

What “Intuitions” are Linguistic Evidence?

Michael Devitt

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Abstract In “Intuitions in Linguistics” (2006a) and *Ignorance of Language* (2006b) I took it to be Chomskian orthodoxy that a speaker’s metalinguistic intuitions are provided by her linguistic competence. I argued against this view in favor of the alternative that the intuitions are empirical theory-laden central-processor responses to linguistic phenomena. The concern about these linguistic intuitions arises from their apparent role as evidence for a grammar. Mark Textor, “Devitt on the Epistemic Authority of Linguistic Intuitions” (2009), argues that I have picked the wrong intuitions: I should have picked non-judgmental linguistic “seemings”. These reside between metalinguistic judgments and linguistic performances and have an epistemic authority that the orthodox view may well be able to explain. Textor seems to think that the metalinguistic intuitions are not evidence at all. I argue that he is wrong about that. More importantly, I argue that there are no “in-between” linguistic seemings with epistemic authority.

1 Introduction

The linguistic intuitions of ordinary speakers serve as evidence for grammars. Why are they evidence? In “Intuitions in Linguistics” (2006a) and *Ignorance of language* (2006b, ch. 7), I criticize the received Chomskian answer and propose an alternative. I take the received view to be that these intuitions are good because, “noise” aside, they are provided to a speaker by her cognitive state of linguistic competence. I call this the “voice of competence” view (now “VoC” for short).¹

¹ The evidence that VoC is the received Chomskian view is overwhelming yet some strangely resist the attribution: Collins (2008a, pp. 16–19); Fitzgerald (2010); sec. 3.4. I have responded (2010), sec. 4.

M. Devitt (✉)
Philosophy Program, the Graduate Center, The City University of New York,
365 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10016, USA
e-mail: mdevitt@gc.cuny.edu

The alternative to VoC that I prefer is that these intuitions are central-processor responses to linguistic expressions. They can be good evidence because speakers are likely to be reliable about the simple and obvious properties of these expressions.

The intuitions that are the subject of my disagreement with VoC are intuitive *metalinguistic judgments*, judgments that expressions are grammatical/acceptable, ambiguous, corefer, and the like. In a neat response, “Devitt on the Epistemic Authority of Linguistic Intuitions” (2009),² Mark Textor argues that I have picked the wrong intuitions: “there are non-judgmental responses to linguistic strings, linguistic seemings, which are evidence for linguistic theories.” My central-processor view cannot explain the “epistemic authority” of these intuitions, cannot explain why *they* are good evidence for a grammar. VoC is “back in business” (p. 395). I think Textor may well speak for many here.³

I describe my alternative to VoC as “modest” because it makes do with cognitive states and processes we were already committed to (2006a, p. 496; 2006b, p. 107). Textor picks up on this and names my alternative “the Modest Explanation”. His discussion has brought home to me that I need to improve the presentation of the Modest Explanation. This I shall attempt in Sect. 2. In Sect. 3 I shall say briefly why my alternative should be preferred to VoC. I shall then move onto Textor’s criticisms.

Textor clearly disagrees with me over his “linguistic seemings”. But does he disagree over the metalinguistic intuitions that are the subject of my discussion? I think he rather agrees with me on issues to do with the explanation of these intuitions but disagrees with me on issues to do with their status as evidence. In Sect. 4 I shall argue that he is very wrong to disagree.

In Sect. 5 I turn to Textor’s linguistic seemings. Now the Modest Explanation does not pretend to cover anything non-judgmental. So, if Textor’s criticisms are to succeed, there must not only *be* these non-judgmental seemings but *also* they must have an epistemic authority in grammar construction that VoC, unlike the Modest Explanation, might plausibly be thought to explain. It must seem plausible that VoC could explain why any such seemings are good evidence for a grammar. I shall argue that it is wholly implausible that VoC could.

But, first, an important point to which I will return in Sect. 5. I endorse the view that metalinguistic intuitions have an evidential role but I downplay that role. I argue that the main evidence for grammars is to be found “in a combination of the corpus, the evidence of what we would say and understand, and the intuitions of linguists” (2006a, p. 488; 2006b, p. 100).

2 The Modest Explanation

The Modest Explanation of linguistic intuitions arises from a view of intuitive judgments in general. I argue that intuitions are empirical central-processor responses to phenomena, differing from many other such responses only in being fairly

² All references to Textor are to this paper.

