

Inner Speech as a Language: A Saussurean Inquiry

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People often talk silently to themselves, engaging in what is called inner speech, internal conversation, inner dialogue, self talk and so on. This seems to be an inherent characteristic of human beings, commented on as early as Plato (Theaetetus 189e–190a and Sophist 263e), who regarded thought as inner speech. The American pragmatists thought the inner dialogue was the defining feature of the self (Archer 2003, pp. 53–92). For them the self is an internal community or network, communicating within itself in a field of meaning.

The idea that ordinary language is the language of thought however is not the only linguistic theory of thought. Since Saint Augustine there has been the idea that thought is itself a language of pure abstractions. This “mental language” as it was called differs from ordinary language by consisting solely of meanings, i.e. as signifieds without signifiers to use Saussure’s language (Ashworth 2003). This hypothesis peaked in the writings of William of Occam and declined when Hobbes introduced a purely computational, hedonistic theory of thought (Normore 2005).

A second competitor to the ordinary language theory of thought is the “mentalese” hypothesis of Noam Chomsky (1968) and Jerry Fodor (1975). This approach, which sometimes uses the computer as a metaphor for the mind, resembles the Scholastic’s theory in envisioning a purely abstract language of thought. Whatever processes of ordinary language might accompany it are viewed as epiphenomenal, gloss or what might be called “fluff.” Ordinary language, according to this view, is a pale shadow of the actual language of thought. In addition mentalese is regarded as both innate and unconscious. It is a faculty that is claimed to be present at birth and one which operates below the awareness of the mind.

There are then three language of thought hypotheses, the ordinary language or inner speech version, the now marginalized Augustine-Occam mental language and the computer-based, Chomsky-Fodor theory of mentalese.

There seem to be no comparisons of the Scholastic and the mentalese theories except in Panaccio (1992, pp. 267–272). However there is a vigorous debate

between the ordinary language theory and that of mentalese (for two collections see Carruthers and Boucher 1998 and Preston 1997). A major weak spot of mentalese is that, being unconscious, there is no empirical way of verifying it. The weak spot of the inner speech approach is that there are several examples of non-linguistic thought, e.g. in infants, animals, brain damaged people and ordinary people under conditions of high speed thought.

Still, all three of these language of thought hypotheses are alive and under discussion in contemporary thought. On another occasion I will make a comparison of all three, arguing that the inner speech approach is the most useful. On this occasion, though, I will confine myself to the analysis of inner speech, attempting to approach it in a linguistic manner.

Inner speech is a streamlined version of outer speech, characterized by short cuts and speaker peculiarities. (A useful collection is Vocate 1994. Also see Vygotsky 1987; Hurlburt 1990, 1993; Johnson 1994; Wiley 1994; Tomlinson 2000; Kinsbourne 2000; Archer 2003; Collins 2004; Scheff 2000; Morin 2005). One scholar, building on Vygotsky, distinguished four features: (a) silence, (b) syntactical ellipses or short-cuts, (c) semantic embeddedness, i.e. highly condensed word meanings and (d) egocentricity or highly personal word meanings (Johnson 1994, pp. 177–179). But even though all people seem to practice inner speech, there is little known about it as a language, other than the broadly defining characteristics. There are no systematic studies of vocabulary or syntax. In this respect it is like dreams. We all have them, but they are so private and vague they resist analysis.

In addition examples or texts of inner speech are rarely found in the literature. Vygotsky (1987) gave no examples, even though his analysis, presumably based on his own self awareness, was quite illuminating. I will supply examples based mainly on self observation. As I present them it will be obvious that Vygotsky could have easily given similar examples and that they would have made his path breaking analysis a lot richer.

Despite the fuzziness of inner speech, I will look at it as though it were an actual language, bearing similarities to ordinary or “outer” language. And I will use ideas from Saussure to see the extent to which it can be treated as a language. To do this I will have to make several compromises and adjustments, but this seems to be unavoidable. I am aware that Saussure did not catch on in linguistics and is mainly of historical interest in that discipline. But in cultural studies, where the linguistic analogy is dominant, Saussure is the central figure. And my interest is mainly in the status of inner speech in cultural studies, not in linguistics as such.

In this paper, then, I will draw on Saussure’s major theses (de Saussure 1957) concerning language, among which were the following. (1) Language has two axes: a syntagmatic one on which linguistic syntax unfolds, and a paradigmatic one on which we choose words from among their similars and opposites. (2) There are two ways of approaching language temporally. We can study it diachronically, as it originates and changes over time, or, as he preferred, synchronically, as it exists in the present moment. (3) We can define word meanings

referentially, by their relation to some extra-linguistic object, or, as he chose, differentially, by their relation to the other words in the language. (4) We can distinguish between empirical speech (“parole”) and formal language (“langue”), the latter being a smoothed-over version of the way people actually speak. Linguistics, he said, should study language, not speech.

I will show that inner speech does not fit well into Saussure’s notion of a public language. It is too personalized, private and self styled. On the other hand Saussure’s conceptual scheme sheds light on what is now something of a dark continent in human consciousness. This set of questions reveals a unique linguistic structure and shows how inner speech functions as a guide or mapping device through life.

THE TWO AXES: PARADIGMATIC AND SYNTAGMATIC

Saussure distinguished two principles or axes along which the flow of language proceeds. The syntagmatic, which had long been discussed in linguistics, is that of sentence formation or syntax. The paradigmatic, which had not been singled out before Saussure, is that of word selection. The speaker must choose each word from among a batch of words, all somewhat similar in meaning. And the speaker must also pay attention to words that contrast, particularly binary opposites.

These two axes are structures that inform meaning. On the syntagmatic axis, ideas cannot be elaborated without syntax, otherwise they will be in the much weaker and less flexible form of pidgin language (Bickerton 1990, pp. 118–122). And on the paradigmatic axis, words get much of their meaning from their partners or associates, i.e. similars and opposites. These latter are unspoken in a sentence, so they function as an implicit verbal context.

