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CONCERNING THE ONTOLOGICAL QUESTION IN LINGUISTICS

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Pateman (1983) distinguishes between four different answers that have in current literature been given to the question figuring in the title of his paper 'What is a language?'; namely 'naturalism' (represented by Chomsky), 'platonism' (represented by Katz), 'nominalism' (represented by Kanngiesser), and 'sociologism' (represented, in different forms, by Saussure, Labov and Itkonen). Pateman's own answer, labelled 'dualism', is a combination of naturalism and some aspects of sociologism. Nevertheless, he denies that linguistic facts are primarily social in character, and to establish his point, he argues at some length against views put forth in Itkonen (1978). Now it seems to me that Pateman's position is not as far removed from mine as he apparently thinks. Yet acknowledging the *de facto* similarity of our views would, in my opinion, have some repercussions on his program of constructing a viable 'dualistic' conception of language.[1]

In Itkonen (1978, p. 126) I state that 'I regard a language as a system of rules',[2] with the qualification that at the level of common knowledge we have to do not with a system, but with a set of rules: 'It is the grammarian's task to work out the system in question'. Because rules (qua constituents of a language) exist at the level of, or as objects of, common knowledge, they are social in character. I use Wittgenstein's private-language argument to prove that this is a necessary, and not just a contingent, property of rules.[3] After dealing with the ontological question, I proceed to discuss the epistemology and the methodology of grammatical theory (or 'autonomous linguistics'), and in particular its relations to such disciplines as formal logic and analytical philosophy.

Since Pateman wants to prove that linguistic facts are not primarily social facts, he must show that rules are not necessarily social in character or, what comes to the same, that linguists are in general not concerned with rules in my sense. He intends to achieve this by adducing such cases from language study, viz. creation of creoles, second-language acquisition, and 'home sign' systems created by deaf children, which he regards as counter-examples to the private-language argument. So the whole issue boils down to whether or not these are genuine counter-examples.

Before answering this question, I make two preliminary remarks. First, since Pateman wishes to undermine the private-language argument by examples taken from outside the synchronic-grammatical study of natural languages like English or Finnish, he implicitly admits that the private-language argument applies to this kind of study. He also admits (p. 105) that 'to write a grammar [is] the central descriptive activity of linguists'.[4] Hence Pateman agrees with me that the private-language argument applies to the central descriptive activity of linguists. Second, having argued his case, Pateman concludes that 'the material I have presented is sufficient to establish the claim that *there are linguistic facts*

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which are not social facts, and hence to undercut any thorough-going sociologism' (p. 119). In fact, Pateman's 'dualism' is meant to be a synthesis both of cognitive (or psychological) facts and of social facts about language, and thus to 'indicate a view of reality as stratified' (p. 102). Since Pateman does not, after all, insist on the view of linguistic facts as *primarily* non-social (see the quotation from p. 119), it is not at all clear who he is arguing against; it certainly cannot be me. I have always insisted that we must carefully distinguish between *social* rules or norms of language, to be investigated by autonomous linguistics, and *psychological* internalizations of rules (or 'mental grammars'), to be investigated by psycholinguistics (see Itkonen, 1978, pp. 34–37, 82–84, 116–17, 138, 149, 187–88, 220–21, 258–60, and elsewhere). This duality, transferred to the level of *rationality,* constitues the main topic of Itkonen (1984).[5] So we see that here again, Pateman and I are in complete agreement. It is self-evident that the distinction between psychological and social practically coincides with Popper's distinction between the 'world-2' and the 'world-3'. What seems to be less evident is that Wittgenstein too espouses the view that reality is 'stratified' in this way; but he is just not interested in the world-2:

> Supposing we tried to construct a mind-model as a result of psychological investigations . . . This model would be part of a psychological theory in the way in which a mechanical model of the ether can be part of a theory of electricity . . . But this aspect of the mind does not interest us (Wittgenstein, 1965, p.6).[6]

Next I shall try to show that the private-language argument applies not only to the synchronic-grammatical study of natural languages like English, but also to the cases adduced by Pateman. What does the private-language argument consist in? In its bare essentials it goes as follows. The notion of rule is inseparable from the notion of incorrect action or mistake: where no mistakes are possible, there are no rules. Can a person recognize and correct his own mistakes with no help from others? Cartesians, who claim that knowledge is primarily subjective in character, must answer in the affirmative. Wittgenstein gives a negative answer, based on the following fact.[7] When I follow a rule, I rely on my memory of what it is. If I am in doubt whether or not I have violated the rule, and if I wish to resolve my doubts, but do not wish to use any outside help, then I cannot avoid relying on (what ultimately turns out to be) the *same* memory. If the memory has altered, I have no way of knowing it: for me, everything that seems correct, is correct; and this is unacceptable. Consequently I need independent checks on my rule-governed actions, and these can only come from others.[8]