³ See, for example, Mišćević 2006; Fitzgerald 2010.

immediate and unreflective, based on little if any conscious reasoning. These judgments are theory-laden in the way observation judgments are in general.⁴ Related to this “we should trust a person’s intuitions...to the degree that we have confidence in her empirically based expertise about the kinds under investigation” (2006a, p. 492; 2006b, p. 104). Sometimes the folk are as trustworthy as anyone in an area but where there is a science in an area they are not. We should then prefer the intuitions of the scientists because they are the most expert. So we should prefer the paleontologist’s intuitions about old bones, the physicist’s about certain physical facts, and the psychologist working in the relevant cognitive area (2006a, pp. 492–493; 2006b, pp. 104–105). Applying this view to linguistics leads to the claim that “the intuitions that linguistics should mostly rely on are those of the linguists themselves because the linguists are the most expert” (2006a, p. 499; 2006b, p. 111).⁵

But, it may be thought, a speaker’s linguistic intuitions are different from those non-linguistic ones because they are about the products of the person’s own competence. Of course, linguistic intuitions are not unique in this respect: think of intuitions about touch typing,⁶ chess moves, and logical thought. In all these cases, a person can find data to have intuitions about without going out and looking, because her competence produces relevant data. This makes it easier for her to become an expert in the area. Still this does not mean that she will become one:

a person competent in an activity may remain ignorant about it. And even if she does become an expert, we should not assume that her opinions carry special authority simply because she is competent...She is privileged in *her ready access to data*, not in *the conclusions she draws from the data*; conclusions of the competent, just like those of the incompetent, are empirical responses to the phenomena and open to question; they arise from the empirical observation of data. (2006a, pp. 494–495; 2006b, p. 106).

So, whilst acknowledging that linguistic intuitions are different from physical and paleontological ones, I stick to my story about their status. I think that the normal competent speaker with even a little education will “reflect on linguistic reality just as she reflects on many other striking aspects of the world she lives in. And this education will usually provide the terms and concepts of folk linguistics, at least.” So she is likely to be able to judge accurately, in a fairly immediate and unreflective way, about grammaticality/acceptability,⁷ ambiguity, coreference and the like. Such judgments are examples of the sort of linguistic intuitions that I am

⁴ So this is not the obviously false claim that these intuitive judgments are *theoretical* (cf. Mišević 2006, p. 539; Devitt 2006c, p. 595).

⁵ Culbertson and Gross (2009) challenge this. I have responded (2010: part III).

⁶ Textor attributes to me the view that “typists don’t have typing intuitions” (p. 398). I think that they often do (2006a, p. 495; 2006b, p. 107).

⁷ Textor does not make much of the alleged distinction between acceptability intuitions and grammatical intuitions. I think he is right not to do so. However, Chomskians commonly make a great deal of it, even claiming that speakers lack intuitions about grammaticality altogether: “Acceptability and interpretability as data sources are to be distinguished from the theoretical notion of *grammaticality*, and what is generated by a *grammar*. Speakers have no intuitions about what a grammar mandates, in the theoretical sense of a grammar that concerns linguists” (Fitzgerald 2010, p. 130; see also Collins 2008a, p. 31; Culbertson and Gross 2009). I argue that this is largely mistaken (2010, sec. 3).

talking about, empirical central-processor responses to linguistic phenomena. They have no special authority: although the speaker's competence gives her ready access to data it does not give her any privileged access to the *truth* about the data (2006a, pp. 497–498; 2006b, p. 109).⁸

This Modest Explanation differs sharply from VoC in its view of the contribution that a person's linguistic competence makes to her linguistic intuitions. The Modest Explanation's talk of "data" is to be understood on the model of "primary linguistic data": *the data are linguistic expressions* (and the experiences of using them). According to the Modest Explanation, the competence provides only these data to the intuitions. It does not provide any *information about the data*, any linguistic propositions that could be true or false. According to VoC, in contrast, the competence does provide such information (although not without interference), and it is because it does that the information is likely to be right and hence evidence.