Inner speech too has both axes, but they are more relaxed and less controlling than in outer language. On the syntagmatic axis, the syntax of inner speech is abbreviated and simplified. Vygotsky (1987, pp. 266–268) pointed out that the subject of a sentence along with its modifiers is usually omitted. Like the language people use in a telegram, this seems to be a simple matter of economy. Why keep saying “I” when you know the subject is always “I.” Just omit the subject, or as Vygotsky said, “predicate” the sentence.

Non-linguistic imagery may also substitute for parts of a sentence¹. If you are getting hungry, thinking about meeting your spouse at the end of a work day, planning your route home, or thinking about cooking, you might get the imagery of your favorite store. Perhaps even of the produce sections and meat counter. If this visual (and olfactory) imagery enters your head you already have a stimulus that can function syntactically. At this point you can think the simple, one-word sentence: “Shop!” and say the whole thing. You don’t need the subject, since it’s the usual “I”. And you do not need modifiers or clauses, since the store imagery is already supplying this information. With all the clues and visual context, the

word “shop” is all you need to remind yourself to (a) stop at Whole Foods market on the way home, (b) pick up a green vegetable, (c) buy two cuts of lean meat, (d) some milk, (e) and maybe some wine, (f) and possibly a low calorie dessert.

The abbreviated syntax of inner speech seems to resemble pidgin language in its lack of crucial parts of speech. If it were actually pidgin it could not handle complex ideas. But the syntax of inner speech is just as involved, if not more so, as ordinary speech. The difference is that inner speech is condensed and folded into itself. Still, all the parts of speech are there, and they could be produced in all their complexity merely by unfolding the internal utterance.

Writers do this all the time when their thought process gets to a highly illuminating insight. They stop the stream of thought, re-run the idea (and the internal language) that contained the insight, and sometimes utter the insightful sentence aloud to themselves. But when they speak it out they do not use the elliptical syntax of inner speech. They switch to the syntax of outer speech, which is not abbreviated. In doing this they stretch out or unfold the syntax that was implicit in the insightful thought in the first place. The thought was so over-simplified that it looked like pidgin or infantile language. But when the writer re-played the thought to capture the fullness of its meaning, it became clear that the elaborate syntax was there all the time. It got folded into itself for economy, not because of the thinker’s deficiency (see the “thinking aloud” research, e.g. Ericsson 2001).

Inner speech also seems to resemble Basil Bernstein’s “restricted code” (Bernstein 1971, pp. 76–94; Tomlinson 2000, p. 125). Bernstein, who studied the speech patterns of different social classes in England, distinguished the relatively concrete, local and syntactically thin code of the less educated from the more abstract, universal and syntactically rich code of the more educated classes, although both seem to be able to use each other’s codes at times. He called the former “restricted” and the latter “elaborated.” But the resemblance of inner speech to the restricted code is misleading. Inner speech seems restricted because it is efficient to speak to oneself in this way. But this is merely the way the crushed or condensed feature of inner speech looks—not the way it has to be.

The uneducated, at least in Bernstein’s theory, speak in a simplified code because this fits their local lives and modest educations. Perhaps some cannot speak in the elaborated code. Or, more likely, they use the restricted code as a mask of distrust in speaking to middle class people. But many people using inner speech in this way do so out of simple convenience, and they could easily translate inner speech into a more elaborate code. In fact if someone said “a penny for your thoughts” they would automatically translate them from the abbreviated to a more elaborate code.

All these abbreviations and short-cuts speed up inner speech, making it a more efficient cognitive resource. The best scholarly estimate of this speed at the present time is ten times as fast as outer speech (Korba 1986; 1990). This speed may vary somewhat depending on the topic of internal conversation, but its rapidity explains how inner speech can keep up with rapidly changing problems. If you

wake up to a burning house in the middle of the night, you can plan your escape route, using high-speed inner speech, just as fast as you need to. There are also probably times when one reacts by habit or by some even more physiological response. Then inner speech may be bypassed entirely. But for most problems, inner speech is fast enough to keep up with the demands of the situation.

The elliptical syntax of inner speech, then, is one of its strengths. Its speed creates a powerful intellectual resource, making it in some ways more useful than outer speech. Not that the two are completely distinct. During outer speech or interaction all parties are simultaneously engaged in inner speech. This process interprets what has been said and rehearses what might be said. At these times inner speech probably runs the usual ten to one ratio, allowing it enough temporal play to digest and direct one's contribution to the conversation. But inner speech goes on privately too, even when there is no conversation with others. At these times it can be seen most dramatically how this speech is useful for fast action.

The paradigmatic axis too has its peculiarities, including condensed and egocentric semantic principles. Along with abbreviated syntax, this semantics allows us to use fewer words. For one thing the stock of vocabulary is much smaller than in outer language. As Mead says of inner speech, "The mechanism that we use for this process is words, vocal gestures. And we need, of course, only a very few of these as compared with those we need when talking to others (1936, p. 381)." One is not impressing others, or for that matter capturing precise nuances of language. This precision can be obtained later with ordinary language, assuming one needs it.

And if one repeats or over-uses key words, even though this might be a deficiency in writing or in conversation, it can work just fine in the internal conversation. Again, you want the job done, and the appropriate language is whatever works best. This means the vocabulary can be quite small, and the same words can be used over and over again. Also adjectives and other modifiers can usually be dispensed with. If you say "girl" (or "guy") you need not add the word "cute," assuming you might want to. This can be handled by visual imagery. You picture a cute girl or guy or even turn on the feeling of "cuteness," making it an emotion rather than a visual image or word.

In this way the overtones of key words can become condensed, allowing them to carry large numbers of other words or their many possible meanings. If someone makes me angry and I say to myself, "bastard," this can cover many possible reasons for the anger. The person might have flagrantly wronged me, e.g. more or less stolen something of mine; they might have violated exchange rules by not taking their turn in doing me a favor; they might have insulted me in word or deed; or they may have harmed someone dear to me.

