Chapter 5. **Language: private, public, solitary, shared**

On the received reading of Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*[1], the book contains an argument purporting to show the impossibility of a private language. There has been a lively debate, however, on how the relevant notion of a private language is to be understood, and what considerations should be taken to rule it out. Some have understood Wittgenstein to mean that a language must be something that several speakers *actually* share, while others take him to mean that a language must be something that they *could, in principle*, share. Or, slightly differently put, on one view, speaking a language presupposes the actual existence of a linguistic community upholding certain shared standards of meaning and correctness, while on the other view, it only presupposes that such a community might have existed. These views have come to be known as the 'community view' and the 'solitary speaker' view, respectively.[2] Furthermore, supporters of the community view tend to think that the discussion about privacy holds a central place in Wittgenstein's later philosophy, whereas those who support the solitary speaker view usually see its bearings as limited to the issue of the privacy of experience.

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[1] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1958). References to this work will be indicated with the abbreviation *PI* followed by paragraph number.

[2] Rather than two monolithic positions, what we have here is a spectrum of views ranging between two extremes. To mention but a few examples: the best-known formulations of the community view are to be found in Norman Malcolm, "Following a Rule" in his book *Nothing is Hidden* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), as well as in his essay "Wittgenstein on Language and Rules" in *Wittgensteinian Themes: Essays 1978-1989* (ed. by G. H. von Wright, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), and in Saul Kripke, *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982). It should be noted, though, that the difference between Malcolm's and Kripke's readings is significant. A recent expression of the view is found in Meredith Williams, *Wittgenstein, Mind and Meaning: Toward a Social Conception of Mind* (London: Routledge, 1999). Moderate versions of the community view are put forward in Rush Rhees, "Can There be a Private Language?", in his *Discussions of Wittgenstein* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970), and in Cora Diamond, "Rules: Looking in the Right Place", in D. Z. Phillips and Peter Winch (eds.), *Wittgenstein: Attention to Particulars* (Houndmills: Macmillan, 1989). I too advocate a moderate version in "Wittgenstein and the Sharing of Language", in *The Limits of Experience* (Helsinki: Acta Philosophica Fennica, 1994). Some well-known criticisms of the community view are G. P. Baker and P. M. S. Hacker, *Wittgenstein: Rules, Grammar and Necessity* and *Wittgenstein: Meaning and Mind* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985 and 1990), Warren Goldfarb, "Kripke on Wittgenstein on Rules", *Journal of Philosophy* 82 (1985), pp. 471-488 (this essay was evidently where the term 'solitary speaker' was introduced), and, in a moderate form, Edward H. Minar, "Wittgenstein and the 'Contingency' of Community", *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 72 (1991), pp. 203-234.

Most of those who have participated in this debate have not simply taken an exegetical interest in it: they usually regard the view they favour, not only as the correct interpretation of Wittgenstein, but as the correct view on the matters at hand. In fact, the questions of what *we are to think* and what Wittgenstein *must have meant* (as is often the case in discussions of Wittgenstein's later philosophy) are mostly not kept separate.[3] I do not wish to insist on the separation of these questions: while the fact that Wittgenstein held a certain view is good reason for taking it into serious consideration, what matters in the end is not what Wittgenstein actually meant to say, but what, if anything, we may learn from his remarks.

Wittgenstein's main concern in philosophy was to change our perspective on philosophical problems, and his remarks on privacy and meaning seem to me to have been central to that effort. While there are serious objections to the community view in its traditional form, I hope to make it clear how the emphasis on words and meanings as connected with human interaction is crucial to the perspective he was advancing. The importance of interaction in connection with meaning may have been obscured in part by its being identified with the issue of community standards. I wish to argue instead that the crucial lack in the case of the solitary speaker is not community standards but the relation to a listener. The essential shortcoming of the solitarian view is that it makes no allowance for the bearing of the (purported or actual) listener on the question of what a speaker can be taken to be saying.

The first part of this essay is primarily exegetical: I discuss a section in *Philosophical Investigations* that might seem to lend support to the solitary speaker view, pointing out a few problems with the solitarian reading of it. After that, I shall discuss the role of the listener, and finally, I shall address some problems connected with the notion of community standards.