My attention to the fact that a speaker can produce the data that are the subject of her intuition led me to the following account of forming an intuition:

So, in the typical situation, an ordinary person asked about a certain string of words will first simulate the behavior of attempting to produce or understand the string, thus exercising her linguistic competence. She will then go in for some quick central-processor reflection upon this experience, deploying her concept of *grammaticality*, *acceptability*, or whatever from folk linguistics, to form a judgment. The judgment itself is propositional, of course, but the datum for the judgment is not. The datum is the experience of simulating the behavior, which is no more propositional than is an experience of actually producing or understanding a string in normal language use. So competence supplies the datum for the intuition, the central processor provides the intuition. (Devitt 2006c, p. 594)⁹

Although I think the presentations of the Modest Explanation that I have just summarized were basically right, they were misleading in two respects. And Textor, who otherwise understands the Modest Explanation well, has been misled (pp. 398–399).

First, the story I have just told may indeed capture the typical way for a speaker to form an intuition in response to a *difficult* case but it surely does not for a speaker

⁸ So there is room for doubt that a speaker's linguistic intuitions are accurate. There is also room for doubt that any attempt to elicit such an intuition has succeeded. It can be hard to tell, for example, whether intuitions that an expression "is acceptable", "is ok", "sounds good", and the like are really intuitions about grammaticality. If they are not, I argue, they are evidentially irrelevant (2006a, p. 490; 2006b, p. 102; 2010, sec. 3). There is a further worry that an elicited intuition may not be about grammaticality in the speaker's *actual* language but rather in the *prescribed* language of the speaker's community. This raises another doubt about the evidential status of these intuitions. However, we should keep in mind that there is likely to be a high correlation between the speaker's language and the prescribed one.

⁹ At one point in the earlier works, in a passage quoted by Textor (p. 399), I carelessly misstated the view as follows: "So she asks herself whether this expression is something she would say and what she would make of it if someone else said it. Her answer is the datum" (2006a, p. 498; 2006b, p. 109). Her answer is not, as I later pointed out (2006c, p. 594 n. 22); it is part of the central-processor reflection. The datum is the experience that the answer is about.

in response to an *easy* case. Consider the strings, ‘responded the quickly speaker’ and ‘the speaker responded quickly’, for example. The speaker is likely to recognize immediately, without reflecting on any simulation, that the former word salad is unacceptable and the latter simple sentence is acceptable. If so, her intuition is, in this respect, analogous to some other ones I have mentioned in the past: a paleontologist responding to a bit of white stone sticking through grey rock with “a pig’s jawbone”; art experts correctly judging an allegedly sixth-century Greek marble statue to be a fake; the tennis coach, Vic Braden, correctly judging a serve to be a fault before the ball hits the ground (2006a, p. 492; 2006b, p. 104)¹⁰ Just as the paleontologist, the art expert, and Vic Braden, immediately recognize the relevant property in these cases, so too does the speaker in easy linguistic cases. There is no need for her to go through the experience of trying to produce or understand the string.

Second, my talk of the linguistic intuition being “theory-laden” and being the result of past “reflection” and “education”, “reflecting ‘the linguistic wisdom of the ages’” (2006a, p. 499; 2006b, p. 110) may suggest that the forming of a linguistic intuition is always against the background of a lot of prior thought about language. I did not intend to suggest this. Indeed, in discussing an objection due to Stephen Stich, I note that a thoroughly ignorant person may *learn* to have intuitions about easy cases in the experimental situation. “The judgments are theory-laden, but probably not much more so than many ‘observation’ judgments; for example, ‘Grass is green’; ‘Rocks are hard’; ‘Elephants are bigger than mice’” (2006a, p. 502; 2006b, p. 114).¹¹

3 The Modest Explanation Versus VoC

Why should the Modest Explanation be preferred to VoC? To answer, we need first to distinguish two versions of VoC. According to what I call the “standard” version, speakers derive their intuitive judgments from their representations of linguistic rules (and principles) by a causal and rational process like a deduction. I cite a lot of evidence in support of this interpretation of VoC (2006a, pp. 483–484; 2006b, pp. 96–97). Still, I accept that it may not be the right interpretation. If it is not, Chomskians must have a “nonstandard” version of VoC: the intuitions must be provided somehow by embodied but *unrepresented* rules (2006a, pp. 482–486; 2006b, pp. 96–98).

The main objection to the standard version of VoC is its highly *immodest* commitment to speakers’ representing linguistic rules.¹² I argue at length that this commitment is unsupported and implausible (2006b, pp. 87–121, 195–272).

