Hardin’s Private Language

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In the article “Wittgenstein on Private Languages”, C.L. Hardin lays out why he believes that Wittgenstein has not proven private language to be \textit{absolutely} impossible. Hardin does not give us any specific real life instances of private language, nor does he think he needs to; what he instead wants to show us is that some logical possibilities of private language have not been disproved by Wittgenstein. It is not in Hardin’s interest to show that an actual private language is possible, but that certain tenets of the notion of private language are dismissed too carelessly by Wittgenstein. Hardin’s argument centers mainly around the notion that Wittgenstein is wrong in claiming that there is only one \textit{sense} of which we use our words when we speak (in terms of how they give meaning to us by either a private, inner sense or a public, outer sense). It is Hardin’s contention that there is a sort of dual sense to our words – one which Wittgenstein acknowledges the possibility of but ultimately rejects – and lays out exactly why he believes that this other ‘sense’ is the key to private language. Hardin does so by citing abstract examples of merely \textit{logically} possible private languages. What I wish to show is that Hardin’s position is based on a fundamental misunderstanding of what is acceptable as language, and that the logical possibility Hardin speaks of is unsound.

Wittgenstein believes that private language is impossible. A private language is one that would only be understood by the person using it and which is incommunicable to others. Such a language would be incommunicable because it would be based on inner sensations of the particular person as referents for the private language’s words. Because it can’t be known that sensations used as referents in private languages are available to others, only the person using the language really has access to the meanings of the words and is the only one who can understand and \textit{use} the language.
Wittgenstein’s problem with the notion of such language is that, granted, our sensations may be unique to each of us individually; but through the fact that we can infer by analogy that other people have these sensations (whether, in reality, they have them or not), such language would not be private. That it is communicable goes to show that someone speaking in such a way doesn’t have unique access to the use of the language. What matters to Wittgenstein are not the feelings evoked in us by words, but *our capability of using the language correctly with others.*

In acknowledging the way in which we would use sense-data as referents in this hypothetical private language, Wittgenstein posits in the *Investigations* the possibility of two different senses of words, one of which he rejects. The first kind of sense is the kind that comes to us when we *use* a word. For example, the sense of the word ‘red’ would be something *roughly* tantamount to ‘the property recognizable and communicable as red’ (This is likely not exactly what Wittgenstein would accept, but it is good enough for our purposes). The other sense of a word – the one which Wittgenstein ends up rejecting – is that which is tied up solely with the feeling or sensation that the word evokes. For example, the sense of the word ‘red’ would be the actual sensation that comes to mind when we think of this word. A person blind from birth, who we may assume does not see colors in dreams or anywhere else, certainly has the former sense of red; it cannot be said, however, that the latter sense of red is available to the blind person.

Consider the example where one tries to explain what the color red is like to a blind person who we know has never experienced it. Simply in virtue of the fact that we can talk with a blind person about the color red, we see that the use-sense is available to the blind person. Try to get through this barrier and convey the sensation of red through language, and it quickly becomes apparent that the effort is in vain. It is simply not enough to speak of the ‘sensing’ of color in terms of things that the blind person already able to grasp; nothing short of experiencing the sensation will allow him or her to understand.

The only way that this sensation-sense of words would be of any use to us is if we used these words privately in speaking to ourselves, as we could never be sure that anyone else understood them. Wittgenstein accounts for this sort of dual sense of language by claiming that it simply does not exist. We only ever use the use-sense, even when talking or thinking to ourselves.

Aside from this, Wittgenstein sees two real problems with the notion of sensation-sense of words. The first argument against the possibility of sensation-words in private language has to do with the general
inconsistency of our mental states and the fact that we do not have objective checks to keep us from making mistakes in this private language. A public language is not developed by the user (assuming that the user does not already have language). Instead, the user learns from examples outside of his or her self (e.g., seeing other people use the language). In this way, public language is said to have public criteria for its use. In using a language, two people automatically agree on what the rules of language are; the use of language is the public criterion for how I might interpret it, and it is always there for me to test the correctness of my words.

Private language does not have this advantage, as we would not ever see it in use by anyone else. The user of the private language is the one who has to develop it (the one who has to figure out which words correspond to which sensations, etc.). Someone might have some sensation that they refer to internally as ‘gryrl’. How is it, Wittgenstein asks, that one recognizes ‘gryrl’ always as the same sensation? How is it that we know we’ve thought of ‘gryrl’ correctly if the only objective test is the memory of the original sensation itself? The best we could do is to think back to when we originally connected the sensation up with its name and test our current usage with that.