*I. Private languages and solitary speakers*

[3] It is true that Kripke denies taking a stand of his own. (Op. cit., p. ix.)

One section in particular has been contested ground in the battle over solitary speakers (*PI* § 243):

> A human being can encourage himself, give himself orders, obey, blame and punish himself; he can ask himself a question and answer it. We could even imagine human beings who spoke only in monologue; who accompanied their activities by talking to themselves. – An explorer who watched them and listened to their talk might succeed in translating their language into ours. (This would enable him to predict these people's actions correctly, for he also hears them making resolutions and decisions.)
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> But could we also imagine a language in which a person could write down or give vocal expression to his inner experiences – his feelings, moods, and the rest – for his private use? -- Well, can't we do so in our ordinary language? – But that is not what I mean. The individual words of this language are to refer to what can only be known to the person speaking; to his immediate private sensations. So another person cannot understand the language.

This section opens the discussion about language and privacy in *Philosophical Investigations*. It is not hard to see why those who support the notion of a solitary speaker have wished to draw attention to this section, whereas their opponents have thought it a stumbling block and have tried to get around it in one way or another.[4] The first paragraph seems to make short shrift of any idea of community standards, whereas the second explicitly narrows the issue down to

[4] Among the former are Colin McGinn, *Wittgenstein on Meaning* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1984), p. 193, n. 75; David Pears, *The False Prison*, Vol. 2 (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1988), pp. 337-339; and Oswald Hanfling, *Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy* (Houndmills: Macmillan, 1989), pp. 91 ff. (Hanfling, however, enters a caveat on p. 92); among the latter, Jenny Teichman, "Wittgenstein on Persons and Human Beings", in *Understanding Wittgenstein* (Royal Institute of Philosophy Lectures, Vol. 7; London: Macmillan, 1974), pp. 146-148; Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), pp. 344 f.; Cora Diamond, op. cit.; and Norman Malcolm, "Wittgenstein on Language and Rules", op. cit.

one of private experience. The question is: whose voice are we hearing here? And, if it is Wittgenstein's own, could the section possibly be a slip?

The first paragraph and the end of the second undeniably have the *ring* of having been made in Wittgenstein's own voice. But there are some very obvious problems for those who would read them that way. First, regarding the end of the second paragraph, the presupposition that a person's "immediate private sensations --- can only be known to the person speaking" is flatly contradicted three sections down (§ 246), where Wittgenstein points out that, in one sense, it is wrong, and in another, nonsense, to say that only I can know whether I am really in pain. This strongly suggests that the writer of the latter section (which, one cannot help thinking, is Wittgenstein speaking in his own voice) would not have accepted the conclusion apparently drawn in § 243. Accordingly, when § 243 is read in conjunction with § 246, it is difficult to take it seriously as an attempt to formulate the problem. It is much more plausible that it is intended to draw our attention to the muddle we should be getting into *if* we tried to formulate the problem in this way. In other words, it is reasonable to suppose that here Wittgenstein is trying to make us see that, as Cora Diamond puts it, "there was not anything at all that we were imagining".[5]

As for the first paragraph of § 243, it appears to conflict with another section in *Philosophical Investigations*, § 344:

> Would it be imaginable that people should never speak an audible language, but should still say things to themselves in the imagination?
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> "If people always said things only to themselves, then they would merely be doing *always* what as it is they do *sometimes*." – So it is quite easy to imagine this: one need only make the easy transition from some

[5] Op. cit., p. 21. - One should also note the strange contrast which the writer presents, with apparent acceptance, at the end of § 243, between the way we speak about sensations "in our ordinary language", and words that refer to a person's "immediate private sensations"; as if in speaking our ordinary language we did not *really* manage to refer to our sensations. (In that case, what use of the word 'sensation' are we to suppose the writer is relying on here?) The idea of such a contrast is implicitly questioned by Wittgenstein in §§ 244-245, and explicitly rejected in § 261.