¹⁰ The last two examples are from Gladwell 2005.

¹¹ I claim that this is the way to view intuitions of the ignorant in the ingenious “minimal pair” experiments (2006a, p. 499; 2006b, p. 110).

¹² Textor seems to have this commitment (p. 396). However, the commitment, hence the standard version, has no friends among my other Chomskian critics (Smith 2006; Collins 2006, 2007, 2008a; Pietroski 2008; Slezak 2009).

The main objection to the nonstandard version is that we do not have *any idea* how a system of embodied but unrepresented rules might provide the informational content in linguistic intuitions. Not only do we lack the details needed for a plausible explanation but attention to other such systems gives good reason to suppose that the linguistic system does not provide these intuitions and so we *could never* have the details:

The explanation would require a relatively direct cognitive path from the embodied rules of the language to beliefs about expressions of that language, a path that does not go via central-processor reflection on the data. What could that path be?... Consider some other examples. It is very likely that rules that are embodied but not represented govern our swimming, bicycle riding, catching, typing, and thinking. Yet there does not seem to be any direct path from these rules to relevant beliefs. Why suppose that there is such a path for linguistic beliefs? Why suppose that we can have privileged access to linguistic facts when we cannot to facts about these other activities? We do not have the beginnings of a positive answer to these questions and it seems unlikely that the future will bring answers. (2006a, pp. 506–507; 2006b, pp. 118)

Those are my main objections to VoC but there are others. I offered these whilst discussing the standard version but many count against the nonstandard version too. Here, briefly, are some of these others.

- (i) There are clearly lots of linguistic facts about which ordinary speakers have few if any intuitions: facts about heads, c-command, and so on. Why is that? “If our competence...speaks to us at all, how come it *says so little*?” (2006a, p. 489; 2006b, p. 101). We wonder what account of the causal route from embodied rules (and principles) to intuitions could account for this.
- (ii) Chomsky has, in effect, found support for VoC in an analogy with the intuitions yielded by the visual system (1965, pp. 8–9; 2000, p. 125). Others have followed him in this (Rey 2006, pp. 563–568; Collins 2007, p. 421; Fitzgerald 2010, sec. 3). I have rejected the analogy (2006a, pp. 500–501; 2006b, pp. 112–113; 2010, sec. 6). Indeed, I argue that the comparison with vision undermines VoC (2006a, p. 503; 2006b, p. 114).
- (iii) If embodied rules in the language faculty provided the linguistic intuitions they would surely also govern language use. Yet, on the assumption that languages are acquired by a “bottom-up” process that psychologists call “implicit learning”, there is empirical evidence that the rules don’t do both jobs (2006a, pp. 504–505; 2006b, pp. 115–116). Of course, one might resist this point by denying the assumption. Still, I argue (2006b, pp. 210–220), the evidence that language learning is implicit learning is very persuasive.¹³

I have since become aware of a body of literature that provides much more persuasive empirical evidence against VoC, without the implicit-learning assump-

¹³ Textor responds to this objection briefly (p. 398).

tion.¹⁴ The evidence suggests that the ability to speak a language and the ability to have metalinguistic intuitions about the language are quite distinct.¹⁵ Carson Schütze ends a critical discussion of much of this evidence with the observation that “it is hard to dispute the general conclusion that metalinguistic behavior is not a direct reflection of linguistic competence” (1996, p. 95). In other words, it is hard to dispute that VoC is false.

It is time to consider Textor’s criticisms.

4 Intuitive Metalinguistic Judgments as Evidence

Let us start by setting aside any potential disagreement over what linguists *call* “intuitions” or over what are appropriately so-called. These are boring verbal matters and I assume that Textor no more wants to engage with them than I do.¹⁶ Indeed, I have no very strong opinions about them and certainly accept that ‘intuition’ and its cognates is used to cover more in linguistics than the metalinguistic judgments that are the concern of VoC and the Modest Explanation (2006a, p. 487; 2006b, p. 99; 2010, sec. 2).

Textor and I clearly have a substantive disagreement over his linguistic “seemings”. I shall postpone discussion of these until the next section. Do we also have a substantive disagreement over the metalinguistic intuitions that I am talking about, intuitions about the grammaticality/acceptability, ambiguity, coreference, etc. of linguistic expressions?

