Private Language Arguments. Notes for the Reconstruction of a Controversy

Pedro D. Karczmarczyk
Universidad Nacional de La Plata - CONICET (National Committee for Scientific and Technical Research) (Argentina)
Email: peterkado@yahoo.com; pedrok@conicet.gov.ar

Subject of the article: to clarify the logic of the discussion on the Private-language argument (PL) seem from Kripke’s proposal in Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language.

Two aims of the reconstruction:

(i) showing that there is no other coherent alternative of PL argument (PLA).

(ii) taking profit of the reconstruction to show that two often raised objections to communitarian views of Wittgenstein do not apply to Kripke’s interpretation.

(I) The problem of internal relationships: which is the character of the relationship between the rule and its applications in the communitarian view of rules?

Source of the problem: Wittgenstein criticism to the “classical mentalist position” (meanings= mental states containing application: “superlative facts”).

W’s criticism: makes to appear the notion of obeying a rule blindly (vs. Application guided by a mental state). Way out: agreement in judgments (PI # 242: the need of agreemnt in judgements seems to abolish logic, but it does not….).

(II) the problem of objectivity of rules:

are correctness and consensus overlapped?
Can a community distinguish between right and wrong?
Can an individual to be right against the community assent?

KEY IDEAS:

- External criticism (dependent of an independent premise) vs. immanent criticism.
  - Meaning semantic scepticism (implicit or explicit in classical discussion) vs. Ontological or constitutive meaning scepticism.

“The problem is not “how do I know that 68 plus 57 is 125”, which should be answered by giving an arithmetical computation, but rather “How do I know that ‘68 + 57’ as I meant it in the past should denote 125.” (Kripke, 1982, p. 12).

- Semantic normativity (thought of as the motivation to behaviour arising from the conviction that without the obedience to certain rules there would not be language or communication. At the bottom there would be a sort of though, though implicit) vs. Social or intersubjective normativity (thought of as arising from the pressures that in a given context make someone to (or stop to) belong to a certain community, at the limit: to be a speaker at all. At the bottom: ungrounded way of acting)
Private language definition:

Language that could be known only by the speaker. *Language whose conditions of meaningfulness could be satisfied by merely subjective mental states*, for instance beliefs. Hence the overlapping between PL thesis with epistemological scepticism (external world problem), and other minds scepticism (solipsism).

Epistemological interpretation I - Norman Malcolm: argument of independent justification

It takes the form of a *reductio ad absurdum*.

Let’s suppose that the rule of use of a term ‘S’ is got in *t* through an internal ostensive definition, where ‘S’ is associated with S.

In any later moment *t₁*, when trying to apply ‘S’, we do not have the very rule, in *t₁*, the original exemplar of ‘S’ is not available anymore, but only a memory of S. Malcolm: this is only “the impression of a rule” or “what seems to us to be the rule”, i.e. “the appearance of a rule” [the memory of S].

Any judgment made through this will inherit its appearance character. /// There is no difference between what it is rights seems and it seems to be right.

- **Corollary of the PLA**: we need **INDEPENDENT INSTANCES OF JUSTIFICATION**: they allow us to decide or to establish whether a linguistic use is right or not.

- **Notion of a CRITERION**: “the satisfaction of the criterion of *y* establishes the existence of *y* beyond question.” (Malcolm 1963a, p. 113).

- **Communitarian way out**: the notion of rule is associated to the customary way of following the rule, which constitutes a standard of correctness.

Criticisms made to the argument of independent justification

- The independence needed cannot be obtained. Any check, test, proof, etc. is mediated by a mental state.

- Alfred Ayer: When is something a check (test, proof, etc.)? When I accept or, recognize it, when it seems to me that it is such and such.

- Judith Thomson: Malcolm’s argument works whether it is at the same time a successful anti-sceptical argument. But, to make this job the argument needs of a version of the verification principle: for some terms it is required that we can actually know (vs. believe to know) that its truth conditions have been provided.

- This criticism is immanent in Malcolm’s own criticism on the defeasible application of of criteria and the appeal to the notion of “form of life to solve this problem” (“our eyes are closed to some doubts”).

Epistemological interpretation II: Robert Fogelin, the communitary answer and the doctrine of given

Fogelin essays a defense of the communitarian argument by changing Malcolm’s notion of “form of life” (for Malcolm = our shared given
constitution, close to “Human nature”) for an understanding along the lines of “form or way of living”, (= shared practices).

FORM OF LIFE (=form of living) equates to a doctrine of the given in traditional epistemology,

The given = level where what it seems to be so, really is so (e.g. Cartesian cogito, p. e.)

Fogelin: what in our practice (form of living) seems right to all of us, is right.

PROBLEM: it opens a door where the Privatist can find shelter. Privatist claims its practice to be a majority composed of only one (the Privatist himself) where what seems right to the majority....