> to all. (Like: "An infinitely long row of trees is simply one that does *not* come to an end.") ---

The suggestion that we could easily imagine that people should never speak audibly is evidently ironic. The supposition that if something happens occasionally, this means that it could happen all the time, is a fallacy which Wittgenstein clearly wants us to recognize as such. (Consider also the next section, where Wittgenstein compares this to the inference, "If it is possible for someone to make a false move in some game, then it might be possible for everybody to make nothing but false moves in every game"). Now the conflict between the first paragraph of § 243 and § 344 is in fact blurred by a slight inaccuracy in the English translation of the former section: in German, the second sentence reads "Man könnte sich *also* auch Menschen denken, die nur monologisch sprächen" ("We could *thus* also imagine human beings who spoke only in monologue" [my italics in both cases]). By leaving out the word "thus", the Anscombe translation gives the impression that the second sentence makes an additional claim, whereas Wittgenstein intends it to be read as an inference from the previous assertion, and thus precisely as an *instance* of the kind of vicious generalisation that he himself denounces in § 344. But if he were going to argue for this possibility, he would hardly have supported it with what he considered a fallacious argument. So it is hard to avoid the inference that the view put forward in the first paragraph is that of an interlocutor being set up for criticism, the point of presenting the fallacious argument being to show the source of the temptation to think that people might always speak only in monologue.

But even so, it remains to be shown *what* is wrong about this notion. For of course, the position might well be correct, even if the argument put forward in its support is invalid. What *would* be the problem of imagining a language that is only ever spoken in monologue?

*II. Solitary orders?*

The reason why the generalisation in § 344 is vicious is given in the sequel to the passage just quoted:

> Our criterion for someone's saying something to himself is what he tells us and the rest of his behaviour; and we only say that someone speaks to himself if, in the ordinary sense of the words, he *can speak*. And we do not say it of a parrot; nor of a gramophone.

So speaking out loud does not make a difference in itself, if the speaking is like that of a parrot or a gramophone. But suppose it is claimed that the situation in § 243 is quite different from this, since there we do have the criterion we need in order to determine that these human beings are speaking to themselves: we can hear the sounds they make and observe the connection between the sounds and their behaviour. One might even quote § 206 in support of such a reading: "The common behaviour of mankind is the frame of reference by means of which we interpret an unknown language." Provided we understand what they are up to, we should have no difficulty making out what roles their different utterances have in the context. We can, for instance, , predict their actions since we can hear them making decisions, as the voice in § 243 suggests

I would contend, however, that this analysis misses what makes the generalisation in § 344 vicious. In fact, it is hard to see how the common behaviour of mankind can get a purchase here, *as far as making utterances is concerned*. For what is the common behaviour in which words and utterances have a role? Let me pursue this question step by step. The speaker in § 243 imagines the creatures in the example, among other things, giving themselves orders. It should be obvious, though, that such an example is problematic in a number of ways. For one thing, in a great many cases, if we do not understand the language in which an order was framed, we cannot tell what someone has been ordered to do by simply observing his behaviour on receiving the order. Setting aside the

possibility that he might simply not obey or might make an error[6], a great many orders are not intended to be put into action right away. (It is true that we might understand a situation such as this by recognising the characteristic expressions of obedience, defiance, etc., but this is not relevant to the present case, since those expressions are bound up with cases in which the person who gives an order is different from the person who receives it.)

Examples like these are, of course, familiar from the literature on the private language question. What they all attempt to show is that the example leaves too much open. The specific situation provides no basis for identifying the sounds made as this or that utterance, and since there is no shared language which could provide a frame of reference, there is no context for attributing *any* specific meaning to them. We might call this the identification problem. Let us suppose, however, that we could try to get around these difficulties by assuming that the situation in which the giving of orders occurs is a familiar one, e.g. the person we are observing is erecting some sort of building. (For the sake of the argument, we shall ignore the question of whether buildings have the same sort of significance for him as for us, or whether, say, they are simply constructed as an exercise, or are traps devised to fall and kill an animal.) Now even so, what would be missing in the case of a solitary builder is a *point* to the orders. On the other hand, if several people were involved in the project (like the builders at the beginning of *Philosophical Investigations*), orders would be required to co-ordinate their activities. Without such co-ordination, we can imagine, certain tasks would be much more arduous or even impossible to perform, so a certain amount of ordering might be needed, even if everyone participates voluntarily in the project as equals. The orders would make a difference to the activity because without them, the other builders would not know what to do or when to do it.