There are two different sorts of issues with these metalinguistic intuitions: (i), about their explanation and, (ii), about their status as evidence. Concerning (i) I claim, (a), that linguists offer VoC as the explanation of these intuitions and, (b), that they are wrong to do so: we should prefer the Modest Explanation. Concerning (ii) I claim, (a), that linguists use these intuitions (although not only these intuitions) as evidence, and, (b), that they are right to do so. Does Textor disagree with these claims? It is a little hard to tell because Textor is not very explicit on these matters.

It looks as if he rather agrees with me about (i), issues to do with explaining these intuitions. Thus, concerning (a), his presentation of VoC in Sect. 2 certainly implies, at least, that linguists endorse the VoC view of metalinguistic intuitions, intuitions like his example of the judgment “that in ‘Bill claimed that the clerk deceived himself’ ‘Bill’ cannot be the grammatical antecedent of ‘himself’” (p. 396). And concerning (b), he looks somewhat favorably, at least, on the Modest Explanation of these intuitions. Thus, early on he allows: “The Modest Explanation explains, in effect, the epistemic authority of the wrong kind of evidence.” (p. 396). And later he claims: “Even if the Modest Explanation is the correct explanation for the epistemic

¹⁴ See particularly, Hakes 1980, Ryan and Ledger 1984, Bialystok and Ryan 1985, Bialystok 1986. (I am indebted to Justyna Grudzinska for drawing this literature to my attention).

¹⁵ Pietroski finds my view of what it is to be competent in a language “unduly narrow” in that it does not include “recognizing yuckiness and (un)ambiguity, entailments, and so on?” (2008: 665). In rejecting VoC I am indeed denying that the competence to *use* a language is essentially conjoined with the competence to make intuitive judgments *about* the language.

¹⁶ Cf. Fitzgerald 2010, p. 153.

authority of the central processor judgments about English expressions, it does not capture the linguistic seemings which are the evidence for linguistic theories” (p. 404). So it looks as if Textor agrees with me that linguists wrongly accept the VoC view of metalinguistic intuitions. In any case, I want to emphasize that Textor makes no attempt to argue against my view that linguists do.

What about (ii), issues to do with the status of these intuitions as evidence? Here it is fairly clear that Textor disagrees with me. Speaking for both himself and linguists he implies, at least, that metalinguistic intuitions are not evidence. Thus, note that in the passage just quoted, “seemings” are described as *the* evidence for linguistic theories. And earlier he states:

The main point of criticism will turn on Devitt’s claim that an important kind of data for linguistic theories are metalinguistic judgements about the acceptability of linguistic strings. I will argue that the data are non-judgemental responses like seemings. (p. 396)

Perhaps most telling of all, he claims that “for a linguist a central processor judgment concerning the acceptability of a string is not evidence, but distorting noise” (p. 403).

Now, of course, linguists do not believe that the *central processor* is responsible for judgments of acceptability (although, as just noted, Textor does seem to believe this); they believe VoC. *But it is as obvious as could be that they do believe that those judgments are evidence.* As Schütze says: “Throughout much of the history of linguistics, judgments of the grammaticality/acceptability of sentences...have been a major source of evidence in constructing grammars” (1996, p. xi; see also the evidence I cite: 2006a, pp. 481–484; 2006b, pp. 95–97; 2010, sec. 2). And why wouldn’t linguists believe that these judgments are evidence given that linguists subscribe to VoC, as Textor agrees? Indeed, Textor’s very own characterization of VoC brings out nicely how and why they do believe this (sec. 2). So Textor is very wrong to disagree with me about (ii) (a).¹⁷

He is also wrong to disagree about (ii) (b). I argue that even though a speaker’s metalinguistic intuitions are not produced by her underlying competence but rather by her central processor, they are quite likely to be correct (2006a, pp. 497–500; 2006b, pp. 108–111).¹⁸ In response, Textor takes these intuitions to be “a reliable guide” to the speaker’s “implicit folk-theory of English” but not to “the principles of an I-Language” which Chomskians are seeking (p. 403). This leads him to suggest that I am

pursuing a different project from Chomsky. Devitt takes linguists to investigate the principles of an external language, Chomsky doesn’t. If this is the underlying source of the disagreement, Devitt has not proposed a rival account of the evidential role of linguistic intuitions for linguistic theory. He

¹⁷ He is not alone in this disagreement: see Collins 2006, p. 480; Fitzgerald 2010, sec. 3.2.