Before examining Pateman's purported counter-examples, it is good to mention that in Itkonen (1978, pp. 320–21, n. 55 and pp. 126–27) I already discussed two prima facie counter-examples to the private-language argument, namely Fodor's (1975) 'mentalese' and the language of aphasics. The 'rules' of these two types of language lie under the level of consciousness, which means that the speakers are unable to detect mistakes resulting from violating these 'rules'. Consequently we do not have to do here with genuine rules at all, and 'languages' constituted by such 'rules' have no relevance to the problem at hand.[9]

Pateman gives (1983, p. 115) a definition of the private-language argument which is basically the same as the one I gave above. However, it is not this definition that he applies to his material, but some loose notion of what it means for a rule to be 'private'. Let us consider first the case which Pateman himself considers decisive: a deaf child of hearing parents will make itself understood by using a sign language which it has created all alone. Pateman emphasizes that although the parents understand what the child says,

they are not able to follow the 'rules' of this idiosyncratic language themselves. Pateman concludes that we have here an instance of a private language, something that Wittgenstein thought would be conceptually impossible, 'I cannot see that the intelligibility of the users of these rules *ipso facto* shows that those who understand them are therefore parties to a convention of mutual knowledge with their users' (p. 118). Let us not forget, however, what is the definition of the private-language argument, equally accepted by Pateman and myself. In accordance with it, the only questions we have to ask are: 'Can the child make a mistake?' and 'If it can, can it correct the mistake without help from the parents?' Pateman answers the first question negatively when he claims (p. 118) that 'the output of . . . 'home sign' systems is not normative for anyone'. If he is right, the 'rules' we have here do not satisfy the basic requirement put upon genuine rules (i.e. the possibility of making a mistake), and therefore the case at hand is irrelevant to the private-language argument. But I think he is wrong. Suppose the child points at a dog and makes a sign that it normally uses when it points at a cat. I cannot see why the parents could not make the child realize its mistake[10] (even if they use an *ad hoc* sign language which differs from the child's own), and if they can do it, the output of home sign systems is certainly normative for all concerned. This case confirms Wittgenstein's argument because the child's behavior has been corrected by independent checks. And the reasons why the child cannot rely on non-independent checks are precisely those general philosophical reasons that led Wittgenstein to construct his private-language argument in the first place.

Pateman seems to have anticipated an answer of this kind because he continues the sentence quoted above as follows: 'If it did, it would obliterate any distinction between creoles, interlanguages and 'home sign' systems on the one hand and standard languages on the other, and it would remain to specify the differences' (p. 118). It is exactly at this point, I think, that Pateman commits the decisive mistake. Let us have a careful look at the structure of his argument. He *first* distinguishes natural languages like English (=A) from creoles, interlanguages, and home sign systems (=B), and claims that the private-language argument is not *general enough,* because it applies to A, but not to B. But he *then* claims that if the private-language argument applies also to B, it is *too general,* because it obliterates the distinction between A and B. Do I need to say that this is a contradiction?

I hasten to add that there are attenuating circumstances which to some extent make Pateman's position comprehensible. It is quite true that the private-language argument is so general as to be of no help to the ordinary practising linguist. With some exaggeration one might even claim, with Pateman, that the sense in which the rules of home sign systems are public rules 'is surely irrelevant to linguistics' (p. 118). But nowhere in Itkonen (1978) do I claim any practical relevance for the private-language argument. Itkonen (1978) is a large-scale attempt to assess the methodology and the philosophy of one scientific discipline, namely autonomous linguistics. It is only natural that I should proceed here in the direction of decreasing abstractness: I start from knowledge in general, proceed to knowledge of language, and finally arrive at detail problems of linguistic methodology. More precisely, I start by trying to show that, contrary to what Saunders and Henze (1967) call the 'traditionist' line of thinking in the history of epistemology, knowledge is not primarily subjective in character. Now what is true of knowledge *in general* must also be true of knowledge *of language*; and the private-language argument is just one way of refuting the *general* traditionist position. If you are going to examine the philosophy of linguistics, you cannot expect that everything you say will be relevant to the practising

linguist. The same goes of course for the philosophy of any other scientific discipline as well.

