

Sensation and Rules: Revisiting Two Core Issues in the Private Language Argument

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Abstract: The private language problem has long held a central place in the philosophy of language. It does so in part because two difficult questions meet there: what role sensations play in meaning, and what it is to follow a rule. Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* already contains a tacit argument for the privacy of language. Wittgenstein, in the *Philosophical Investigations*, turns that argument into a series of thought experiments whose method is grammatical rather than demonstrative. This paper sets aside the attempt at another comprehensive reading. It asks two narrower questions. Can the meaning of sensation words rest on private objects? Is a private rule possible once public criteria of correctness are removed? Ayer, Cook, and Kripke give different answers. Drawing on recent scholarship, we argue that Wittgenstein's work is closer to therapy than to refutation, and that Kripke's rule-skepticism, while philosophically powerful, marks a hermeneutic shift. The most important step in the argument, on this reading, is the treatment of privacy claims as meaningless grammatical propositions.

Keywords: private language; sensation; rule-following; grammatical proposition; Wittgenstein.

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1. How the Problem Arose

The private language problem predates Wittgenstein. In Book III of the *Essay*, Locke holds that words are sensible marks of ideas, and that ideas exist only in the individual mind. Martinich reconstructs the position as a syllogism: all words signify ideas; all ideas are private; therefore all words signify private things. Locke never drew the conclusion that a private language exists. The inference nonetheless leaves a problem in place. If meaning is rooted in private ideas, then language is in principle accessible only to the individual speaker.

Wittgenstein's formulation in §243 of the *Philosophical*

Investigations is well known. A private language would be one whose words "refer to what can only be known to the person speaking; to his immediate private sensations." Another person, on this account, cannot understand it. Wittgenstein concludes that such a language cannot exist. How he reaches that conclusion, how far it extends, and what it is meant to accomplish have never been settled. Ayer tries to keep the possibility of a private language alive. Cook rejects the privacy of sensation. Kripke reads the argument through rule-following and arrives at a skeptical conclusion. Recent work tends to treat Wittgenstein's remarks as a cluster of thought experiments with different methods rather than as a single argument.

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This paper takes up two threads—sensation and rules—and asks what remains convincing in the anti-private-language argument.

2. The Language of Sensation: Private Object or Public Use?

2.1 Ayer's Middle Position and Its Difficulty

Ayer's "Can There Be a Private Language?" takes a strategic detour. He begins with languages used by a limited number of people, such as trade jargon, and argues that privacy comes in degrees. This is meant to make room for a private language. Ayer himself concedes, however, that a dead language is not the same as a private language. The former is a public language that has been lost; the latter is a language that in principle only one person can understand.

Ayer's real support is the private accessibility of sensation. A table is publicly accessible: it makes sense to say that several people see the same table. A headache is not. It makes no sense to say that several people feel the same headache. The privacy of sensation thus becomes the cornerstone of the possibility of a private language.

A difficulty follows. If a headache cannot be publicly observed, how does the word "headache" acquire public meaning? Wittgenstein's beetle-in-the-box responds to this. Suppose each person has a box containing something called a "beetle," and no one can look into another's box. If the word "beetle" still has public meaning, that meaning does not come from what is in the box. It comes from the word's use in the language-game. Even if the boxes are empty or contain different things, "beetle" can still function as a sign in communication.

Lou Wei states the point plainly: the meaning of sensation words lies in use, not in objects. The traditional referential theory traces meaning to private sensory objects. Wittgenstein places it in the function of words within public language-games. A private sensation detached from public use cannot ground word-meaning.

2.2 Cook on the Grammatical Character of Sensation

Cook's "Wittgenstein on Privacy" continues this line. He uses several analogies to dissolve the status of sensation as a private object. No one can have another person's shadow, but this does not mean that no one can know anything about another person's shadow, since shadows are publicly visible. The same goes for crocuses. One can distinguish "my crocuses" from "my neighbor's crocuses," but only because spatial locations are publicly distinguishable. And when we say that a child has his father's physique, "physique" is not that can be owned or transferred like a house. The genitive construction tempts us into a false grammatical analogy.

Cook concludes that I cannot feel another's pain because I cannot feel it, not because I cannot know or understand it.

The unfeelability of pain is a remark about the mode of sensation, not about linguistic meaning. Wittgenstein says that private sensations do not enter the language-game of pain. Cook's analogies have drawn criticism. Shadows and crocuses are public objects, whereas sensations are unobservable, so the comparison has limits. His central insight survives: once a sensation is articulated in language, it has entered the public domain and is no longer a private sensation.