¹⁸ I might have supported my view of these intuitions as evidence by appealing to the general role of testament as evidence. A person’s testament about something counts as evidence whenever there is good reason to suppose that she is likely to be reliable about that thing. Just the same goes for a person’s linguistic intuitions.

has proposed an account of the evidential role of fairly unreflective central-processor judgments for investigating the folk-linguistics of natural language speakers. (pp. 403–404)

Textor is here alluding to a significant background for my disagreement with Chomskians over intuitions. I reject the received Chomskian “psychological conception” of a grammar in favor of a “linguistic conception” (2006b, ch. 2; see also 2003, and Devitt and Sterelny 1989).¹⁹ According to the psychological conception, a grammar is about a cognitive system and linguistics is part of psychology. According to the linguistic conception, a grammar is about a non-psychological realm of linguistic expressions, physical entities forming symbolic or representational systems. However, in arguing for the linguistic conception I am not urging linguists to change what they are doing, just to change what they *say about* what they are doing. I am claiming that the grammars that linguistics are producing are, as a matter of fact and despite what Chomskians say, theories of representational systems external to minds (though of course products of minds). And I would no more propose that the project of linguistics should be the investigation of folk linguistics, than I would that the project of, say, biology should be the investigation of folk biology. Though speakers’ metalinguistic intuitions are laden with their folk theory, I am indeed proposing a rival account of those intuitions because I claim that, although linguists are right to think that the intuitions are often good evidence for a grammar, VoC does not explain why they are.

In sum, Textor has nothing to say against my view that the linguists endorse the VoC explanation of metalinguistic intuitions and that they are wrong to do so. He may even agree with my view. His apparent view that linguists do not use these intuitions as evidence is obviously mistaken. And he is wrong to think that they are not evidence.

I turn now to Textor’s major criticism, arising from his view of linguistic “seemings”.

5 Intuitive Linguistic “Seemings” as Evidence

Textor argues that there are intuitions that are “non-judgmental...linguistic seemings” which have “epistemic authority”. These intuitions are evidence, perhaps even *the* evidence, for linguistic theories. He claims that the Modest Explanation cannot account for this authority. However, this alone would be no problem for my view because the Modest Explanation does not pretend to account for anything non-judgmental. If I have a problem it must come from my failing to undermine the idea that VoC can explain why these linguistic seemings are good evidence for a grammar, why they have epistemic authority. Indeed, he thinks that

¹⁹ This rejection has received a deal of criticism (some of it very harsh): Antony 2008; Collins 2007, 2008a, b; Dwyer and Pietroski 1996; Laurence 2003; Longworth 2009; Matthews 2006, Pietroski 2008; Rattan 2006; Rey 2006, 2008; Slezak 2009; Smith 2006. Devitt 2006c, 2008a, b, c, and 2009 are recent responses to some of these criticisms.

VoC “has at least the beginning of an explanation” of this authority (p. 404). This is a confusion.

To see that it is, we need some background, starting with something I mentioned in Sect. 1: although speakers’ metalinguistic judgments are evidence for grammars, they are not the only evidence. Indeed, I emphasize that they are only indirect evidence and not particularly important. The more important evidence is direct, and there is lots of it (2006a, pp. 486–488 2006b, pp. 98–100). A major source of this direct evidence is the corpus, the linguistic sounds and inscriptions that the folk have produced and are producing as they go about their lives. The technique of “elicited production” can provide further direct evidence: experimental situations “are designed to be uniquely felicitous for production of the target structure” (Thornton 1995, p. 140). Next, rather than *creating* situations in which we see what people say or understand, we can *describe* such situations and ask people what they *would* say or understand. Responses to these questions are aptly called “intuitive” but they are not, note, metalinguistic judgments. Finally, psycholinguistic studies of language processing can provide evidence of syntactic structures, although it has proved very difficult to provide interesting evidence this way.