By now I have established my main point. For the sake of completeness, however, I shall also examine the other two cases adduced by Pateman, namely creoles and interlanguages. Just as he did in speaking of home sign systems, Pateman claims (p. 118) that 'the output of creoles [and] interlanguages is not normative for anyone, including their users'. As for creoles, I am afraid that Pateman has got Bickerton's (1981) facts wrong. Pidgins, and not creoles, are said to lack any well-established rules. Once a creole has been created (on the basis of a pidgin, to be sure), it functions like any other language. It is possible that Pateman means to say that the *process* of creating a creole is not normative. It is a general truth, however, that there are no *rules of change* (cf. Itkonen, 1981, p. 695). This truth is general enough to cover the creation of creoles as well as first- and second-language acquisition, in addition to linguistic change proper. This remark takes care of interlanguages as presumptive counter-examples.

In connection with mentalese and aphasia it became clear that the private-language argument does not apply, and is not meant to apply, to 'rules' that lie under the level of consciousness. And it is well known that the 'rules' of Chomsky-type mental grammars belong to this category. From these facts Pateman infers (pp. 118–19) that I am wrong to claim, in Itkonen (1978, p. 113), that Chomsky's conception of language 'is demonstrably equivalent to the private-language conception'. Pateman's inference would be correct, if Chomsky made no claims that go beyond cognitive psychology. As a matter of fact, however, he also makes claims in which he emphasizes, in the true Cartesian fashion, the primacy of (subjective) knowledge over (intersubjective) behavioral criteria; and his arguments have been further developed by Moravcsik, Vendler and Fodor (see Itkonen, 1978, pp. 117–21, 1984, pp. 224–39). It is this Cartesian aspect of Chomsky's work which justifies my claim quoted above.

It has been my purpose here to clarify my own position. In conclusion, however, I would like briefly to comment upon the prospects of Pateman's dualistic program. Language is not an undifferentiated whole, but rather contains an ontological diversity which must be accounted for by any overall conception of linguistics. Such a conception must also be able to show how this *ontological*(-cum-epistemological) diversity finds expression in the methodological differences that are characteristic of existing linguistic subdisciplines.[11] In view of these desiderata, it seems to me that at least in two respects Pateman's programme stands in need of complementation or revision. First, among the 'facts about language' he distinguishes between two principal domains, namely 'socio-political' facts and 'mentally-represented' (i.e. psychological) facts, and labels the corresponding epistemological notions as 'beliefs about language' and 'knowledge of language'. Beliefs about language may be brought to the level of consciousness; they concern such matters as the group identity of speakers and the role of prestige dialects or of prescriptive grammarians. By contrast, knowledge of language lies permanently under the level of consciousness and may only be hypothesized about. Surprisingly enough, in this dualistic conception there seems to be no room left for those linguistic facts which are the basis of everything else, namely (intuitions about) correct sentences or speech acts. The whole edifice of Chomskyan linguistics is ultimately based on the analysis of such sentences as *John is easy to please* or *Mary bought a dog to play with.* Therefore anyone interested in working out an explicit and consistent conception (dualistic or not) of

Chomskyan linguistics must start by explaining how such sentences exist and how they are known (and known to be correct) by the grammarian.[12] As long as this has not happened, the program has not yet got off the ground. I shall be much interested to see in which respects, if any, Pateman's account will differ from mine.[13]

Second, Pateman castigates nominalistic approaches for being 'positivistic when they treat the object of their investigations as a fact definable and describable purely 'externally' without reference to a hermeneutic moment in which speakers define the fact or object for themselves' (p. 109). For his part, he is anxious to do justice to this 'hermeneutic moment'. Against this background it is unfortunate that he has thrown in his lot with Chomskyan linguistics. Because Chomsky (1976, p. 183) refuses to see any distinction between linguistics and physics, or between human beings and natural objects, he denies the very possibility of any hermeneutic moment (for documentation and discussion, see Itkonen, 1978, pp. 75–87, and elsewhere).[14] Writing on Chomsky's hermeneutics is like writing on Lenin's theology. In both cases, the reason for trying to combine incompatible facts is not to be found in the facts themselves, but only in the analyst's mind.

NOTES

[1] I have commented on naturalism, platonism, nominalism and Labov-type sociologism in Itkonen (1978, pp. 75–87; 1983; 1978, p. 322, n. 61; 1977), respectively. In two passages (p. 113 and p. 124, n. 5) Pateman (1983) claims, without giving any more specific references, that Itkonen (1978) sometimes treats languages nominalistically, i.e. as mere *names*. I see no justification for this claim.