If this point is missing, however, what would make us regard their vocalizations as the giving of orders? We could, it is true, imagine one of the

[6] Actually, this is one important difference between the situation envisaged in § 243 and trying to interpret an unknown language: where we are simply trying to predict behaviour on the basis of sound, the only recourse where a prediction fails is to conclude that our hypothesis was wrong. But if we think of what we are observing as a language, there is also the possibility that the speaker made an error, or that the listener gave the wrong response.

builders continuing by himself after the others leave, carrying building blocks, etc., accompanying his work by mumbling the appropriate orders to himself. But the point of the orders he gives himself would of course be quite different from those given by one of the builders to the others. They would not be used in co-ordinating activities. Perhaps, it will be thought, he is mumbling those orders in order to keep track of what he is doing, to practice giving orders, to encourage himself, to stave off the loneliness, or simply out of habit, without noticing what he is doing. However, any of these uses would be derivative of the use of orders in telling others what to do. It is only against that background that his mumbling will take on the character of orders. Also, the orders he is giving himself are not constitutive of the activity he is engaged in, as in the other case. In as far as we take him to be building, he might as well proceed without audibly giving himself orders: he might say them silently to himself, or not formulate them at all. It would make no difference to what he could be taken to be doing. (This is not to suggest that our telling people to do something is always tied to some practical purpose; we should not forget that this type of example was chosen as a concession to those who wish to defend the position expressed in the first paragraph of § 243.)

On the other hand, if the interactive background were missing, then so would be the connection linking the mumbling of the solitary builder to the giving of orders. In the case we were imagining, the solitary builder could be said to be speaking to himself, since his speech was derivative of things that he had previously said to others or things that others had said to him. Lacking that background, however, it would be too much of a concession even to describe him as speaking *to* himself.[7]

In light of this example, consider some of the claims made concerning the conceivability of a solitary speaker. According to G. P. Baker and P. M. S. Hacker, what is, for Wittgenstein, "crucial [to the question of an individual

[7] Actually this is not what the voice in § 243 says. The German original goes as follows: "Man könnte sich also auch Menschen denken, die nur monologisch sprächen. Ihre Tätigkeiten mit Selbstgesprächen begleiteten." 'Selbstgespräch' means 'monologue' or 'speaking by oneself' which I take it is not quite the same thing as speaking *to* oneself, which is how Anscombe renders it.

speaking a language] is the *possibility* of another's mastering the 'language' that the solitary person 'speaks'."[8] Now, is the putative language of the 243's, for instance, the one consisting of the orders they give themselves, a language that another could master? Well, what would mastery amount to here? What should one be able to do? We can hardly resolve this question until we are told what role the mouthing of orders is assumed to have among the 243's.

Again, could their orders be understood by others? (This is the way Oswald Hanfling formulates the condition of non-privacy.[9]) But what is it to understand or to fail to understand the orders? Nothing, it seems, has been said about *the role of understanding* in connection with them.

Or are the 243's, to use Colin McGinn's terms, following rules that are 'knowable' or 'shareable' by others? We can hardly tell until we have resolved what it would mean to know them or to share them. Sharing, evidently, would have to be expressed in our being able to take part in their activity. But what would it mean to take part in another's activity of speaking by himself?[10] More generally, what precisely is the nature of the modality expressed in saying we *could* share certain rules before we *do* share them? If it takes a community to recognize standards, in what sense do the standards exist until they have been recognised by a community?

Hanfling also formulates the crucial condition as involving what can "conceivably be rendered into the common language"[11]. Now, how are we to render the 'orders' of the 243's into our language? Are we to render them in the form of orders (and in what other form might they be rendered)? What would be

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[8] Baker and Hacker, op. cit., p. 175.

[9] Hanfling, op. cit., p. 91. Cp. also David Pears, op. cit., p. 337. – It is true that Hanfling and Pears do not talk about orders in this connection. They might argue that orders are a special case, and that their condition of non-privacy was only meant to apply to certain other uses of language. Hanfling speaks of keeping a private record. But it is hard to see why orders should be exempt; and, as will be argued in the next section, the case of orders is not that different from many other uses of language anyway.