All of this evidence is direct because it consists of linguistic performances, the production and understanding of expressions in a language, expressions that are just what the grammar of that language is about. At least, these expressions are just what the grammar is about on the linguistic conception that I favor (sec. 4). In any case, it is *trivial* that a speaker’s competence in that language (along with some other factors) is causally responsible for these performances and hence makes them evidence for the grammar of the language: that is the very nature of the competence! To accept this trivial fact is not, of course, to accept VoC. For, VoC is not a trivial theory of why these performances are evidence, however intuitive the performances may be, but a substantial theory of why *information about* a language captured by intuitions is evidence. Briefly, VoC is the theory that the information is evidence to the extent that the competence provides it. (I know: I named it!) Linguistic performances may convey all sorts of information about the world but they do not convey any information about a language unless they express a thought about a language.

The metalinguistic intuitions that are indirect evidence differ sharply from these linguistic performances in that these intuitions *do* convey information (or misinformation) about the language. For, they are thoughts about linguistic expressions involved in those performances, thoughts arising from judgments about acceptability, ambiguity, coreference, and the like. So these intuitions are just the sort of evidence that VoC *might* explain although, I argue (sec. 3), *does not* explain. What *does* do the explanatory job is the Modest Explanation.²⁰

This point about what VoC might or might not explain is the key to my argument. I have made the point without using Textor’s expression ‘epistemic authority’ in order to make it absolutely clear that the point does not depend on exactly how that expression is understood. Still, we can use that expression to make the point nicely,

²⁰ I think (2010) that insufficient attention to the distinction between this indirect evidence and the direct evidence provided by linguistic performances is largely responsible for the mistaken views of Collins (2006, p. 480; 2008a, p. 31) and Fitzgerald (2010) about linguistic intuitions.

provided the expression is understood on the basis of the ordinary meanings of ‘epistemic’ and ‘authority’ (and Textor does not warn us that it should be otherwise understood). For, if the expression is understood in this ordinary way, the metalinguistic intuitions raise questions about their epistemic authority but the linguistic performances do not. It makes no more sense to talk of the epistemic authority of those performances than it would to talk, in our earlier examples (sec. 2), of the epistemic authority of the white stone confronting the paleontologist, the marble statue confronting the art experts, or the tennis serve confronting Vic Braden. Epistemic authority, in this ordinary sense, is something that may be had by *knowers*—people and some other organisms—and by *what they are alleged to know*, their judgments about the world, information-bearing propositions that may be *warranted* and even *true*. Thus, the paleontologist has epistemic authority in her area because she is apt to make warranted judgments about it. And her judgment that what she confronts is a pig’s jawbone has that authority because it is an example of such a warranted judgment. Similarly, the earlier speaker, and her judgment that ‘Bill’ cannot be the grammatical antecedent of ‘himself’. In contrast, epistemic authority is not something had by the world that is so judged (unless the world that is so judged is a person or her judgment). In light of this, we can put my key point as follows. VoC might explain the epistemic authority of anything that has the informational linguistic content to have such authority. So it might explain the authority of the metalinguistic intuitions (although, I argue, it doesn’t). But it could not explain the epistemic authority of the linguistic performances because they have no such authority.

So, I have presented the following picture: on the one hand, there are linguistic performances which have no linguistic content or epistemic authority (in the ordinary sense) and which VoC could not explain; on the other hand, there are metalinguistic judgments about expressions involved in those performances which have the content and authority and which VoC could, but doesn’t, explain. There is nothing in between the performances and the judgments.

Textor disagrees: “There is room between fairly immediate meta-linguistic judgments and behavioral responses to expressions for other *cognitive* responses to sentences that deserve the title ‘linguistic intuition’” (p. 400; original emphasis).²¹ That room is alleged to be occupied by his linguistic seemings which VoC is on the way to explaining. What else does he say about these seemings?

We have already noted the key claim that they are “non-judgmental”. Yet, he says, they are, nonetheless, “passive evaluations of ‘bits of language’” (p. 401). How could that be? Here is a suggestion. Consider language understanding: a person responds to a linguistic string and, when all goes well, ends up with the message expressed. There is no harm in seeing the processing mechanisms involved in this as *evaluating* the string, doing something *analogous to* a speaker’s judgment. But, of course, it *is not* a speaker’s judgment because it is subpersonal and inaccessible to her. So, we still don’t have something over which *she* has epistemic authority.