[2] Pateman quotes a passage from Itkonen (1978, p. 136), viz. 'language is a set of rules', and comments upon it as follows: 'it is unfortunate that . . . Itkonen writes of 'language' generically; he does not there commit himself to the view that 'a language is a set of rules'' (p. 114). I find it very hard to follow Pateman's argument here. As we just saw, I start, on p. 126, by identifying *a language* with a set (or system) of rules; and I then assume that this holds true of *any language*, i.e. of 'language' in general. Maybe Pateman's misgivings are due to the fact that he identifies (p. 103) *language* (as distinguished from *a language*) with *faculté de langage*. For me, however, the two concepts are distinct: *language* (meaning any language, understood as a set of rules) is a social concept whereas *faculté de langage* is a psychological one.

[3] Pateman makes two puzzling comments on my treatment of the ontological question: 'Itkonen is primarily concerned with the ontology of individual linguistic rules, and not with the ontology of languages' (p. 113), and 'he writes essentially about individual linguistic rules' (p. 114). This is something I cannot understand. I define (p. 126) a language as a set of rules, and I conclude: 'I have given here my account of what it means to say that *a language exists*' (italics in the original). I then go on to give examples of rules and of sentences referring to rules, especially in the section 6.2, which is entitled 'Examples of Rules and Rule-Sentences'. Now examples of rules are of course examples of individual rules. But to infer from this that I am interested only in (the ontology of) individual rules is unjustified, to put it mildly. It is true, of course, that at this stage I leave several questions open, e.g. the distinction between languages and dialects.

[4] Pateman is speaking of Chomsky's way to write a grammar. Maybe it is not amiss to recall that Chomsky's contribution pertains to the syntax and the phonology of English. He has written no grammars for creoles, 'interlanguages', or sign systems.

[5] While Itkonen (1978) investigated the notion of autonomous linguistics, Itkonen (1984) investigates the complementary notion of non-autonomous linguistics. Taken together, these two notions exhaust the superordinate notion of linguistics.

[6] Wittgenstein's attitude vis-à-vis psychology has been widely misunderstood and misrepresented; for comments, see Itkonen (1984, pp. 239–48).

[7] The more I learn about the history of philosophy, the more I discover arguments similar to Wittgenstein's and presented long before him.

[8] This brief account gives rise to several objections which I cannot answer here; for a more detailed exposition, see Itkonen (1978, pp. 91–113).

[9] As for genuine rules (as I understand this term), Pateman makes the following comment: 'For Itkonen, though linguistic rules are known with absolute atheoretical certainty by those who participate in them . . . speakers' intuitions about the rules of which they have certain knowledge are fallible and corrigible' (p. 124, n. 13). This may sound puzzling, but the idea that Pateman wishes to express is in fact quite simple. The truth of '$7 \times 8 = 56$' is a matter of certain *knowledge,* if anything is. Now it is quite possible that the (mathematical) *intuition* of some person—be it a child, a moron, or a lunatic—fails to grasp this truth. However, this does nothing to undermine its certainty. In a similar way we must distinguish between the *intersubjective* knowledge of language and the *subjective* intuitions about language. Once again, this brief account is open to several objections; for answers, see Itkonen (1978, pp. 131–51).

[10] I assume the child *is* making a mistake, i.e. it means to say something like 'Look at that dog' and not 'This dog resembles the cat I saw yesterday'.

[11] Itkonen (1978) and (1984) jointly offer one such 'overall conception of linguistics'.

[12] It may not be out of place to point out that the practice of analyzing self-invented sample sentences which the grammarian knows, on the basis of his linguistic intuition, to be either correct or incorrect stands at the very beginning of Western linguistics. See how Apollonius Dyscolus (1981, p. 24) experiments with the sentence *Ho autos anthrōpos olisthēsas sēmeron katepesen* (= 'The same man slipped and fell today'); or indeed, see Plato (1963, p. 1009).

[13] One piece of advice: Pateman identifies mentally-represented objects and idiolects (p. 119), but it would be wise to distinguish one from the other. The former are generally defined not to be open to intuition, whereas there must be at least one sense, exemplified by the grammarians' descriptive practice, in which the latter are open to intuition.

[14] Notice that the question concerns the existence of a hermeneutic moment in the grammarians' descriptive practice. That such a moment is contained in 'socio-political' linguistics, comes close to being a conceptual truth and will probably be granted by everyone. It is not equally obvious that (experimental) psycholinguistics too needs to make use of hermeneutic understanding. Therefore I do not wish to press the point, although I think that here too Pateman is wrong to accept Chomsky's positivistic line of thinking; see Fodor *et al.* (1980, p. 303) and Itkonen (1984, pp. 196–201).

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