

Private Sensation and Private Language

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The issue of private language raised by Wittgenstein in his late work *Philosophical Investigation* (1953) is an important one open to long-term debating. Wittgenstein's private language argument which negatives it runs on discussing inner sensations, especially the "pain" in the human body. Is Wittgenstein argument successful or un-successful? My short paper argues that the Wittgenstein's argument is not successful. In order to explore the cause we need to begin from private sensation which is the starting point of the issue of private language in Wittgenstein.

Wittgenstein defines private language through the discussion of private sensations. In Wittgenstein's philosophy, private language is concerned with private sensation. In terms of the objects of human senses, objects can be classified into two sorts: public ones and private ones. Language used to describe such public objects as external natural objects, mountains, rivers, vast land and etc. is undoubtedly of the public nature.

Private objects of human senses in contrast with the public are in the private sector, such as inner sensations, inherent personal feelings, including physical sensitivity. These sensations or feelings are private experiences. Appropriate language is needed to describe such feelings, sensations and experiences. For instance, the word "pain" describes the human inner experience, expressing the personal inner feeling or experience. Here, two basic elements are entailed: symbols of language and the objects that the symbols stand for. The connection between them is not one out of fabrication, but one all people who use the language can grasp through the use of that particular words. In a sense, the connection between the two elements is determined by language rules. The reference function of a Descriptive Noun or a Demonstrative Pronoun is the basic function of a language, which is guaranteed by grammar rules. So, in this point, expressions of private sensations share the same public language or the rules. Then in this sense, private sensations are expressed through public language.

However, how do we understand private sensations or personal inner experiences in other persons? We can or can't? That is to say, lots (if not all) of private inner feelings, sensations or personal inner experiences are not public. You may not understand my feelings, nor do I understand yours. It is well proved by the human experiences that people in different social positions, or with different psychologies, different personalities and different social experiences can have quite different feelings and sensations. Personal inner feelings are rather private, for each individual is a lonely unique being. If so, would there be an expression of personal feelings or inner sensation, which could be called as private language? i.e., I just want to express my own personal, unique feelings by the language that could not be shared by others and not follow the rule of public language. Wittgenstein denies the existence of such private language, but his argument is not a good one.

To understand how Wittgenstein shows private language falsely, first of all, let us look at his definition of private language. Wittgenstein puts, "could we also imagine a language in which a person could write down or give vocal expression to his inner experiences - his feel-

ings, 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."¹ This definition of private language entails three perspectives. 1. the reference of the vocabulary in that language is just what the speaker himself knows, or the speaker's direct and private feelings and inner experience;

2. such a language can not be used for inter-subjective communication, but only for his personal use; and 3. no one else can understand this language except the language user himself. Hence private language is private in that it can not be understood by anyone else except by the first person "I". Therefore, private language is the sounds or written symbols that are exclusive in the understanding or understood by the only person who invented. Here the "do not understand" is a matter of logic rather than one in the factual or technological sense, for it excludes subjective intentions (password, code word) which makes understanding impossible for others, and incapability of language (foreign language, professional language). For instance, a person who does not understand the codes of a telegraph is able to understand them when told. Inability to understand the language in such a case is not what Wittgenstein intends to put forward as private language.

According to the first perspective of Wittgenstein's definition of private language, we need to classify the language reference as either the private language or the public one. The so-called private language does not refer to the public object, but the private one. In the second level, the use of language is the private rather than the public. In the third perspective, the private language is only and solely for the private user. The use of the private language for the user "alone" does not mean that the user talks to himself. If the private talking to himself is heard by others who are able to understand, it does not mean that it is a private language. The so-called private language is the one which can not possibly be understood by any other at all even if I speak out and make explanation. Suppose I use X to refer to one of my inner feelings. If I associate the X with my feeling that X stands for, and establish a certain connection between them, then others can understand what I have said and understand the meaning of the symbol X after I have told them what X stands for. In this sense, X is not the private language. Therefore, the private language is one kind of one which is in the sense of logic that the user can only understand it. If so, is there such a private language?

Wittgenstein has performed a Reduction to Absurdity for the position that a private language is logically possible or conceptually coherent. In the first step, Wittgenstein points out that any inner feeling or inner experience of consciousness can only be expressed in some kind of language if it is to be expressed or described, and the

¹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, translated by G. E. M. Anscombe, Blackwell Publishing company, 2001; §243 p.75e.

language used must be public rather than private in nature. Secondly, the most important point in his Reduction to Absurdity is memory.

Wittgenstein puts forward his argument primarily through discussing "pain" as a person's inner sensation or intrinsic experience. Everyone has inner sensation or inner experience, but how do we express our inner sensation or inner feeling? How is there any possible that a person's inner experience can be grasped or expressed only through something similar to language but uniquely grasped by the language user himself rather than through the public language? Wittgenstein invites us to imagine that a child intends to describe his personal feeling of toothache and wants to name such a personal feeling but without the usual vocabulary, for example, Y was named to his experience. The word that child uses to describe his toothache cannot be understood by anyone else. When he used the word or symbol others can not understand what he said.