2.3 The Grammatical Status of Privacy Claims

Recent work pushes the issue into the pathology of language. Lou Wei distinguishes grammatical propositions from empirical propositions. Empirical propositions state possible facts and have truth-values. Grammatical propositions appear to be necessarily true but lack conditions of verification and factual content. When someone says "my sensations are private" or "others cannot have my sensations," the speaker treats sensations as inner objects. Objects require criteria of identity, such as spatiotemporal location and stable properties. Sensations provide none of these. To insist on "my pain" creates the illusion that a criterion of identity exists, but no criterion is actually defined. "I know I am in pain" is not a cognitive statement either, since knowing requires the possibility of verification, and "I am in pain" is already the full expression of the fact.

Wittgenstein is not refuting someone's view about the privacy of sensation. He is exposing the meaninglessness of the claim through grammatical investigation. Such claims do not form a proposition with a truth-value.

3. Private Rules: Rule-Following and the Skeptical Challenge

3.1 Kripke's Rule-Skepticism

Where Ayer and Cook stay with sensation, Kripke turns to rules. In *On Rules and Private Language*, he argues that the real private language argument is already complete by §202, not §243. His basis is the paradox in §201: no course of action can be determined by a rule, because every course of action can be made to accord with it.

Kripke uses addition to illustrate. Suppose someone has never calculated beyond 57. When faced with "68 + 57," what fact determines whether he means ordinary addition or a non-standard "quus" operation, according to which $x + 57 = 5$ for any $x \geq 57$? Kripke concludes that no fact about past mental states or behavior uniquely determines which rule he means. The skeptical inference applies to private language. If rule-following cannot be privately determined, private rules are even less possible. Without public criteria of correctness, any behavior can be read as conforming to any rule, and rule-following becomes an empty proxy for private will.

3.2 The Community's Dispositional Solution and Its Critics

Kripke offers a dispositional solution. An individual follows a rule not because he grasps a fact about the rule, but because members of the community respond in certain ways under certain conditions. When a child answers "50 + 50 = 20," the community judges the answer wrong. This is not rule-following but a dispositional response. The majority of the community maintains order.

The reading has drawn criticism. Some scholars argue that Kripke turns Wittgenstein's discussion of rule-following into a debate about facts and skepticism, which is itself a shift. Wittgenstein's concern is not whether there are facts about rules. Following a rule is a practice, a form of life that needs no theoretical foundation. §202 says: hence it is not possible to obey a rule "privately"; otherwise thinking one was obeying a rule would be the same thing as obeying it.

3.3 Stage-Setting and the Circularity of Private Ostension

Recent work has noticed a circular structure in the definition of a private language. §258 discusses stage-setting. To give meaning to a new word "S," merely pointing to a sensation and saying "S" is not enough, because "S" could have countless meanings: the sensation itself, its intensity, its duration, some property of it. A classification system must already be in place, specifying where "S" is to be placed—for example, in the category of sensation rather than color or object. But the classification system is itself provided by language. It is through language that we divide the world into colors, objects, and sensations. Without a pre-existing language, a mere act of pointing and uttering cannot introduce a meaningful sign. The definition of a private language, however, requires building a new language from scratch, which means it cannot borrow any classification system from a public language. The private language thus falls into a circle: it needs language to establish language.

4. Conclusion

Several conclusions follow.

Sensations do not have the status of private objects. The beetle-in-the-box shows that the meaning of sensation words lies in their use within public language-games, not in some private inner object. The temptation to treat sensations as private objects comes from a grammatical misuse of the word "pain."

Private rules do not exist. Kripke's rule-skepticism is controversial as an interpretation, but it exposes the internal

contradiction in the idea of privately following a rule. Without public criteria of correctness, rule-following is an arbitrary expression of private will.

Wittgenstein's argument is a grammatical investigation, not an empirical refutation. Hymers (2025) shows that the anti-private-language argument does not try to refute the possibility of a private language of sensation. It tries to dissolve, through a series of thought experiments, the philosophical temptation to objectify sensations.

The nature of language is public. If speaking a language means following publicly verifiable rules, then the premise of a private language—private rules—has been cancelled. Talking one's sensations to oneself is at best redundant soliloquy, at worst a product of philosophical illusion.

The debate continues. Some scholars note that Wittgenstein's argument may look different in non-Indo-European contexts. Japanese, for example, has two systems for expressing pain, one subjective and phenomenal, the other objective and nominal. Others are re-examining the argument from the perspective of artificial intelligence, where the computability of rule-following gives the classical issue a new significance.

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