To specify a particular grievance all you need is the word "bastard" along with a specifier. This specifier can be a visual image of the look on their face, an auditory image of what they said, the emotion of wrongness that we attribute to

their action—or even some fringe words, (e.g. “lying bastard) that are implicit in the shadow of the main word. The actual condensational processes are usually too complex to dissect, but we can see how one or a few words can be used for many, and how this helps makes inner speech both lean and fast.

Egocentricity also pervades these verbal peculiarities. One is one’s own dictionary, i.e. one can use words in ways that are peculiar to one’s own emotional habits, desires or personal slang. Each person has his or her own biography, and along this road there are lots of major, sometimes life-changing, events. These events are the stuff of one’s personal mythology.

My inner vocabulary is full of these close-to-the-bone words.² They are pervaded with what William James and Charles Horton Cooley called “self feeling.” This is a glow or mana or charisma, usually positive but sometimes negative, that attaches itself to the things closest to us: our persons, our bodies, our prize possessions and the people who mean the most to us.

When words get their meaning from events peculiar to us, circumscribed by our own intra-subjectivity and completely meaningless in interpersonal conversation, we are in the house of egocentric vocabulary. These packed-with-meaning expressions give our inner speech its emotional flexibility and contribute to its lightning speed. They also show that some things, which are easily handleable in inner speech, cannot be introduced in outer speech at all. This is our own, private little world. It is nobody’s business but our own, and it does tasks for us that could not be accomplished in any other way.

In sum, Saussure’s two axes certainly do exist in inner speech. But not as he described them in outer speech. His syntagmatic and paradigmatic axes were heaped with meaning and complexity. In contrast, those of inner speech are both simpler and more complex. They are simpler in both semantics and syntax, using fewer words and fewer parts of speech. On the other hand they incorporate so many extra-linguistic elements—visual imagery, tactile sensations, emotion, kineshetics, smells, tastes and sounds—that they are far more complex than Saussure’s two axes.

So far, then, inner speech is partly responsive to linguistic concepts and partly not. This set of mixed effects will continue as I look at the other three Saussurean ideas. And I will conclude by showing that inner speech both *is* a language (generically) and *is not* a language (specifically)—because its linguistic species has so many peculiarities unshared by outer language.

HISTORY VS. SYSTEMATICS

When Saussure compared the history and systematics of language, he framed the problem in terms of outer language. In that medium linguistic change is cultural change. But for inner language change is not cultural, since this language is ensconced in someone’s psychology. This change is an aspect of human development

or the life cycle. And since each person's inner speech is something of a unique tongue, each would have a unique history—though there might also be a shared history based on physical and cultural evolution. In any case it is clear that the history vs. systematics issue would have to be re-defined to apply to inner speech.

There are two ways of looking at the shared history of inner speech: phylogenetically in the species and ontogenetically in the infant. The two approaches converge in suggesting that inner speech may have come gradually or in stages. The stages and what they mean are a major feature of the history.

I will just touch on the phylogenesis of inner speech, since this process is known only in broad contours. Still it was almost certainly a case of the “me” coming at an earlier time period than the “I.” Early human communities, to speak very generally, had a highly corporate or integrated character, with little emphasis on the individual or the individual point of view. This social absorption of individuals would seem to encourage the me, the passive self, and virtually disallow the I, the originating or agentic self. The community, which is all-important in early pre-historical periods, would dominate the mind, including inner speech.

The “I” would be quite indistinct and undeveloped until the rise of the individual in urbanized societies. An early example was classical Greece from Homeric to Periclean times. In the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* early Homer has no references to psychological processes or elements of the self—no thinking, remembering, deciding or anticipating, etc. When these processes come up they are explained either as physiological or as the voices of the Gods. The later interpellations of Homer however, i.e. passages obviously written by later writers, do begin to talk about the mind, supplying terms for the major internal processes as well as for the self (Snell 1982 and Onions 1988).

The more recent urban civilizations of the industrialization period seem to sharpen individuality even more and thus give more edge to the “I” component of inner speech (Borkenau 1981). The egocentricity of ordinary inner speech seems to undergo a qualitative transformation at this point.

In broad strokes then it seems clear that humans became more self conscious and individualized as societies moved toward the urban industrial model. The history of inner speech is one in which the “me” preceded the “I.”

Turning to ontogenesis, children develop listening skills before speaking skills, suggesting that they are objects before becoming subjects. They decode before they can encode language. In a similar vein they learn the word “me” before the word “I.” They refer to themselves in the objective case as “me” or by using their given name, examples being “me hungry” or “Janey want cookie.” “I” comes, somewhat laboriously, long after the word “me.”

I will argue that this is more than just words. The small child not only thinks of him- or herself as me, this person is also confined to the me niche of inner speech. The child functions as a me in the thought process, with the other pole of the conversation being somewhat out of reach, though not out of earshot. When children think out loud, which the child development specialists refer to as

“private speech” (Diaz and Berk 1992), they create a similar objectivization of self. They are speaking to themselves as though taking the role of another, often that of the mother.

The staging of inner speech, such that some capacities come before others, helps explain these developmental oddities. Perhaps the infant discovers the “I” in something akin to Jacques Lacan’s “mirror stage” (Lacan 1977). For Lacan this discovery can occur in an actual mirror, or it can occur in a more diffuse experiential setting he seems to think of as a social mirror. As he puts it, “the idea of the mirror should be understood as an object which reflects—not just the visible, but also what is heard, touched and willed by the child” (1949, p. 567; Rose 1982, p. 30). Lacan does not explain how what is heard, touched or willed might act as a mirror or reflective device. But I think his formulation is open to hearing the voice of others, especially the close caretakers—in other words to Mead’s role-taking (Wiley 2003).