Wittgenstein asks: "does he understand the name, without being able to explain its meaning to anyone? "And" what does it mean to say that he has' named his pain ' "? In other words, once the child explains to others what he has said, others must understand the meaning of the new name for his tooth-ache.

Therefore, the invention of the new name can not be as one kind of private language. When one says, " He gave a name to his sensation "; one forgets that a great deal of stage setting in the language is presupposed if the mere act of naming is to make sense. And when we speak of a name given to pain, what is presupposed is the existence of the grammar of the word 'pain'; it shows the post where the new word is stationed.² You can invent some new words or new sign substitution for old use, but it does not mean that you have some private language. It only means that you have put some new words or signs into the system of public language. What is more, the grammar system, which you use, determines how the new words or signs are used.

We can also assume that I use the sign "S" to keep one of my inner sensations which often recurs, and I put the sign in a calendar each day when I have the sensation, but I cannot formulate the sign and I can only give myself a kind of ostensive definition. Therefore, Wittgenstein thinks that we cannot point to the sensation in the ordinary sense if we can not give a clear definition referring to its use. So the only thing I can do is "when I speak, or write the sign down, and at the same time I concentrate my attention on the sensation and so, as it were, point to it inwardly ... for in this way I impress on myself the connection between the sign and the sensation.—But 'I impress it on myself 'can only mean: this process brings it about that I remember the connection right in the future. But in the present case I have no criterion of correctness."³

What Wittgenstein said is that if we can give the sign "S" a definite formulation, we have made a criterion of its use. Is it necessary that one word or sign needs one definition for its use? For example, J.E. Moore argues that the concept of good cannot be defined or formulated, but almost everyone knows how to use it. From Wittgenstein's point of view, without the definition, we only use the sign by remembering the connection between the sign and sensation. But there are no rules or criteria for correctness

for private terms or signs. If the memory is well kept, then it may replace the definition to determine the link.

Therefore, what Wittgenstein puts here is not the same as or consistent with what he said in § 257. In § 257, he said, if you create a new word, the rules of grammar of the entire language or syntax of the usage determine how to use the new word. Now Wittgenstein adds one more point: definition of new words or signs. Therefore, the definition by Wittgenstein is also concerned with the way the sign is used in the language system. What is more, the definition shows how the connection of the sign and the thing, which it stands for, is stable. In particular, Wittgenstein believes that the definition is embodied in the thing that can be shared by all. So it is public language, rather than private one. Precisely, the word or sign can not be defined by anything, which is the characteristic of a private language. So, memory must be only relied on to determine how the symbols and the inner experience are connected. Therefore, private language at most has the impression of rules.

If the memory is reliable, the private language can be established. However, Wittgenstein argues that the memory of human beings is not stable, therefore it is uncertain to keep the relation between the symbol and the object that the symbol refers to, which has necessarily no epistemic warranting results. Therefore, the private language can not be established. Wittgenstein argues, "surely I can appeal from one memory to another. For example, I don't know if I have remembered the time of departure of a train right and to check it I call to mind how a page of the time-table looked. Isn't it the same here? 'No; for this process has got to produce a memory which is actually correct. If the mental image of the time-table could not itself be tested for correctness, how could it confirm the correctness of the first memory? "⁴

Wittgenstein argues that the justification of public language consists in appealing to something or rules independent of the subjective area; but the justification of private language can only appeal to something, namely, memory, in the subjective area in which agents' memory always changes so that the variation results in failing stable connection between signs and inner experiences which it stand for.

The problem thus occurs here the argument of private language could not invoke skepticism with regard to all memory judgments. If it did, it would prove that neither private language nor public one is reliable. So in this sense, the true value of all languages is questionable. If this claim could be made about the argument of private language, it would cast as much doubt on public memory. By Wittgenstein's logic, the agent's memory is variant, and unwarrantable, and the agent is not only some individual, but also all individuals of humankind. And not only private language, but also public language, needs the support from agent memory. In order to get any warranted information about the past, it is impossible that if we do not invoke some memory judgment. If we need to check the use of some kind of language whether or not consistency with past usage, we must invoke some memory judgment, no matter whether it is private language or public one. If we want to know whether use a public word is used correctly, we need to refer to the dictionary, which help our memory, or ask other people whether their memory is consistence with ours.

² ²Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, translated by G. E. M. Anscombe, Blackwell Publishing company, 2001; §257 p.78e.

³ ³Ibid. §258.p.78e.

⁴ ⁴Ibid. §265.p.79e

However, Wittgenstein's point is that private language solely appeals to memory, but public language appeals both to memory and to rules, or the grammar of language, the way of life and cultural background. However, do the language rules and language games or ways of life have no relation with memory? Is the proper use of our language not based on our memory? Can we properly use the rules of grammar or rule of society without the role of memory? If a person suffers amnesia, does he possibly have the concept of language game? Therefore, memory is not irrelevant with public language. If private language is based on memory so that it is not reliable, then the public language is also not reliable.