---

Semantic interpretation I: Kenny’s version

Kenny: new exegesis of PI # 258 and # 265, “remembering right” = ‘to remember the connection right’ (refers to remembering the meaning right (vs. ‘remembering right’ = to make a true assertion, to apply ‘S’ to an instance of S).

To remember the connection right (knowing the meaning, the rule) is a question always presupposed by making true or false assertions, Kenny: PLA rest on the former, not on the latter.

Refutation of PI #258’s Privatist:

(a) lack of analogy between public ostensive definition: : the bare contact with the object is not enough to produce the knowledge of meaning (it requires acquaintance plus training)

(b) “This is S” in a PL not a genuine proposition able to be true or false. It does not have the required independence between meaning and truth: what would give meaning to it is the same that gives it its truth

CRITICISMS: in general, Kenny’s feeble point is his answer to “What it is to remember (to know) the meaning?”
-ordinarily the required independence is not at work: making true statements = criteria to attribute knowledge of the meaning (understanding).
-to know the meaning does not require to be able of justifying it /// PL way out

if justification is required, does it suffices to warrant we know meaning (vs. believing we know meaning)
-requirement of independence: leads Kenny to model the notion of knowing the meaning according to a Subject-Object relation, identifying criterion of correctness and the sample

---

Semantic interpretation II: Tugendhat’s semantic-dynamical interpretation of PLA


Tugendhat: criterion of correction is the application to objects: “feeling we classify objects”.

This supposes to accept classical discussion’s CIRCLE OF JUSTIFICATION:

Subjetif statements(on mental states) require of external criteria, expressed in objective statements.
But *objective statements* (on external state of affairs) have as criteria subjective statements.

Tugendhat ACCEPTS THIS CIRCLE, but qualifies it: it takes place at the level of epistemologically modalised statements, “it seems to me that …” vs. “it is actually a… ”

• Tugendhat: the circle is not vicious, because of the dynamical character of language, because of learning.

• Subjective and objective modalised statements have a shared semantic ground: SIMPLE OBJECTIVE STATEMENTS (“this is red” - vs. “it seems red” “it is actually red”) which are an indispensable previous step in the learning of language.

CRITICISM: it depends of a factual premise (we have learnt language) which allows who is already in the circle (as the Privatist is) to absorb it asking for its justification.

• If I learnt language, then have learnt first the non modalised objective statements, and I believe I have learnt language, but did it really happened? Which is my justification to believe it?

---

**Stroud’s assessment of transcendental arguments**

Stroud generalizes the criticisms made to PLA.

Stroud: transcendental arguments are not different at bottom from the rough anti-sceptical argument: “It is a tomato there, your wife says she sees it”, failed because it depends of a factual premise, “your wife also says she sees it”, on which the sceptic can raise new doubts.

Transcendental argument: claim implicit contradiction of the sceptic (Privatist) because some unavoidable commitments involved by its very questioning. This unavoidable commitments = criteria of meaningfulness.

Sceptic (Privatis): answers s/he believes the criteria to have been satisfied (e. g.: “I do believe there are other speakers”), but claims this is not a good anti-sceptical position until it is demonstrated that what one must to believe (e. g., to speak with meaning) is known.

• /// Defeating the sceptic requires either or a FACTUAL PREMISE indicating that we know, or specification of knowledge as note in the definition of the criterion/conditions of meaningfulness that the transcendental argument elucidates as implicit in the question of the sceptic (VERIFICATIONIST CLAUSE).

• The sceptic (Privatist) insists that s/he is happy to accept her commitment with the conditions of justified or paradigmatic use, those that if were not accepted would entail her discourse’s lack of meaning. E.g. “There are public objects (other speakers, other minds)” but now the sceptic claims the truth conditions of these necessary commitments to be subjective mental states: (as “I believe there are public objects”), but she claims not to know the truth condition of the propositions believed.

---

**Fundamental presupposition of the controversy of PL**

The PLAs –purported to be anti-sceptical arguments questions the possibility of there be Cartesian criteria or what amounts the same, Cartesian truth conditions- have to engage in the elucidation in terms of sufficient and necessary conditions of the criterion of correctness in a language proper. I they give less, the makes room for the interpretation of the criteria, and then to what it seems to us (if the conditions of
meaningfulness could be elucidated in general in terms of what it seems to us, PL’s possibility would have not been refuted).

It is only sufficient and necessary conditions what can establish what it is correct in contrast with what merely seems to be right.

[sufficient and necessary conditions selecting all the instances of correct use and only them, equates to truth conditions]

Kripke’s Wittgenstein PLA: the sceptical interpretation

- K’s W is not a critic of Cartesian truth condition (privatist criterion of correctness) but of truth conditions in general.
- Major change in the direction of the argument: it is not anymore grounded in the putative cognitive limitations of privacy. Instead, PLA conclusions rest on the putative cognitive advantages of privacy and mental states. If the statements concerning meaning were to be grounded on truth conditions they would not arise the main difficulty of realism: to have its standard beyond consciousness (Hegel).