This so-called ‘test’, then, does not count as a test because it consists solely in remembering the original matching up of the sensation of ‘gryrl’ with the word. This makes it more than easy to be mistaken in thinking of ‘gryrl’, confusing it for a very similar sensation, or not remembering what ‘gryrl’ corresponds to at all. Imagine someone who can’t remember whether she felt sick or not on some certain day; she does not have anything to test this against other than the memory itself. The person’s friends could not explain whether or not she felt sick, but only whether they thought she was or was not. In the same way, private language would be entirely untestable and therefore incapable of construction. There would be no distinction between being right and thinking one was right.

The second objection that Wittgenstein has to the construction of private language consists in this simple question – what is the point? There is nothing for which we possibly need a private language. The reason we have words in the first place is to make assertions, and in private language, we are not asserting anything to anybody, nor can we. Additionally, anything that we might need to chew over privately can be thought out in terms of the public language. The meaning of sensation-words is validated in their analogous public use. Private language, then, is both impossible and unnecessary according to Wittgenstein.
Hardin, on the other hand, has several reasons for accepting the logical possibility of private language, though he is not willing to admit that we can actually have a private language. Hardin thinks it appropriate to say that certain ‘phenomenal predicates’ are capable of usage. Hardin gives the examples of ‘red’ or ‘headachiness’ as phenomenal predicates. (Hardin, 1959, p. 519) These are words based on the sort of sensation-sense of words described previously, which are based not on use - as Wittgenstein believes all language is based on - but rather on personal experiences of sensations.

Hardin believes that Wittgenstein’s argument has much more force when applied to scenarios in which a private language is logically prior to a public one, but when applied to people who already have language, it loses much ground; the examples he uses draw on scenarios in which a person already is able to speak. One example that Hardin gives has to do with the excitation of the brain to produce sensations, and these sensations are reported in terms of color patches in the visual field. It would be possible to report such patches in the visual field using color words of our public language, but our report would supposedly be private in the sense that we are not sure how to reproduce the particular subjective state experienced. (Hardin, 1959, p. 521) Hardin believes that because we are using public language, there is no more of a memory mistake than there would be with any of our private languages. Why he would think this ‘private’ act is beyond me; simply because we are not sure how to reproduce such a state of sensation outside of this isolated example of this particular experiment? Is the sense of the words used somehow different from the use-sense and thus incommunicable? This argument is weak at best.

Hardin draws upon an example created by Moritz Schlick to illustrate his point further. Schlick lays out a palatable scenario in which someone’s sensations are presented to him or her in a very irregular way – in such a way that they are, for all intents and purposes, completely new sensations. According to Hardin, that person would not be capable of referring to any of these sensations using previous language because it would have entirely new meaning; meaning not appropriated by pre-established language. We may develop new words to describe these novel sensations and go on to use this as a system of language.

Wittgenstein may likely have accepted this scenario, but this is not a private language, and so Wittgenstein would not be at fault in doing so. However, Hardin claims that this is a private language because in using the language, no one other than the person speaking would be able to make sense of what the words meant. The sensations are not available to any normal person hearing this odd language, and so its meaning is incommunicable and thus private.
An obvious problem with this example is that it is assumed that no one else would have experienced these sensations. What if another person were to have these sensations presented to him or her in the exact same way? Clearly, the two people would be able to communicate with one another and understand the sensation-sense of the words used. Of course, if we assume that only one person were capable of receiving these sensations, this example is still problematic.

What this language communicates, Wittgenstein would tell us, is not the sensation that the person speaking it feels, but rather, something quite independent of inner sense in a rule-guided way. Understanding the system of language – not just the general form, but how precise words are used analogously – communicates something, indicating that Schlick’s language is not a private one. Hardin states in his article that it is not necessary to show that the syntax of a private language is incommunicable, but only its sense. Of course, it is syntax which Wittgenstein believes is vital for communicability; his beetle in the box example indicates that it is not what the beetle is, but rather, how we refer to the beetle – i.e., the syntax – that is important for the beetle’s use in language. Hardin acknowledges the beetle in the box example, but does not appear to understand its full import. It seems as though he understands its purpose in regards to showing us how we use language analogously in our normal, everyday language – e.g., that it doesn’t matter whether the color red invokes the same sensation in each of us, but that we all can talk about ‘this color’ relative to one another. So long as we are seeing the same color (but perhaps perceiving it a little differently), Hardin may say, communication is possible. The example of the blind person, however, shows us that it is not necessary to have some sensation to talk about it. Its analogous use is still possible, even with people who are incapable of perceiving that sensation.

