introduction

In the minds of contemporary philosophers, language stands out as one of the most influential topics across all intellectual domains, making it a central focus for many leading thinkers worldwide. We believe that the intellectual capital of the modern era is deeply rooted in the precise ideas of great thinkers, who sometimes weren't even aware of the implications of their own thoughts—implications later recognized and extracted by subsequent thinkers. Descartes is one such figure. While there's no explicit discussion titled "linguistics" in Descartes' philosophy, it was Noam Chomsky who first applied this term to his ideas. Chomsky dedicated one of his later works, *Cartesian Linguistics*, published in 1966, to this very subject. In it, he posits that "Descartes himself paid little attention to language, and his few statements on the matter can be interpreted in various ways" (Chomsky, 2003, p. 7).

It's important to clarify that this paper does not aim to examine the appropriateness of the term "Cartesian linguistics." Instead, assuming Chomsky's research, it seeks to analyze and critique a specific view of language that Chomsky extracted and highlighted from Descartes' philosophical perspectives[1].

What's clear is Descartes' profound influence on subsequent philosophy and philosophers. Precisely for this reason, clarifying and critically examining various facets of his thought holds special significance. This critique of Descartes' linguistic view (as extracted by Chomsky) aims to illuminate and analyze one such aspect of his thought, and it is an entirely novel endeavor that has not been

1. Given that Chomsky explicitly considers his ideas to be a continuation of Cartesian linguistics, we can sometimes utilize Chomsky's approaches to clarify Descartes' views.

undertaken before. To achieve this, we will first present an explanation of Descartes' linguistic view as Chomsky extracts it, with references to some of Descartes' own statements. Subsequently, we will critique these views based on Chomsky's findings.

1. Descartes' Linguistic View as Narrated by Chomsky

1-1. The Innate and Individual Nature of Language

From Descartes' perspective, ideas fall into three categories: innate, adventitious (acquired), and factitious (invented). Innate concepts exist potentially in the soul prior to experience, only emerging and becoming actual when an empirical context arises. They reside in the mind as predispositions, becoming clear and distinct perceptions upon encountering sense experiences (Descartes, 1982, pp. 65-67). This classification and Descartes' definition of innate ideas are incredibly helpful in understanding his linguistic theory.

Given what we observe in Descartes' philosophy, we'd expect him to consider at least the initial principles of language as innate and, therefore, individual. After his methodical and pervasive doubt, he's left with no other option but to start from the mind and mental concepts to reconstruct his entire system of beliefs. These reconstructed beliefs, of course, hold a firmer ground than before. In this way, Descartes begins with concepts and then proves the existence of external realities. He states: "I shall shed light on the true richness of our soul, which offers each of us the means, without any help from another, to discover within ourselves all the knowledge we need to grasp the most complex elements of cognition" (AT X 496; CSM II, 400). Descartes' position seems quite clear. In his view, if concepts, as conceived, have an object, that object will precisely possess the characteristics of the concept in question. For example, he says: "The mere fact that I can clearly and distinctly perceive one thing apart

from another is enough to make me certain that the two things are distinct; for it is at least possible for them to be separated by God" (Sixth Meditation, op. cit).

According to Noam Chomsky, the innate and foundational concepts from which Descartes begins serve as a shared framework for both thought and language. Therefore, even though words in different languages don't perfectly align, a common ground can be found for all the world's languages. The variations among languages are then attributed to the manner in which these concepts are expressed and articulated. Essentially, the conceptual framework upon which diverse languages are built is a universal feature of all humans. The extent to which experience and differing cultural conditions modify this framework is a subject of debate. However, the conceptual framework itself guides the acquisition of vocabulary through a rich, fixed, and unchanging mental system that transcends and, in fact, precedes experience (Chomsky, 1988, p. 32).

By asserting the universality of the foundations of thought and language, one can readily claim that certain linguistic features and categories in humans have a biological origin. In other words, every human brings these categories into the world at birth, and life's experiences merely serve to activate and actualize them. This is precisely the approach Descartes alludes to: half of the language acquisition process is provided by human nature and innate faculties, while the other half is made possible by experience and environment (Chomsky, 1965, p. 52). This illustrates how the belief in the innate and inherent nature of linguistic frameworks profoundly influences the analysis of how language is acquired. In this scenario, when a child is placed in an appropriate environment, language will emerge within them, just as a child's body grows and develops when exposed to nutritional and environmental stimuli.

From what's been discussed, we can conclude that language, in Descartes' view, is an individual matter. Its origin lies in innate and inherent characteristics that are entirely individual, even if they possess an intersubjective quality due to being common among different people.