Lacan’s reference to the child’s will is reminiscent of Peirce’s idea that the child first discovers his or her self by making errors of desire (Peirce 1984, p. 202). In Peirce’s example the child is entranced by the fire and, ignoring the advice of others, sticks its finger into it. When the finger is burned the infant immediately wants to know how it happened. He or she backtracks to find the cause. And what is discovered is an activity that the child was not quite conscious of before. The infant discovers that he or she has an inner energy that can want and seek after given goals, such as the more complete experience of the fire. This discovery could be attributed to something or someone else living in the child and controlling it. But Peirce thinks the discovery leads directly to a now visible, internal principle that is an actor or agent, or more simply a self.

To discover that you are a self must clear up all sorts of problems. You half knew it before, because you were using it. You were making things happen, even though they seemed to be happening to you. You had a visceral if indistinct sense of your self all along. In fact you probably had been listening to that, sometimes bewildering, self in the internal conversation for quite a while. This self is the other end of the inner dialogue. That dialogical partner is not your mother or some outside authority; it is another part of you. And the conversation is private, no one can hear it, and you can talk about anything you want.

This discovery of self is a crucial step in the fleshing out of inner speech, for now the person has control of both ends of the conversation and can use it to its full potential. As I see it, the “I” has been added to the “me.” The child has moved grammatically from third to first person. And the old “me cookie,” “Janey wants” days are replaced by the more assertive *I WANT COOKIE!*

The progression from me to I is the movement from what might be called precursors of inner speech to inner speech itself. Piaget and Vygotsky thought full-fledged inner speech began about age four, although they did not refer to the earlier, less developed forms. These precursors are evidently performed with rudimentary semantics and syntax. Little is known about them, and in the nature

of the case texts cannot be examined. But it is unlikely that the thinking child of ages one, two and three is not using the medium of language in some way. These incipient forms of inner speech are what I am referring to as the “me” stage. They are early markers in the ontogeny of inner speech.

Presumably the child will take a while getting used to this new faculty, but this power will soon become the clearing house for all aspects of the child. Desires, fears, habits, and understandings will now come together in the newly cleared field of consciousness. This field will be organized by what is now the fully-formed dialogical self, referred to by George Herbert Mead as the I-me relation and by Charles Sanders Peirce as the I-you (the you being one’s immediately future self as it is gradually approaching in the field of time).

In this section I have shown that there is a kind of history to the language of inner speech. There may also be changes as people reach old age, but I do not need that to make my point. My purpose in this section has been to show that the history of inner speech is important and should be studied along with systematics. In other words Saussure’s exclusion of history in favor of systematics does not seem like a good strategy for understanding inner speech.

DIFFERENTIAL VS. REFERENTIAL THEORIES OF MEANING

The traditional linguistic theory of word meaning is referential, i.e. words are thought to refer to external objects or things, along with the ideas that represent those things. Thus “cow” refers to actual cows along with a list of properties that characterize cows. Within this tradition there has always been controversy over the nature of universal ideas, e.g. nominalism vs. realism, but this is a sub-issue against the more consensual background of referential theory.

One of Saussure’s most revolutionary innovations was to argue that words are defined, not in relation to external objects or ideas about those objects but to the other words in the language. He still worked with both words and ideas, referring to them as signifiers and signifieds. But the signifieds or ideas were not generated by external objects. They too were defined in relation to each other, with no reference to extra-linguistic entities.

This is the differential as opposed to the referential theory of meaning. Previously it had been thought that words were initially defined referentially, and then the differential component, i.e. the relation to other words, operated as a supplementary, contextual factor. Reference gave basic meaning, and context gave additional and more precise meaning. Saussure completely removed the referential component and explained definition as entirely a matter of relations among words. Thus language was pictured as a self-enclosed system, explainable on its own, with no need to refer to the external world. This was perhaps the single most defining feature of Saussurean linguistics as well as of the larger structural movement that it spawned.

The critics of structuralism, many of whom came from older versions of literary criticism, argued that the differential approach had fatal problems. It was unable to explain language acquisition, change, translation, or ostensive definition (by pointing). In addition it was circular and philosophically idealistic. But the structuralists, despite the objections, stuck to their guns, and their theory was adopted by the post-structuralists and deconstructionists. Such arguments as the death of “man” and of the author were spin-offs from the differential approach.

I think the differential approach is an over-statement, although context certainly does add to meaning. As Dell Hymes (1966, p. 45) put it, the question of meaning “recalls De Saussure’s famous thesis that in language there are only differences. In point of fact, De Saussure probably did not hold that purely negative conception of structure, but rather a view like that of Pike, for whom features are jointly contrastive and identificational.” Hymes’s “contrastive and identificational” are the same as my “differential and referential.”

The two sources of meaning then seem to work together. When a previously defined word is used in a sentence, the syntagmatic and paradigmatic axes, which are the immediate context, impose additional meaning. On this view the context can provide indispensable information about a word’s meaning, but it does so in addition to, not instead of, a referentially defined meaning. The contributions of the two flows of meaning are each substantial and important.

It may also be true that the relative contribution of the two sources of meaning varies from one type of word to another. Relations would seem to be more differentially defined than non-relations. And terms drawn from relationship clusters, such as kinship systems or pieces in chess, would seem to be largely differential in definition. On the other hand classifications of ordinary biological species, e.g. apples or frogs, would seem much more referential.

Given the two sources of meaning, one might still ask if the referential-differential balance of outer speech is about the same in inner speech. Whatever the relation between the two semantic streams, is there any reason why this relation would be different when we shift to inner language? I will argue that inner speech is even more referential than outer speech in some respects, but also even more differential in other respects. In other words its semantic system is polarized between the differential and the referential.

Considering the peculiarities of inner speech, I think its vocabulary would be more differentially defined, i.e. more “structural”, than outer speech. First let me recall the special qualities of inner speech as silent, elliptical, embedded and egocentric. These qualities make it relatively private, both in the words and their meanings. And these privacy walls push things together, creating links and dependencies among the words.