The next of Hardin’s criticisms of Wittgenstein has to do with Wittgenstein’s claim that private languages have no function – that, if we were to have private languages, they wouldn’t do anything that our normal language couldn’t already do. This and another criticism that Hardin has of Wittgenstein are mutually linked, and that is the criticism that we can formulate laws which a private language can be based off of. Drawing on Schlick once more, Hardin claims that the purpose of phenomenal language is to “formulate and confirm phenomenal laws” (Hardin, 1959); i.e., phenomenal language helps us to discover regularities in our ‘sensory field’ that we may not otherwise have noticed merely from perceiving sense-impressions, without language. These regularities then provide us with something against which we can judge all future uses of a phenomenal language.
This reasoning is nothing short of circular. Hardin claims that the point of private language is to form phenomenal laws – laws that would be unstable because they have no objective check. These laws are then used as an objective check for all future uses of the language (which then, we can suppose, allows us to formulate these phenomenal laws). Even if these ‘phenomenal laws’ were at all stable, what purpose would they serve that communicable laws could not?

There is another general reason put forth by Hardin as to how objective checks are possible, so his theory concerning phenomenal laws would not be entirely circular (though the formulation of these laws becomes somewhat pointless). Hardin uses the example of Robinson Crusoe, who is stuck on a desert island and has only memory as reference to see if he is right or wrong in his use of language. How might we say, asks Hardin, that Crusoe’s memory is not deceiving him? In reality, we can only assume that he remembers the use of language correctly; his memory may very well be deceiving him. Hardin uses this as a parallel to Wittgenstein’s concept that we base an objective check of sensation-sense words solely on memory. If both these objective checks rely on memory, then according to Hardin, they are both equally as stable or unstable. Though Wittgenstein may be right that our sensation-sense words are unstable because they are based on memory, the inductive learning of public language must be just as unstable according to this argument.

To me, Hardin’s example is a gross oversimplification of Wittgenstein’s denial of the objective check for private language. Hardin makes it seem as if all Wittgenstein is saying is that memory is unreliable, and that for this reason, there is not enough for us to test the use of a private word. Instead, Wittgenstein is actually saying that the proper use of language among people is something that remains at least somewhat constant – constant enough that we are able to test our own understanding and personal usage of the language as we learn it. The ‘proper use of language’ is always there for us when we are in the process of learning language, and so each time we learn the use of some word it need not be isolated to a single instance. With private language, we do not have this. Instead, the paradigm matching of a word with its sensation happens once and only once in private language.

It is not just a problem of our memory in general being unreliable. Instead the problem lies in the fact that we will only get the sense-definition of a word once. The use of a public word, if used coherently in language at all, is its paradigm definition. This occurs over and over again, and it occurs an indefinite number of times until we are capable of using the word. The problem is not so much, as Hardin seems to think, a matter of keeping the word (recalling it). Rather, it is a problem of learning the word in the first place. How is
it that one can learn a word if one cannot check to see, in the process of learning it or familiarizing oneself with it, whether or not he or she really understands its proper use? Certainly, this is not possible with private language, as the check is not there for the person when trying to think of the use of the word when one is unsure of it. One can become perfectly sure of the use of a word if it is repeated enough in its paradigm form (i.e., its usage). In private language, this is simply not available. It does not matter that Robinson Crusoe does not have any English-speaking company, as he has already mastered the language and can remain confident in his use of words. He doesn’t check his memory to see if he is using his words right; it is simply a matter of habit that he uses words correctly.

Wittgenstein would accept that we do have ‘private’ sensations, but that that is all it would come to – the having of sensations. Nothing can be ‘known’ or communicated about these sensations as it is senseless to speak of the communicability, incommunicability, or ‘knowledge’ of these sensations. Anything corresponding to these sensations which might be called ‘words’ can always be communicated, so long as the one having these sensations is capable of communication.