1-2. The Creative Nature of Language

Descartes believed there are limits to physical explanation; not everything can be reduced to the interactions of matter in motion. The ability to think and speak, unlike animal behavior, which is instinct-driven (Descartes, 1964 SH, p. 229) and thus falls within a mechanical description, cannot be explained solely by referencing the functions of a mechanical system.

In Descartes' view, human language, unlike animal "language" (or behaviors that resemble language), is independent of external stimuli. It functions freely as a tool for self-expression and free thought (Cottingham, 2013 SH, p. 196).This leads to two distinct types of "language":1- Animal "language": This is mechanical and imitative, originating from the body.2-Human language: This is free from external stimuli, creative, and originates from the mind and soul. It's worth noting that Descartes essentially restricts true language to the thinking being, identifying humans as the sole users of language. For this reason, he attributes humanity's non-mechanical nature to its ability to use language. Descartes believes that because humans can express their inner thoughts through language, the truth of this ability must be linked to a realm beyond the purely mechanical (Cottingham, 2013 SH, pp. 196-197).

Descartes used the possession of genuine language and the ability to demonstrate intelligent responses in diverse and novel situations as key arguments to show that human capabilities differ

from those of animals not just in degree, but fundamentally in kind. In his view: "We can certainly conceive of a machine so constructed that it utters words, even words corresponding to bodily actions that cause a change in its organs[1]. But it is not conceivable that such a machine should produce different arrangements of words so as to give a meaningfully appropriate answer to everything that is said in its presence, as even the dullest of men can do" (Discourse on Method, Part Five, AT VI 56f; CSM I 140). Furthermore, Descartes believed that genuine language is free from external stimuli and involves the capacity for creative responses to an indefinite range of situations. For this reason, he thought it "impossible for a machine to have enough different organs to make it act in all the contingencies of life in the way that our reason makes us act" (Discourse on Method, Part Five, AT VI 56f; CSM I 140).

The human mind employs language creatively and is free from the dominance of external stimuli. According to Descartes and his followers, the normal and ordinary use of language is creative, infinite, and seemingly free from the control of external stimuli or internal states, all while being appropriate to the context and situation. This is why, even though language provides limited tools, it offers the possibility of unlimited expressions.

In ordinary speech, humans don't simply repeat what they've heard before; instead, they produce novel linguistic forms. These forms are often ones the individual has never uttered before, or they may even be entirely new in the history of the language. There's seemingly no limit to such innovations. Furthermore, such discourses aren't random sequences of sentences and utterances. They are appropriate and relevant to the situation that elicits them, though the

1. For example, if you touch one spot on it, it might ask what you want; if you touch another, it might cry and say you're hurting it, and so on.

situation itself isn't the *cause* of these sentences (meaning language and linguistic categories can't be reduced to mere communicative or situational policies). For Cartesians, therefore, the creative aspect of language use is the best evidence that another being similar to us possesses a mind similar to our own (Chomsky, 1988, p. 5).

Based on the preceding explanation, it appears that for Descartes, language is a creative tool for the free expression of thought and an appropriate response to new situations, independent of external stimuli or physiological conditions.

2. Critique of Descartes' Linguistic View as Narrated by Noam Chomsky

2-1. Overlooking the Relationship Between Language and Action

Given what we've discussed, it's clear that the relationship between language and action in Descartes' philosophy could, at best, be that every action helps to actualize language from potentiality. However, this is a very simplistic understanding of the Cartesian-Aristotelian relationship between language and action. In this superficial view of their connection, the function and role language plays in different situations, along with the meaning of linguistic expressions, are entirely disregarded. Furthermore, as we'll explore, a consequence of this perspective on the language-action relationship is the acceptance of the possibility of a private language[1].

Today, following the work of thinkers like Wittgenstein, the relationship between language and action is largely taken for granted by many scholars, not just in philosophy but across various branches of the humanities. Later Wittgenstein developed a theory of language

1. We will see that defending the possibility of a private language, especially after the arguments of later Wittgenstein, is an extremely difficult task.

that not only moved beyond his earlier "picture theory of language"[1] but also initiated a new and highly influential movement in all fields of the humanities. In this new approach, widely known as the "use theory of language," he emphasizes the connection between meaning and function, advising, "Don't look for the meaning, look for the use" (Magee, n.d., p. 557). Indeed, according to later Wittgenstein's perspective, meaning depends on the role and function a linguistic unit plays. Therefore, meaning is no longer inherent but rather embedded in its use. More precisely, not only is meaning no longer inherent in the essence of language, but there is fundamentally no essence at all; everything finds its meaning in its application.