Data of the sceptical challenge

Our commitment with two kinds of “semantic statements”:

Categorical statements: “John adds” “I add”
Conditional statements: “If John grasped addition, remember his past intentions and wish to act in agreement with then, then, if he is confronted with a problem such as ‘57 + 68’ he will answer 125”

It is assumed there is a metaphysics below these statements explaining its use:

Acts of apprehension of rules and acts of following rules we have previously grasped.

The sceptical challenge

In our practices (e.g. addition) there is a limit maximum, let’s suppose it to be 57 for addition.

When we are confronted with a new problem: ‘57 + 68’ and we are strongly inclined to answer ‘125’ How do we know we are not misunderstanding our previous use? (possibility of metalinguistic mistake).

SCEPTICAL HYPOTHESIS: in the past you meant quaddition with ‘+’, i. e. a function that agree with addition in all the cases below 57 (then with all our past uses) and differs of it in the calculations with arguments above 57:

\[ x \oplus y = x + y, \text{ if } x, \text{ and } y < 57 \]
\[ = 5 \text{ otherwise.} \]

The sceptic confront us with a problem of correspondence (or truth condition): How do you know that the function you refer now with a given sign corresponds to the function you refered with this sign in the past?
The way in which the problem is designed allows to answer bye yes or not to the question: Is there a fact concerning what I (someone) mean?

Design of the problem:

- (i) it does not question, at the beginning, the present uses. It does not question that 125 is the result corresponding to the addition of 57 and 68).
- (ii) there are not limit neither criticism to the evidence alleged. What is is presented as a fact is taken as a fact. What is examined
is how this fact can distinguish between addition an quaddition hypotheses.

There is not questioning to the alleged evidence to be a fact. What it is at stake is how is could be our meaning one thing instead of another

Sceptical argument, sceptical conclusion and sceptical paradox

• **Sceptical argument**: analyzes the different answers alleged.

• **Sceptical conclusion**: there is not a fact concerning my meaning on thing instead of another. There is not difference between meaning addition and nothing at all.

• **Sceptical paradox**: arises because of the self-defeating character of the sceptical conclusion.

Sceptical solution

Diagnostic: what goes wrong is the elucidation of meaningfulness of semantic statements along the lines of truth conditions. It is accepted the conclusion to the challenge (there is not truth conditions for semantic statements) and tries to elucidate language in general and semantic statements in particular along the lines of alternative conditions assertability conditions.

Replacement of the question “What must happen for an statement to be true?”, for another two: under which circumstances these statements can be legitimately or validly asserted? And which is the utility of this assertion in our lives?

Objectivity in the sceptical solution

• It does not makes *petitio principii* as another communitarian solutions (to Malcolm: Which is the relationship between the customary way and the particular applications? Relation kind-token).

• Judgments of correctness are basic or primitive. Judgments on third person are also primitives.

• /// agreement in judgments takes the form: “I judge s/he judges in the same way that me”

• Language has as all thickness its surface: “Nothing is hidden”.

• There is no room for the question about whether what all consider to be right is actually right. The question ask for a fact, but the point of the sceptical challenge is to show that there cannot be such a fact: there is no matter of fact concerning correctness. If everybody agrees, then nobody would feel justified to call wrong another’s answer; assertability conditions for judgments of another’s making mistakes won’t be activated

• Sceptical solution is an elucidation of our normative semantic discourse (vs. an elucidation of the normativity of our discourse. [social vs. Semantic normativity])

Internal relationships in the frame of sceptical solution

• The requirement of agreement in judgment “do not abolish logic” because agreement in judgments functions through contraposed conditionals as ground for attribution of intentionality (vs. The communitarian agreement as standard of correctness, e.g. the customary way of doing something against which judgments would be tested).
Internal relationships in epistemic semantic scepticism and in ontological meaning scepticism

- Failure of the epistemic meaning scepticism: purport the analysis of an internal relationship.
- Analysis of an internal relationship gives place to infinite regress or redundancy.
- Objection does not apply to ontological meaning scepticism (see distinction between metalinguistic correctness -which is questioned-, and arithmetical correctness -which is not questioned-).
- But the objection apply to most PLA: to be thought as reductio ad absurdum, start with the premise: “let’s consider a private meaning” to ask next:

Malcolm, How do you know that this application corresponds to your rule?
Kenny: How do you know which rule corresponds/justify to your present application?
vs.
Kripke: you know now that there is a relationship between addition and the answer 125 for ‘57+68=?’ and assumed you mean addition by ‘+’ your answer is correct in arithmetical sense, but, How do you know that this use is not a mistake concerning your previous use of the sign ‘+’? (metalinguistic mistake).