[10] McGinn, op. cit., pp. 192 f. Pears claims that the speakers in § 243 might "achieve conformity by eavesdropping" (op. cit., p. 339). But what would it mean for them to achieve or to fail to achieve conformity? He also suggests that they have the resource of checking their use of language against the physical objects to which they are referring (pp. 337 f). But how would one check the meaning, say, of the order "Go and fetch a chair!" against a chair?

[11] Hanfling, ibid.

our ground for rendering an order that one only ever gives oneself, in the form of an order one may give somebody else?

In fact, nothing we are given in § 243 shows that these imaginary speakers are any different from parrots: we can well imagine a case in which we are able to predict the behaviour of parrots from the sounds they make; in both cases our predictions would be based, not on the meaning of what is said, but on correlations we had observed between sounds and behaviour (it is also obvious that this is the *only* use we could make of their utterances). If the imaginary speakers in § 243 suddenly turned to us and started conversing, this should be only slightly less surprising than if a parrot did: their solitary mumblings are no more a preparation for linguistic interaction than the parrot's vocalizations are, since the idea of their utterances being *for* something or other would not enter into the picture. It seems clear to me then that, for Wittgenstein, the question whether the solitary beings make *audible sounds* or not makes no difference to our ability to think of them as speakers.

***III. The importance of a listener***

Now it might be conceded that what I have said is true of *giving and obeying orders*, and that analogous points can be made concerning the other examples mentioned in § 243: encouraging someone, blaming and punishing her, asking and answering questions. What these types of utterance have in common is that it is comparatively easy to make the case that their primary use is in relations between individuals, and that any significance that mouthing them to oneself or by oneself might have is derivative of their use in human interaction. (In fact, the choice of these very examples is strong additional evidence that we are meant to consider the position expressed in § 243 problematic.) But this is not equally obvious in the case of some other uses of language: say, telling stories, making reports, reminiscing, making resolutions (also mentioned in § 243), etc. Unlike the first range of uses, these may not require any specific response on the listener's part, nor need they be reactions to something said or done by another party. Just as I may idly tell a story to someone, or two people may reminisce together without

any purpose in view, I may note down a story for my own amusement, or reminisce in a private diary. It could hardly be denied that writing down a story just for oneself is still really writing down a story.

However, telling stories, making resolutions, etc., are in fact no less dependent on interactive practices than giving orders or asking questions, even though the dependence in those cases is not equally direct. Writing down things for oneself is an activity that is connected with participating in conversations. Suppose someone wrote down an account of events on a piece of paper, but was unable to respond to questions about that account. It appears to be an account, say, of a mushrooming expedition: "We were walking through a forest, etc. etc. ", but the writer cannot explain any of the words she used, nor can she tell us whether this was an actual event, or fill in any of the details. Why will she not answer our questions? Is she retelling a dream, a made-up story, a hazy childhood memory, or doing a writing exercise? If she has made it up, does she mean for us to believe it is an account of actual events or not? If she means for us to believe it, what kind of assurance is she prepared to give for various parts of the story, and how would she back it up?

The example could be filled out in different ways. It could turn out that the writer had no idea of what it is to ask and answer questions. Or she simply had no responses to questions about her text, although she would engage in normal conversation otherwise. In either case, it starts to appear as if the text she wrote were not her words, as if there were nothing she was trying to say by choosing these particular words rather than some others. It is as if she were in a trance, writing down words that came to her independently of her will.

It is important to see how much would be missing if the writing of the story were cut loose in this way, from any other form of human interchange. There would be no sense on the part of the writer of being related to someone through her words. The idea of telling someone something would play no part here. We could recognize what she wrote as English sentences ordered in a meaningful sequence, but a context would be lacking in which those sentences could be said to be *about* something or other. Even if her account happened to

match an actual event in her life, or some episode in a novel she had once read, this would not mean that that was what she had recounted. The situation is reminiscent of one imagined by Wittgenstein in the last section of *On Certainty* (§ 676):

> … If I am [drugged] and if the drug has taken away my consciousness, then I am not now really talking and thinking. I cannot seriously suppose that I am at this moment dreaming. Someone who, dreaming, says "I am dreaming", even if he speaks audibly in doing so, is no more right than if he said in his dream "it is raining", while it was in fact raining. Even if his dream were actually connected with the noise of the rain.