Let us take the analogy of an intimate relationship, one that has some degree of deviance, with consequent secrecy. The mini culture of the relationship tends, due to secrecy, to be cut off from society at large. This culture gets isolated. There is the relationship time, the place, the transportation, the talk, the rituals, etc. The

relationship elements are cut off from the outside world, and they inevitably share in that “relationship” feeling. They also imply each other, causally, sequentially, symbolically, etc. The relationship meanings are defined more differentially than, perhaps, items in a less deviant relationship. It is the privacy that melds things together.

This internal language though is not only solitary and private, it is also much more self styled than outer language. Ordinary language has a smoothed over or idealized version, which Saussure referred to as *langue* or “*langue*.” And it also has a more stylized, idiosyncratic version. This is its spoken variety, which Saussure referred to as *parole* or speech. *Parole* is more heterogeneous than *langue*, given that the speaking process reflects the unique mentalities of individuals and sub-cultures.

But by the same logic inner speech is even more individualized and heterogeneous than outer speech. *Your* spoken or outer speech is somewhat different from *mine*, and both are different from purified or formalized language. But your inner speech, given its elliptical, embedded and egocentric qualities, is even more different from mine, and both are quite different from the outer *langue*. In other words the gap between outer *langue* and inner speech is greater than that between outer *langue* and outer speech.

The peculiarities of inner speech are so stitched into the psyche, so personality-dependent, that they differ considerably from person to person. This does not seem to be primarily a reference-driven variation, for everyone’s inner speech has roughly the same, generic world of reference. The variation in the internal dialogue is largely due to the personal qualities of the speaker, to that person’s particular ego needs and short cuts.

We are little gods in the world of inner speech. We are the only ones, we run the show, we are the boss. This world is almost a little insane, for it lacks the usual social controls, and we can be as bad or as goofy as we want. On the other hand inner speech does have a job to do, it has to steer us through the world. That function sets up outer limits, even though within those limits we have a free rein to construct this language as we like.

There are similarities to the idealist world view in inner speech. The philosophical idealists, especially Berkeley, reduced the outer world to some version of an inner world. They internalized the external, each doing it somewhat differently, as though it were all a dream. For them all speech would be inner, since there is no outer. And since everything would be radiating from the self, everything would be connected via the self.

The Saussurean theory of linguistic differences, whether Saussure actually held it or not, is very much like idealistic metaphysics. In both cases everything is dangling from the same string. And some kind of self is pulling the string. The late 19th century British idealists thought all of reality was in relationship, and given that they had only an inner world, they referred to these as “internal relations.” (Ewing 1963, 117–194).

Saussure used this same phrase, internal relations, to refer to the differences among signifiers and signifieds. And whether he was aligning himself with the idealists or not, there is a similarity between his self-enclosed linguistic world and that of the idealists. It is the denial of reference, of an external world, that underlies this similarity. For Saussure this denial is merely a theoretical move, an “as if” assumption, and not an assertion about the real world. The idealists said there actually was no external world, and Saussure said he would pretend, for methodological reasons, that there was no external world. But regardless of how they get there, they end up in the same place.

If there is no reference, no external world, then the only way language can be defined is internally, by a system of differences. Saussure’s purely differential theory of meaning follows from the loss of the referential. But if there is an external world, even for inner speech, then we are back to the dualistic semantic theory, i.e. to some sort of balance between referential and differential streams.

Although inner speech is not idealism, in some ways it seems to be a more differentially defined universe than outer speech. Linguistic context is even more important than in outer speech. One reason is that meaning is so condensed on the two axes. But a second is that inner language is so pervaded with emotion. We censor our emotions in ordinary interpersonal speech, hiding our fear, our shame, our jealousy, our gloating. It takes a while for little children to learn this, but when they grow up they are all, men and women alike, pretty good at it. Inner speech is another matter, for it is brutally honest. And its emotional life is anything goes. We can scream, whoop and holler to ourselves. Or we can sob on a wailing wall. In fact we probably emote more in inner speech to compensate for the restrictions on outer speech. Emotions pervade large stretches of inner speech, and they heighten the importance of internal relations.

The determinants of meaning in inner speech seem much more stark and unarguable than in outer speech. Inner speech is enclosed within us, and this seems to make it a more dense set of internal relations, both because of the intense privacy and the more spontaneous emotions. In these respects inner speech gives a rich example of Saussure’s differential meaning system.

On the other hand inner speech is also more obviously referential than outer speech. Ordinary speech is quite conventional or arbitrary, and when we say dog or apple pie, the sign has no resemblance to its object. In inner speech, though, the signs are often images of their objects, bearing an iconic or mirroring relation to them. In other words, as mentioned before, there can be a heavy dependency on sensory imagery in forming an internal sentence.

For example, my wife, a social worker, tells me she chooses what clothing to wear in a way that is quite imagistic. “It’s a court day so I’ll wear a skirt, a black one.” At this point her mind’s eye is scanning the hangers of her clothes closet, or rather the hangers are circling on a mental carousel. “Now what *with* the skirt? Here’s my new blouse, which I like, but it’s too bright. Maybe the beige or the white would be safest. The blue isn’t washed. And easy on the accessories”.

She reviews all these possibilities with imagery, not words, as she glances at her closet. She selects by slowing down the scanning process and resting on a single article of clothing. Again no words needed. There is just the feeling of attraction or rejection. She can initiate this inner speech process with the word “dress,” do the bulk of it with the closet-scanning process, and then conclude it with “O.K.” And she does all this, not while looking at her closet, but in bed the night before, waiting to fall asleep.

