

‘S’

When I experience a sensation I can focus my attention on it, mentally point at it so to speak, and think of the letter S. Does this make ‘S’ the name of the sensation? I could also think of a smell or a colour, however we wouldn’t think of these as becoming the name of the sensation. We are inclined to think ‘S’ has become the name because it seems like a word and because language appears to us as an unmediated connection between words and things. In this essay I am going to investigate, through a series of thought experiments, if this baptism ceremony does indeed alchemize a noise or audible label into a name and therefore a word.

The following is the simplest “language” I can conceive of. Two people are sitting motionless in a room with various objects in it. Each object has a name and both of the people know what the name of each object is, or perhaps more accurately both of them have made a mental association between an audible label and an object. It cannot be assumed at this stage if these audible labels are indeed words. If this is all the language they know then there is no obvious reason why either person would speak or what they could hope to achieve if they did speak.

It is important to consider how each object came to have its name. We can imagine that each person took it in turn to say a name and indicated, by pointing or nodding, the object they intended to have that name. This process can perhaps be considered a pre-linguistic activity; necessary groundwork before the real business of using language commences. However, by simply watching this ritual we can’t be sure what it is that is being named. They could be naming the type of object, its colour, its shape or something else. In fact if this is the full extent of their linguistic endeavours it has to be questioned how it is that *they* know what they are naming. Both people would have to be familiar with activities that involve different types of objects, colours, shapes etc. in order to understand what it means to name such things.

Consider another situation; a person whose job it is to monitor an underground train system. They could have a diagram in front of them showing where all the trains are and an array of buttons and levers that do various things. Suppose the person drew a button on the machine in front of them and decided to push it whenever they saw a certain train. There is no way of establishing if they are using that button correctly as the button isn’t attached to any machinery and doesn’t do anything. The only connection between the button and the train is in the mind of the person who pushes the button.

The following peculiar situation is suggested in order to highlight the importance of human activity to language. Suppose there was a community of paralyzed psychics, they are kept alive in a room somehow and can talk directly into each other’s minds. Could such a community develop and use a language coherently? They could never know which of the other people in the room was talking to them. It would be impossible for them to name anything as they could never communicate to anyone else what object it is they might be referring to or if they were talking about colour, shape or something else. They could never integrate the objects into any activities, categorise them or distinguish between different types of names.

It seems to me that when we talk about ourselves focusing on a sensation and naming it we are talking about our mental self as if it’s a person living in a secret room surrounded by secret objects. This person is free to point at the various objects and to call them what they wish, there is no reason to suppose that language couldn’t be used in private under these

circumstances. However our “private” self doesn’t exist like that, it isn’t even like a disembodied spirit floating in a mental space able to inexplicably recognise both mental objects and objects in the world.

For a noise to become a word there are various criteria that must be met. There must be a machinery that sets up a connection between the word and the thing named, it must be clear what type of things are being named and there must be a method by which the things being named can be recognised and categorised. When I focus my attention on a sensation and think of ‘S’, the only connection between ‘S’ and the sensation is a mental act of will; the machinery that connects words to things is human activity. It is also not clear if I am naming the sensation or a property of the sensation. Further, it is not possible to make such a distinction because I cannot integrate private mental objects into an activity. Recognising and categorising objects in the world requires that we can do things with them: pick them up, weigh them, look at them from different angles. In the presence of private mental objects I am paralyzed, I can do nothing with them. Over the years various reasons have been proposed as to why ‘S’ cannot be considered a word, amongst others a lack of public verification and failure of memory. These are not the issues in my opinion, I would argue that the core problem is that sensations are not in the world and that is why they cannot be named. Even if every member of a community had the exact same private sensation, any noise that they associated with that sensation would not be a word.

A word is a sophisticated multifaceted creature and naming things is not a simple pre-linguistic activity but an activity that is part of language itself. This audible label ‘S’ clearly doesn’t meet any of the requirements of a word and is in fact little more than the phoney drawn on button. It isn’t attached to any machinery, it can’t be determined what it is naming and no criteria for its correct use can be established.