Neither, of course, is he wrong. He simply is not making a claim.

To think of something as a story (or as a report, a resolution, etc.) is to think of it as something about which certain questions can be asked. Hence a bit of writing is only a story, say, against the background of the sort of interchange we have in telling and listening to stories, etc. What we have here, it might be said, is a return of the identification problem, but on a deeper level: not just as a problem concerning the particular meaning of what is said (or written), but as a problem concerning what, in particular, someone is doing *in* speaking (or writing).

### *IV. The idea of community standards*

Wittgenstein wrote (*PI*, § 202): "… it is not possible to obey a rule 'privately': otherwise thinking one was obeying a rule would be the same thing as obeying it." For instance, it would be an error to suppose that I could, privately, determine what my words mean in speaking to someone. Now it has widely been thought that the operational contrast here is with the public standards of a linguistic community. This impression has been strengthened by §§ 241-242 (i.e., the sections immediately preceding the one about human beings speaking only in monologue), which are often quoted. Here Wittgenstein points out that, in saying that something is true or false, human beings "agree in the *language* they use",

and that, "[i]f language is to be a means of communication there must be agreement not only in definitions but also … in judgments".

Nevertheless, the fact that something is *not private*, in the sense of being restricted to one individual, does not entail that it is *public*. Consider the following example. Suppose I tell my wife, "I'll meet you at the bank at 5". At 5 she goes to the Midland Bank branch office, whereas I go to the riverbank. Now if I want to argue that she made a mistake, it is not enough to assure her that when I was speaking, I was in fact *thinking* of the riverbank or that in fact I *meant* the riverbank. Neither could she prove she was right by telling me that when she heard the words, *she thought* of the Midland Bank or thought I meant it. The question of who was right is a question of how I was *entitled* to expect my words to be taken, or, in other words, what my wife was entitled to expect me to have meant. In speaking, I may have supposed I made myself clear although I did not.

It is tempting to think that the reason the issue between my wife and myself is not settled by an appeal to what *I* happened to mean is that the issue of what my words meant is an objective matter. It is, one might think, a question of English usage: "When the word 'bank' is uttered under such and such circumstances, then one must either be entitled to assume that it refers to a riverbank or to a financial institution – otherwise the meaning is indeterminate." We think of language here as a sort of code, in which there are determinate rules laid down for the correct words to use and the correct way of responding to them in given circumstances. The trouble with this suggestion, however, is that my wife and I may not agree on what *the relevant circumstances* of the utterance are, which is probably why we misunderstood each other in the first place. We could imagine the following dialogue ensuing: "But we *always* meet at the riverbank" – "But we haven't met there for a long time, and besides our business was going to be at the Midland Bank" – and so on. No appeal to the rules of English usage or any other shared standards is going to settle this dispute.[12] In as far as there are rules of usage, they express our understanding of the conversation; they are not

[12] On the other hand, supposing we reject the comparison of the use of language to the use of a code, it should not be thought that the difference between them is that the rules of linguistic usage are necessarily more indeterminate, or perhaps deficient in some ways. (On this cp *PI* § 81.)

the basis for our understanding of it. There is no appeal here beyond what carries conviction in the ensuing dialogue. But neither do the rules show that the issue is open and that we are both equally right. We could imagine another couple in quite the same circumstances who met at the riverbank without further ado, so that the whole matter of what had been meant was never raised. Or we might suppose a third couple both went to the Midland Bank under the same circumstances. It would be pointless to argue in this case that at least one of these couples acted in breach of English usage.[13]

We might say this: any general appeal to English usage is too abstract to capture what is going on in the conversation between my wife and myself. There is no issue of what my utterance meant that is distinct from the issue of what I was doing in speaking.[14]

Our inclination to think of disagreements about meaning as matters to be settled by an appeal to shared standards is probably sustained by our focusing on what might be called public uses of language. The local newspaper in my hometown used to carry announcements to the effect that such and such an event was to take place "in the hall", without any further specifications. The locals would know which building was being referred to, whereas newcomers would not. Now we could imagine such an announcement giving rise to litigation: say, someone misses out on an important official transaction, suffers financial harm, and brings a suit against the authorities, claiming that the locale of the transaction had not been adequately specified. The considerations that one might invoke to defend or criticize the announcement in such a case are obviously quite different