The imagery, primarily visual but also tactile in this case, is dominating in the inner language. These images function as various parts of speech, but they also function as signs of external objects. They refer to the contents of her closet. True, the images of clothing do have inter-relations. They give meaning, such as color coordination, to each other. But they also refer to what is in the closet, and this referential meaning is powerful. For not only do the images resemble the closet items, they also lead practically to the actual grasping and “putting on” of those items. The whole point is to figure out what to wear, put it all on and then go downstairs for breakfast and the paper. If there were no reference, i.e. if the closet were empty, this daily routine would be meaningless, and she would not be living in the real world (of being a social worker, etc).

In conclusion Saussure’s theory of semantics works well for some aspects of inner speech and quite poorly for others, i.e. the more referential ones. In this section, as in the previous two, we are seeing that Saussure’s questions or issues can cast a lot of light on inner speech. They are well worth considering. On the other hand inner speech is quite different from outer speech, and the Saussurean issues must be handled in special ways. Inner speech is only partially fitting to Saussure’s theories. And new ideas are needed to resolve Saussure’s questions.

PAROLE VS. LANGUE

The last Saussurean idea to be considered is the distinction between parole or speech and langue or language. Speech is the way people actually talk, as it proceeds in the interaction order. Langue is an idealized or formalized version of the way people actually talk, with standardized semantics, idealized syntax and a purified set of linguistic rules. “Language” is a simplified and academically more approachable version of speech. In this respect it has some resemblances with Weber’s ideal types, which tried to get at the underlying meaning and tendencies of historical realities.

On the face of it, it would appear that inner speech exists only in the form of speech and cannot be rendered into the form of “language.” Everyone speaks a different dialect of inner speech, and one could not reduce all this variation to something smoothed over and idealized. And inner speech is too wispy and vague to even be identified clearly as a parole much less as a langue.

But we do go back to the same linguistic forms, over and over, in our inner speech. So we must have a grasp of the parole apparatus in some manner. In fact, to be able to steer through the complex syntactical paths of this inner world, we also need some set of rules or practices (or langue). The structures of parole and langue will be different from those in outer language, but there must be some functional equivalents of these structures for the inner speech process to proceed at all.

If we want to make the analogy to the multiple speakers of external language, however, some sort of transformation will be necessary. There simply are not multiple speakers of our own inner speech but only ourselves. Saussure's category of speech comprised the actual speech of an indefinite number of speakers. And his language was some sort of amalgamated version of all these individual speakers. So Saussure's categories cannot be used as they are presently conceptualized.

But if we remember that inner speech is imagistic as well as linguistic, a principle of differentiation is evident. This is in the elaborate batch of imagist materials we can use for parts of speech. Since these are only loosely tied to the meanings they might represent, they can vary quite a bit. I would suggest that the words of inner speech tend to be standardized and small in number, but the imagery is less standardized and larger in number.

For example, I say to myself "I'd like a hamburger." There are only a few ways we can say this in ordinary, outer language, but a large number of ways in inner language. To begin with I would drop the "I," since we always do this in inner speech. Then, instead of saying "like" to myself I can handle this meaning with some emotional element. I allow myself the feeling of "liking" or "wanting," which substitutes for the word "like". This feeling can come with various nuances or degrees of urgency. Then instead of the word "burger" I can just picture one. And this picture can have buns, condiments sticking out, etc, or it can even be sizzling in a frying pan—along with sounds and smells. So I can say I want a burger in inner speech without uttering a single linguistic word. And I can do so in a large number of individualized ways. This diversity then is the "parole," and the core meaning, the desire for a burger, is the "langue."

There is a second way we can use the parole-langue distinction for inner speech, which I will explain at greater length. To do this I will treat the pronominal system of inner speech, especially the I-you-me triad, as the formal apparatus or langue. I will ignore the vocabulary and syntactical rules. This pronominal scheme I will treat as a niche or circuitry or set of channels within which inner speech goes on. The pronouns are the saddle, and if you want to ride through this linguistic land you have to get on that saddle and inhabit the pronouns.

I think the best example of how this works is seen in watching a good movie. Other aesthetic experiences may have some similarities with this one, but I will emphasize film. If the movie is effective enough one will yield to it and allow it to enter the core of one's consciousness. If this is done the viewer becomes totally

absorbed by the movie and the movie seems to be going on within oneself. In particular I think a strongly internalized movie enters the niche of one's inner speech and seems to be oneself talking to oneself.

Of course one knows it's "just a movie" as one usually does not know during a dream. The viewer could always kick the movie out of his or her consciousness completely, or, not going that far, create some distance from the movie (e.g. by "pinching" oneself). The movie does not occupy one's inner speech channels as naturally and tenaciously as one's own self occupies them.

In addition the self does not completely exit from the inner speech arena, even though some exiting is necessary for there to be room for the movie. I think the self partially withdraws from this place and partially remains there. This makes the experience one of "split consciousness," for the movie has been allowed into this chamber, but the self still remains there, on the periphery so to speak.

If the movie flounders, e.g. by slowing down, meandering, getting confusing or losing plausibility, one might find it moving out of that inner consciousness and getting more distinctly external than before. We have now diminished our identification with the movie and placed it back in the category of the other.

But if the movie holds its grip on us, the whole thing is as though it were happening within us, and, in a way, to us. The movie becomes our daydream, and it goes in the place of daydreams. Saying we are conscious of the movie is not enough. In a way the consciousness of the movie is our consciousness. Normal consciousness gets suspended or peripheralized, and movie consciousness becomes us.

At the same time the split consciousness, with the self still inhabiting inner speech, allows the self to carry on its own internal conversation parallel to the one in the movie. For a movie requires constant interpretation, to fill in the gaps, explain the seeming discrepancies, and contextualize the experience (perhaps by comparing it to other movies). Even when totally absorbed by a movie the processing and interrogating goes on. We still look at the movie from above and use inner speech to figure it out.