To clarify the relationship between meaning and function (the link between language and action), he frequently used the example of chess, emphasizing concepts like roles, rules, and functions to illustrate the connection between action and meaning (Wittgenstein, 1953, pp. 48, 85, 222, 567). Therefore, understanding meaning through usage means seeing the meaning of expressions as dependent on the role they play in a specific context. It follows that you can't conceive of a meaning for them independent of this context and function. Of course, it's clear that, according to this theory, words don't have fixed roles at all. They acquire their roles based on the language-game and context in which they're used, and consequently, they gain their meaning through their function.

While the later Wittgenstein's emphasis on the use and function of linguistic expressions in various contexts is crucial for

1. According to this theory, Wittgenstein states that a linguistic proposition or statement about the world is a picture of reality. In other words, a picture represents a state of affairs in logical space, which depicts the existence or non-existence of a fact (Wittgenstein, 2001, 2.01). Please provide the exact page number.

determining their meaning, we must also consider the individual's personal state. For instance, imagine an individual, let's call them "A," who is both depressed and a skilled chef. According to Wittgenstein, A would certainly be familiar with the "language-game" of cooking. However, if told that "cooking is enjoyable and a very good activity," A might, on one level, say they understand what we're saying. Yet, we know that, on another level, they might *not* truly grasp it. This isn't because they're unfamiliar with the language-game itself, but because their current mental state prevents them from fully comprehending the sentiment. This is a point that Wittgenstein did not address, and it seems essential to add this consideration to his "use theory of language."

Heidegger, too, as one of the most important and influential contemporary philosophers, speaks of the profound relationship between language and action. He expresses the intertwining of language and action through the concept of discourse (Rede). The most precise meaning of discourse is uncovering or exhibiting. Heidegger sees discourse as the interpretation of phenomena within their "fore-sight" (Vor-sicht), encompassing all actions and concepts related to this "fore-sight." Therefore, discourse connects phenomena to the totality of their references. For example, a shoe, a shoemaker, a shoe seller, and a consumer together form a referential totality. Thus, the shoemaker's actions can only be understood in relation to the other referential elements (i.e., the shoe, the shoe seller, and the consumer) (Mulhall, 2005, pp. 92-93).

Heidegger's notion of discourse, as a process of articulation and description, possesses linguistic and non-linguistic (or practical) aspects[1].

1. It should be noted that for Heidegger, action is an entirely linguistic category, and the meaning of the intertwining of language and action, summarized in the concept of discourse, is nothing other than this.

For instance, using a hammer in different situations is the practical aspect of discourse, while talking about its uses constitutes the verbal aspect of discourse. We can thus draw the general conclusion that the meaning of anything is only revealed by referring to its referential totality.

It's crucial to understand that Heidegger fundamentally makes no distinction between language and Being (Hasti); he considers them to be identical. He refers to this unique perspective on the relationship between Being and language in various ways: "We exist in/through language" (Heidegger, 1982, p. 112). "Language transforms things and us into itself, and language becomes Being" (Heidegger, 1982, p. 74). Or, "A thing 'exists' only where a word brings it into being" (Heidegger, 1982, p. 63).

Therefore, all of Heidegger's pronouncements about Being are also applicable to language, and language is inextricably intertwined with all dimensions of our existence, encompassing both thought and action. Thus, it becomes clear that the absence of an adequate relationship between language and action in Cartesian linguistics is a serious flaw that demands attention. Furthermore, overlooking this relationship has other criticized implications and consequences, the most important of which we will address next: the issue of "private language."

2-2. The Problem of Private Language

A private language refers to a language that, in principle, can only be understood by the speaker themselves. The meaning of words in such a language consists solely of the individual's private sensations, which are accessible only to them. Consequently, no other person can comprehend this language. It's a language that is fundamentally untrainable and untransmittable, and others can in no

way participate in it, because its words refer to concepts that are necessarily unavailable to anyone else.

Wittgenstein, in section 243 of his *Philosophical Investigations*, defines private language as follows: "The individual words of this language are to refer to what can only be known to the speaker; to his immediate private sensations. So another person cannot understand the language" (Wittgenstein, 1953, p. 243). Descartes' explanation of knowledge and how it's acquired necessitates a private language. This is because the Cartesian "I" finds itself capable of speaking to itself about its own experiences, while knowing nothing about a world independent of those experiences (Descartes, 1982, pp. 66-76).

Furthermore, if the only path to certainty and knowledge is the "I's" immediate intuition, then others have no way to grasp the content of my intuition. Consequently, any language used to express such intuition would be private. The resulting conclusion is that, according to Descartes' view, we must build language, knowledge, and linguistic communication based on our own inner experiences, and only then can we infer the external world and the existence of others.

Numerous arguments have been put forth demonstrating the impossibility of such a language. Given our focus on two prominent philosophers, Wittgenstein and Heidegger, in the previous section, we'll specifically address their reasons here.