[13] Here we might also think about the case of someone who has a serious speech impediment so that very few people, maybe only one person who knows them very well, can make out what they are saying. Suppose someone utters what sounds like two vowel sounds, and we are told that she said "Thank you". Now we might very well accept this as true even though it would also be true that what she said did not conform to the standard pronunciation of these words. In fact, it could be true even if no one else had ever pronounced those words that way, and even though if a normal speaker made the same sounds we might deny that he had said "Thank you". Of course, there are also more everyday cases, similar to this, in which we may say, "I know she said that, and that to someone who doesn't know her, it sounded like a promise; but knowing her as I do, I did not take it that way." The others consider themselves entitled to construe her words in a particular way, while I do not, and there may be no definite answer to the question of who is right.

[14] The point that considering what the sense of a sentence might be cannot be separated from thinking of situations in which the sentence is actually used for saying something is forcefully made by Don S. Levi, *In Defense of Informal Logic* (Dordrecht et al: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2000), esp. chapters 11-12.

from those that are pertinent to an interchange between husband and wife. What is to be established in court, we might say, is how the announcement could reasonably be expected to be understood by any normal reader. The litigant might in fact have understood the announcement correctly and may have missed out for some other reason: this might make no decisive difference to the court case.[15]

It could be ventured as a rule of thumb that the more anonymous the context in which a text is being considered, the more abstract will be the appeals that are held to be relevant in trying to settle divergent interpretations. There is a huge variety of utterances and written texts of various kinds, in which there is no direct contact between the speaker or author and the addressees. This ranges all the way from announcements on public address systems, over signboards carrying commercial or official messages, radio and television programmes, to newspapers, literary and scholarly works and legal documents. The author of such a text may have to reckon with its being read by people she has never met, and, in many cases, by people who know nothing about her, and who perhaps do not even know her identity. Such uses of language hold a prominent place in a literate, urban culture such as ours, and many of them are among those that an academic is most likely to think about in thinking about language. In fact, expressing oneself in a way that is maximally independent of context is often put forward as a stylistic ideal.

This makes it tempting to suggest that it is by focusing on uses of language such as these that we can see what it means to speak or write the language as it actually is. In contexts such as the court case that we just described, it might be thought, the only appeal is to what can be considered unquestionably *established* features of the language. In our less formal, domestic contacts we can permit ourselves a certain leeway, whereas in anonymous interchanges we must stick as closely as possible to the pure form of the language.

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[15] Of course, the way in which considerations of meaning enter into legal argument may differ considerably from case to case. Thus, consider the part played by specific nuances of meaning and contextual considerations in trying to decide, on the one hand, whether a conversation constituted sexual harassment, and on the other hand, how one of the amendments to the U.S. constitution is to be applied.

However, this notion of a pure form of a language is obviously illusory. Independence of context is a matter of degree. Even when we come across an impersonal text, we will normally know, from the setting or from the text itself, to which category or genre it belongs. We usually encounter a street sign as a street sign, a poem as a poem, etc., which means that we regard them in the context of other tokens of the same type. To the extent that we do not, we are not clear about what to make of the text. (This situation of course will sometimes be exploited in jokes and in experimental poetry.) This means that the kinds of consideration that will bear on the reading of a text will vary from one type of public writing to another: for instance, the status of an ambiguity in a legal document is obviously quite different from its status in certain kinds of literary work. If I do not know what a written text purports to be, I may be able to describe it only in grammatical terms ("This is an English subject–predicate sentence", etc). This is the relation we have to the examples found in grammar books. The sentence "Jack kissed Jill" in a grammar book does not refer to any particular individuals, it does not assert anything, etc; it simply instantiates certain rules of grammar. (It could be said that what rules of grammar apply to are the example sentences in grammar books.)

This also means that there can be no independent notion of a normal reader. Even though we expect a legal document, for instance, to be highly abstract with respect to the context relevant to its application, it would make no sense to require that it should be intelligible to someone who has no familiarity with a juridical culture. Ultimately, the appeal to the normal reader will be circular: she is someone who is able to respond to the text in question in the appropriate way.