Notice the movie characters may inhabit one's pronouns (almost as actors inhabit roles). But they do not use one's inner vocabulary and syntax. In particular their speech is not abbreviated or sped up. They say the same things they say in the movie, using speech patterns as anyone speaking in this language would do. It is an outer language, then, being spoken in the arena (or on the "screen") of inner language. And of course it's not rushed into that ten to one ratio. A ninety minute movie takes the full ninety minutes when we allow it in our inner consciousness. Even though the self, in interpreting this movie, is moving at full inner speech speed. In this way it resembles the way the self gives a fast, running commentary on the conversation when we are talking leisurely with other people.

One can also notice the usefulness of Peirce's "tuism." This was his idea that inner speech is the "I" talking with the "you." In contrast Mead said the main

inner conversation was between the I and the me, the latter being the self as an object or in the accusative case. It is possible to combine Peirce and Mead into an I-you-me triadic conversation. But in relation to movies, it is obvious that Peirce's model is superior to Mead's. Picture Clark Gable talking to Vivien Leigh in *Gone With The Wind*. The speaker, e.g. Gable, fits into Peirce's I niche fine, and the spoken to, e.g. Leigh, into his "you." But if one tried to shoehorn these movie characters into Mead's model, i.e. the I-me, there would be room for the speaker all right but not for the person being spoken to. The speaker (Mead's I) would be talking to him or her self (Mead's me), and the movie would consist entirely of people talking to themselves. In other words Mead's model wouldn't work for internalizing a movie or any other conversational script. I think other art forms, especially the novel, might also inhabit the inner speech niche.

There are probably other imaginative experiences that enter the inner speech chambers and seem to be our natural consciousness. Probably many rituals, e.g. political, patriotic or religious, can approach this status. And people who watch athletic contests with intensity seem to have internalized these dramas.

But all I need to show is that outer events can sometimes seem like inner speech, somewhat as parole can enter the arena of langue. When this happens the boundary between inside and outside is traversed. An external event seems internal, which means a third person event has become first person. The identification has to be strong or the performance will remain at arms length. But once intense identification begins, the outer consciousness permeates the inner. In particular the personal network, i.e. the I, you and me, that constitutes the core of the self, will be inhabited, at least partially, by these visitors. And it will seem real.

Not as real as the paranoid, who experiences completely unrealistic and inappropriate fear. Or the schizophrenic hearing voices, which seem to be those of an outsider. I think these are cases where the gradual integration of I with the pre-existing me breaks down. These unfortunately disturbed souls are only me's, like the pre-historic humans may have been or the infant seems to be. And their I's are detached and outside their control, terrorizing them.

Still the reality of these visiting consciousnesses, occupying the space of inner speech as a parole occupies a langue, is strong enough to give us an out-of-consciousness sort of experience. In this sense I think we can say inner speech is hospitable to Saussure's parole-langue distinction, allowing for some redefinition of the key terms.

In the paper so far I have used Saussure's approach to linguistics as a searchlight for examining inner speech. Given that inner speech is an offshoot or "dialect" of outer speech, Saussure is a useful model in many respects. But there are several peculiarities of inner speech that make Saussure an inadequate tool. Figure 1 summarizes these findings.

Saussure's binaries were meant to simplify the study of language. The paradigmatic-syntagmatic distinction showed two axes of meaning, and it

	<u>Outer Speech</u>	<u>Inner Speech</u>
<u>Paradigmatic and Syntagmatic Axes</u>	Standard Linguistic Meanings	Elliptical Condensed and Egocentric
<u>History versus Systematics</u>	Systematic but not Historical	Both Systematic and Historical
<u>Speech versus Language</u>	Language only	Primarily Speech
<u>Differential versus Referential</u>	Exclusively Differential	Both Referential and Differential

Figure 1. Saussure Applied to Outer and Inner Language

prepared the way for his differential theory of meaning. The history-systematics distinction was meant to justify the exclusion of history. The speech-language distinction was meant to get rid of speech. And the differential-referential distinction was meant to exclude reference. Saussure’s approach then is largely a pruning device which chopped off many traditional parts of linguistics.

My analysis suggests that this pruning apparatus does not work for inner speech. The two axes are useful but they do not prepare the way for the differential theory of meaning. History cannot be excluded, for it is too important for inner speech. Speech should be restored, and in fact *langue* applies only weakly to inner speech. And that capstone of Saussure and cultural studies, the differential theory of meaning, does not seem adequate for inner speech. Referential theory is also needed to make sense of its meaning system.

Inner speech then is a distinct variation or dialect of ordinary language, and the characteristics I have pointed out seem to be central to its structure. But in addition to revealing the contours of inner speech this paper shows how far the understanding of this problem, especially in the social sciences, has come. A couple decades ago the study of inner speech in sociology was confined to Mead’s I-me relation and little more. Mead gave almost no examples, and his main concern was to differentiate the two conversational partners, the I and the me. The study of inner speech was stalled in discussions of Mead’s theory of self. Now the structure of inner speech is beginning to be understood, a host of examples are available to show its texture, and empirical research is beginning to appear (especially that of Archer, 2003 and forthcoming).

DISCUSSION

It seems to me this paper shows inner speech as a highly researchable topic, both theoretically and empirically. Toward this end I will briefly look at three issues: ethnomethodology, privacy and agency.

Ethnomethodology. Inner speech is quite similar to ethnomethodology in its use of short cuts and normalizing practices. Garfinkel (1967) and Cicourel (1974) discovered ethnomethodology by examining interpersonal or intersubjective communication. A great many economies and condensations of interpersonal conversation are similar to ones we use when we talk to ourselves. If I say to myself “shop on the way home,” this is a condensation of the fairly elaborate shopping list I mentioned earlier, but if I say to my wife “I’ll shop on the way home” she may understand something much like that same, implicit shopping list. In other words we are constantly using “etcetera clauses” to speed up our internal conversations. And, being both communicator and communicatee, we may understand these references even more accurately than we do in social conversations.