Perhaps this is too swift. After all, I have accepted that *something* about the processing is personally accessible: my story of forming intuitions about difficult

²¹ Others hanker after a similar sort of intermediary: Mišević 2006; Fitzgerald 2010.

strings—but not, note, about easy ones like word salads—involves reflecting on the conscious *experience* of processing strings (sec. 2). To that extent we can go along with Textor’s claim that “we are conscious of” the evaluations (p. 401). Perhaps we can go along also with his view that what we are conscious of is a *feeling*: “An ungrammatical sentence...will not *feel* right. The feeling has a distinctive phenomenology and motivational force” (p. 401). But all a speaker has at this point is partial awareness of a piece of her own linguistic performance. That performance is evidence, of course, just as is the linguistic performance of others, the paleontologist’s white stone, the art experts’ marble statue, and Vic Braden’s serve. And the feelings that are part of the performance are evidence. But, as I have pointed out, none of these features of the world can have the informational linguistic content and epistemic authority that VoC might explain. That content and authority can only come when awareness of one of those worldly features yields a central processor *judgment*. There is nothing between the performance and the judgment that VoC could explain.²²

The following passage epitomizes Textor’s mistake: “Hearing a sentence to be acceptable is an evaluation of a bit of language....It is not a linguistic performance, but a response to a performance” (p. 402). Hearing a sentence to be acceptable may be a subpersonal evaluation in processing the sentence. If so it *is* a linguistic performance not a response to it. *Judging that* the sentence is acceptable is a personal response to the performance. And only the judgment (or a more cautious judgment that the sentence *seems* acceptable) can have the informational content and authority that VoC might explain. Textor’s linguistic seemings are conflation of two distinct sorts of entities: performances that VoC could not explain and judgments about performances that it might but doesn’t.

Textor claims that VoC

has at least the beginning of an explanation of the authority of linguistic seemings: they are the upshot of tacit knowledge that is inferentially isolated and not under the direct control of our desires and beliefs. A particular sentence seems grammatical to a speaker because the sentence conforms to a grammatical rule represented by the speaker. (p. 404)

There is a truth underlying this passage: that it is largely because a person is competent that she hears the sentence the way she does and processes it as grammatical. But this is not the beginning of an interesting explanation of these phenomena but the end of a trivial one. And VoC has absolutely nothing to do with it. VoC is an attempt to explain the informational content of intuitions about such phenomena. The phenomena themselves have no such content. So VoC could not even begin to explain them.

²² Even if there were, in each competent speaker, a linguistic seeming between performance and judgment, how could it provide linguists with *evidence*? After all, linguists would have no direct access to it. Presumably, the evidence would have to come from the speaker’s *report* of her seeming. Then one wonders how that would differ from a metalinguistic judgment. (I am indebted to David Pereplyotchik for this note).

6 Conclusion

A competent speaker’s linguistic intuitions are evidence for a grammar of her language. This is so, according to the received Chomskian view, VoC, because the informational content of these intuitions is provided, noise aside, by the speaker’s linguistic competence. In opposition to this view, I have argued for the Modest Explanation according to which the source of the information is the central processor in ordinary empirical reflection upon linguistic phenomena. The intuitions that are the subject of this disagreement are metalinguistic judgments.

In response Textor argues that these judgments are the wrong intuitions to consider. He thinks that the right ones are “linguistic seemings”. These seemings are non-judgmental evaluations of linguistic expressions, feelings about them, that nonetheless have epistemic authority. And whereas the Modest Explanation cannot account for these seemings, VoC may well be able to.

So, Textor’s focus is on his linguistic seemings not on my metalinguistic judgments. But what does he think about the latter? He seems to agree with me that linguists endorse the VoC explanation of these intuitions and that they are wrong to do so: the Modest Explanation may be right. Certainly he does not argue against my views on these issues. However, Textor seems to disagree with my view that linguists use these intuitions as evidence. If so, he is obviously wrong.

Textor’s major disagreement with me is over his linguistic seemings. I accept, of course, that there are intuitive linguistic performances that provide evidence for a grammar. Indeed this evidence is direct and more important than that provided by metalinguistic intuitions. However, these performances do not convey information about the language (unless they express metalinguistic intuitions) and so are not the sort of thing that could have epistemic authority or be explained by VoC. People and their metalinguistic judgments about the performances may have the authority but not the performances themselves. Textor’s view that VoC might explain something between the performance and the judgment is a confusion. The performance is (largely) provided by the competence but it has no epistemic authority. The metalinguistic judgment may have the authority but it is not provided by the competence. VoC is wrong. The Modest Explanation is right.

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