It should be clear that public texts in anonymous contexts do not provide instances of pure language, if by that is meant uses of language that can be assessed independently of their connection with what is done with them.

There is no such thing as a set of linguistic standards that will put one in a position to respond appropriately to all texts. [16]

The language 'as it is in itself' is not the basis of our ordinary interchanges; in fact, those interchanges have no basis, and the whole idea of the language as it is in itself is an artefact (or better yet a set of artefacts) arising out of the way we relate to linguistic matters in certain specialized contexts.

Ultimately, it might be argued, this idea of language is due to a misunderstanding of the nature of linguistic standards: the standards are primarily designed to teach a person to cope in a new language by drawing on his command of another language, building bridges (of vocabulary and grammar) between the languages. Access to the standards are not what enables us to interact in our own language, although some of these standards, once articulated, may influence the linguistic habits of native speakers because of the prestige they enjoy in a given cultural setting.

We should note too that there are cases of linguistic interchange to which the notion of linguistic entitlement is even more alien than to the husband-wife relation as I imagined it. What I have in mind are cases in which the parties do not enter the interchange as equals: a slave who fears his master might be wise to try to *anticipate* his master's reactions rather than stand on his rights in interpreting his orders; on the other hand, we might think it quite unreasonable to stand on our linguistic rights in relation, say, to a five-year-old, insisting on holding her to her words rather than accepting the blame ourselves if things go disastrously wrong because of our relying on her (say, in asking her, "Are you *sure* you will be OK on your own for five hours?").

The idea of community standards having a bearing independently of the particular situation thus turns out to be illusory. What is to be made of what someone has said depends on the language used, but *the way* it depends on it is in turn dependent on the actual situation in which she said it. We might also express

[16] This is illustrated by the case of the oblivious diarist in the previous section. The fact that we could recognise her text as consisting of words and sentences in English, and thus could imagine its being used for various purposes, did not put us in a position to tell what it was being used for here. In this respect, it is like a translation exercise in a grammar book

this point by saying that the line between what belongs to logic and what belongs to psychology is not as clear-cut as the philosophers who have cautioned against the pitfalls of psychologism have been inclined to think. Of course, this does not mean that issues of meaning are to be resolved by empirical investigation; 'the psychological' here stands for the irreducible particularity of what takes place in linguistic interchange.[17]

***Conclusion***

The important lack in the case of the solitary speaker, then, is not that of community standards. To construe Wittgenstein's discussion of language and privacy as concerned with drawing attention to the role of those standards is to miss out on what is important in it. To that extent, I am in agreement with those who support the solitary speaker reading. However, I do not concur with their view that Wittgenstein is here simply concerned with undermining the idea of the privacy of the mental. Neither, I would contend, is he concerned with laying down conditions for the use of words such as 'language' and 'meaning' or with getting clear about the essential nature of language. His discussion, in other words, is not simply an exercise in the philosophy of mind or in the philosophy of language, rather it has much wider ramifications: it is part of his effort to turn the philosopher's attention in another direction. He is urging her, when finding herself stunned time and again by her inability to give an account of the meaning of words such as 'pain', or 'knowledge', or 'cause', or 'meaning', or 'time', or 'will', etc, to rid herself of her preoccupation with the objects of discourse and to focus her attention instead on the activity of speaking about those things, that is, to ask herself what kinds of interchange we engage in *in using* those words. The primary relation to be considered, according to Wittgenstein, is not that between the speaker and the object, but that between speakers and listeners with respect to

[17] The points made in this section, and indeed the need for the section, were brought home to me in a correspondence with Lynette Reid and Sean Stidd. (Also, for a discussion of anti-psychologism, see Reid, "Wittgenstein's Ladder: The *Tractatus* and Nonsense", *Philosophical Investigations* 21 (1998), 97-151.)

the object. It is for this reason that he tells us to turn our back on the traditional starting point of Western philosophy: the solitary speaker and his world.[18]

[18] A number of people have taken trouble over this text during various stages of its preparation. I wish to acknowledge my indebtedness to them even though I have stubbornly persisted in what some of them will consider errors. In particular, I wish to mention David Cockburn, Martin Gustafsson, Oswald Hanfling, Pär Segerdahl and Sean Stidd.