Sometimes etcetera clauses are used to cover up or evade some embarrassing topic of conversation. This has an inner speech counterpart in self deception. If you do not want your friend to know you got drunk at a party, you can say the party was a “little wild” and just change the subject. But if you do not want your self to face the fact that you got drunk and embarrassed yourself, you can just say “I was tired,” “I blew off some steam” or more likely banish all thought of the party from your mind. In fact all the defense mechanisms of psychiatry must operate quite freely in inner speech just as they seem to do so in ordinary speech.

One of the most powerful concepts of ethnomethodology is normalization. This refers to the practice of reinterpreting some deviant act as, for example, unintentional or jocular, and therefore normal. Large family gatherings often generate insults among the guests with subsequent attempts to soften the blow. If this is done effectively it breaks the social tension and restores the solidarity of the group.

The self is also a sort of family gathering with similar problems of maintaining and restoring solidarity. Much inner speech is a kind of Durkheimian self soothing ritual where we try to convince ourselves that everything’s fine, even when it is not. In this way we can comfort ourselves when we are frightened, restore some pride when we are ashamed, or find a silver lining when we are disappointed. Such expressions as “you can do it,” “you’re doing great,” and “this looks harder than it is” give us confidence and energy when the going is tough.

In sum inner speech helps one see the importance of ethnomethods. The fact that we engage in these practices in our deepest privacy shows they are rooted in our psychology as well as in our social life. And the fact that they run parallel in intra- and inter-subjective communication shows them to be a feature of communication as such.

Privacy. The sealed off privacy is another striking feature of inner speech, making it a language no outsider can have access to. This inaccessibility maintains the highly private nature of this language's semantics and syntax.

In philosophy Wittgenstein provoked a widespread and complex discussion of private language (1953, paragraphs 244–295; also Jones, 1971 and Candler, 2003). By this he meant a language that is not only de facto but also inherently private. No one but the private language user would be able to fully understand it, even if the meanings were publically available. To constitute a private language such a tongue would not need to be completely private. If only a single word or sentence were inherently private, it would qualify as a private language in Wittgenstein's sense.

It seems to me inner speech is clearly a private language, at least in some of its utterances. This language is so rooted in the unique self that an eavesdropper, could there be one, would not fully understand it. It has so much of one's person in it, a listener would have to be another you to follow it. And if someone invented a window into consciousness, a mind-reading machine, that could invade one's privacy, would they be able to understand the, now revealed, inner speech? I think not. They might be able to understand most of the words, but the non-linguistic or imagistic elements would be too much a personal script to follow. If this eavesdropper watched you, including your consciousness, for your whole life, had access to your memory and knew your way of combining non-linguistic representations with words, they might have your code, but this is another way of saying they would be another you. In practical terms inner speech would be inaccessible in its meaning even if it were accessible in its signifying forms.

Of course this semantic privacy does not prevent one from describing one's own inner speech to another, at least to a substantial extent. Something is lost all right in the translation from first to third person representations. When, in footnote 2, I talked about the inner speech cluster I called "Tom," I obviously left out some of the affect and all of the sensory imagery. But I was still able to communicate the gist of it, in other words to transform first to third person meanings. So even though this is a private language it can to some extent be made public and used for research purposes.

The importance of private language is that it sheds light on what a human being is. We are inherently private animals, and we become more so the more self-aware and internally communicative we are. This zone of privacy may well be the foundation for the moral (and legal) need people have for privacy. In any case the hidden individuality or uniqueness of each human being is closely related to the what the person says to him or her self.

Agency. One of the thorniest problems of the humanities and social sciences is human agency. Humans are the authors of their actions to a great extent, but the way this process works is difficult to understand. I would suggest that inner speech is both the locus and platform for agency.

Charles Sanders Peirce was under the impression that we guide our lives with inner speech. We choose internally in the zone of inner speech, and then we choose externally in the zone of practical action and the outer world. The first choice leads to the second choice. Peirce even thought we could make and break habits by first modelling them in our internal theater. Here we could visualize the performance of a particular action and also choose to perform this action (Colapietro 1989, pp. 99–118). The visualization and the choice could give the energy for designing and moulding one's life.

Peirce may have overestimated the amount of self control that humans have, but I think he was at least half right. One striking example of how this works is in the cognitive therapy approach to psychological depression (Beck et al., 1979). It seems that depressed people get stuck in a stream of self denigrating internal communications. If the person can break that string and introduce self-enhancing communications, not unlike the internal rituals I mentioned earlier, it appears that the depression can often be broken.

More generally the self directing process, including planning, anticipating, rehearsing, etc. seems to be largely a product of inner speech. This includes both what one will do and how one will do it. Picturing one's preferred action as the lesser evil or greater good, even if one fudges a bit on the facts, is probably also a powerful way of producing a given action, and possibly even a new habit. Undoubtedly there is more to self control and agency than inner speech, but this factor is probably seems to be quite central to the way human action works.

CONCLUSION

In this paper I examined inner speech with Saussure's linguistic questions. I showed that inner speech does not qualify as a public language, though it has a distinct structural profile as a semi-private language or perhaps as a dialect. This structure suggests the access points or research approaches that this language is amenable to. As examples of how this research might proceed I took a quick look at three issues: ethnomethodology, privacy and agency.

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NOTE

¹ Here is my evidence of this claim. I myself use sensory and other physical imagery for part of speech in my inner speech. I asked several of my theory buddies about this, and they too think this way. And I asked the syntax expert, Derek Bickerton, and he said “I think you are absolutely correct in thinking that images and other forms of non-lexical material can be organised by syntax” (email 1-16-01).

² I once knew a man named “Tom,” and he had the most engaging, trust-inspiring smile. All he had to do was flash that smile, and I would believe anything he said. The smile was so powerful I had to be betrayed about a half dozen times before I got the point. Then I realized the smile, sucker as I was for it, was a big lie and his major weapon for getting what he wanted. Now, in my mental wanderings I sometimes hear myself saying “he’s another Tom,” or simply the condensed and highly egocentric “Tom!”

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