The argument Wittgenstein presented to refute private language, as detailed in section 258 of his *Philosophical Investigations*, is as follows:

To illustrate the impossibility of a private language, or in other words, to show its internal inconsistency, Wittgenstein offers an example. He asks us to imagine wanting to record the recurrence of a specific sensation in a diary. For this purpose, he associates it with the

sign 'S' and writes this sign in his calendar every day he experiences the sensation. First, he notes that a definition for the sign cannot be formulated. But, he asks, can he still give himself a kind of ostensive (pointing) definition? How? Can he point to the sensation? Not in the usual, conventional sense. However, he speaks or writes the sign while concentrating his attention on the sensation, thus, as it were, invardly pointing to the sensation.

But what is the purpose of this ceremony? Because it all seems to be mere ceremony. Surely, a definition is used to fix the meaning of a sign. Well, this is precisely what happens through my focusing of attention, because in this way I impress the connection between the sign and the sensation upon myself. But "I impress it upon myself" can only mean this: this process causes me to remember the connection correctly in the future. However, concerning the present (current) sensation, I have no criterion for correctness. We want to say: whatever is going to seem correct to me is correct. And this only means that here we cannot speak of "correctness" at all (Wittgenstein, 1953, p. 258).

It's evident that according to this argument, the very possibility of a private language is fraught with contradiction. If a private language were possible, we couldn't differentiate between the correct and incorrect use of words. This is because, under the assumption of a private language, there's no general criterion to determine the proper use of words. Furthermore, linguistic communication and understanding words necessitate distinguishing between the correctness and incorrectness of word usage. Without this, it would lead to linguistic and epistemological skepticism. Consequently, a private language, by leading us into linguistic and epistemological skepticism, ceases to be a language at all. In other words, the absence of a distinction between the correct and incorrect use of words equates to the meaninglessness

of those words. As a result, the premise of a private language leads to a contradiction.

A more fundamental critique of the possibility of private language can be found in Heidegger's philosophy. This critique stems from his use of the term Dasein to refer to what we are (human existence).

Heidegger views Dasein as a "being-there" or a "being-in-the-world" (Heidegger, 2014 SH, pp. 71-85; Craig, 1998, p. 311). This means Dasein always exists in relation to the world and is never outside of this relationship[1]. Dasein's "being-with," "being-in-relation-to," and its connection with others (who are a crucial part of Dasein's world) constitute Dasein's existence. In fact, it can be said that "others" fundamentally ground Dasein, because our existence is always oriented towards them. Therefore, our existence is constantly affirmed by others. We are born into a culture, learn a language, and live in a world shaped by previous generations of others; thus, we are co-participants in our being-in-the-world.

Considering Heidegger's view that Being and language are identical, and his interpretation of human existence (Dasein) as "being-in-the-world" (a world where "others" form a fundamental part), we can conclude that these others, who are integral to Dasein's existence, play an undeniable and significant role in all aspects of Dasein's Being, including its everyday language.

Therefore, the meaning of linguistic expressions is entirely

1. Husserl, Heidegger's teacher, considered the essence of consciousness to be intentional, and Heidegger accepted this intentional character. However, he attributed it not to consciousness but fundamentally to human existence itself, and to demonstrate this mode of human existence, he used the famous term Dasein, meaning being-in-the-world.

contingent on their relationship with other people and on action within the context of social interactions. Language will take shape within the fabric of society and in light of its ways of life. This, of course, does not contradict the existence of an innate capacity for language acquisition (which is an individual matter), because the capacity for language acquisition is one thing, and the notion of a private language is something entirely different.

Conclusion

Although Descartes didn't have a dedicated discussion on linguistics, based on Noam Chomsky's interpretation of his ideas, Descartes would likely consider the origin of language to be individual, not social. When Descartes doubted everything, he also doubted the existence of others, leaving him no choice but to accept language as an individual phenomenon. In doing so, he emphasized the innate and divine aspects of language, contrasting them with a conventional and social understanding. While he also highlighted the creative dimensions of language, he overlooked the role of action and the functions of language in giving it meaning. Consequently, Descartes, overall, viewed language as a mental, individual, and innately rooted matter.

The critique directed at Chomsky's extracted account of Descartes' linguistic view primarily concerns the neglect of society, social relations, situations, and conventions in the formation and meaning-making of language. Essentially, in Descartes' linguistic view (as presented by Chomsky), the relationship between meaning and way of life, as well as psychological and individual characteristics, is disregarded. This oversight of social aspects and the role of linguistic functions in shaping meaning is not only indefensible today,

given the valuable contributions of philosophers like Wittgenstein and Heidegger, but also carries implications such as the acceptance of a private language. This concept, too, after the insights of philosophers like Wittgenstein and Heidegger, no longer holds a serious position or significant support among thinkers.

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