

LINGUISTIC INTUITIONS: IN DEFENSE OF “ORDINARISM”*

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ABSTRACT

*The received view in Chomskian linguistics is that linguistic intuitions are the product of a linguistic competence residing in a sub-central module of the mind. In *Ignorance of Language* I rejected this “Voice of Competence” view (“VoC”), and gave an answer of my own. I argued that intuitions are empirical theory-laden central-processor responses to phenomena. This led to an exchange with Nenad Mišćević in which he defended VoC. Mišćević has since returned to the issue, criticizing my sort of view, which he labels “ordinarism”. Dunja Jutronić has already given an excellent response to these criticisms. I focus on revising and developing my view further. I emphasize that a person’s linguistic intuitions can be immediate perceptual judgments that do not arise from any conscious and deliberate exercise of her own competence. Should she feel the need for such an exercise, she is likely to begin with an understanding test not a production one. The mental processes involved in these deliberate tests are not aptly described as “simulations” of linguistic usage.*

Keywords: *linguistic usage, Voice of Competence, Modest Explanation, theory-laden, simulation, the understanding test, the production test*

I am very pleased to have been invited to contribute to this volume in honor of Nenad Mišćević. I first met Nenad in Dubrovnik in 1989 and we have been friends ever since. As a result of the work of Nenad, and our mutual friend Dunja Jutronić, I have been to so many conferences and workshops, given so many talks, in Croatia that I feel part of Croatian philosophy! Over these 25 years, I have noticed the enormous development of analytic philosophy in Croatia, something for which Nenad surely deserves a great deal of the credit. Finally, I should like to say how much I admire Nenad’s steadfast and principled opposition to the various nationalisms that have caused such grievous harm to the people of former Yugoslavia.

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1. Introduction

Linguistics takes the intuitions that people have about the syntactic and semantic properties of the language that they speak as good evidence for a theory of that language. Why are these intuitions good evidence? In my book, *Ignorance of Language* (2006a, ch. 7; also 2006b), I rejected the received Chomskian answer, which I somewhat playfully called “Voice of Competence” (“VoC”), and gave an answer of my own.¹ In response, Nenad came to the defense of VoC in the *Croatian Journal of Philosophy* (2006). I replied (2006c).² Nenad (2009) has taken up the issue again in a paper in honor of Dunja Jutronić, with a follow up (2012), labeling the sort of view that she and I urge, I’m sorry to say, “ordinarism”. Jutronić has given an excellent response (this volume) and so I can be fairly brief in my own.

2. Voice of Competence (VoC)

What is VoC? Consider the intuitive judgments that

(1) John seems to Bill to want to help himself

is a grammatical/acceptable³ sentence, and that in it ‘himself’ co-refers with ‘John’. VoC is the view that these intuitions are the product of a linguistic competence residing in a sub-central module of the mind. I describe VoC as the view that linguistic competence, all on its own,

provides information about the linguistic facts....So these judgments are not arrived at by the sort of empirical investigation that judgments about the world usually require. Rather, a speaker has a privileged access to facts about the language, facts captured by the intuitions, simply in virtue of being competent... (2006a, 96)

¹ The evidential role of intuitions in the philosophy of language, for example, in the theory of reference, is even more prominent than in linguistics; indeed, philosophers seem to rely on nothing else. Mostly, philosophers seem to think that these intuitions are a priori (McKinsey 1987, 1). However, philosophers may implicitly embrace the more respectable VoC. On this, see Stich 1996, Devitt 2012 and 2015.

² This paper also replied to other critics of my discussion of intuitions: Collins 2006, Matthews 2006, Rattan 2006, Rey 2006 and Smith 2006. There have been some later critics: Pietroski 2008, responded to in Devitt 2008; Textor 2009, responded to in Devitt 2010a; Culbertson and Gross 2009, which led to the exchange, Devitt 2010b, Gross and Culbertson 2011; Fitzgerald 2010, responded to in Devitt 2010b; Ludlow 2011 and Rey 2013, responded to in Devitt 2013.

³ Linguists have recently made much of the distinction between intuitions about grammaticality and about acceptability, far too much in my view (2010b, 839-44). I argue that ordinary acceptability intuitions are evidence only insofar as they are grammaticality intuitions; see Gross and Culbertson 2011 for a response.

On this view, competence not only plays the dominant role in *linguistic usage*, it also provides informational content to *metalinguistic intuitions*. Those intuitions are indeed, “noise” aside, the voice of competence. That is why they are reliable.

I cited a great deal of evidence that VoC is the received Chomskian view (2006a, 96).⁴ The following passage from Chomsky is particularly striking evidence:

it seems reasonably clear, both in principle and in many specific cases, how unconscious knowledge issues in conscious knowledge...a person has unconscious knowledge of the principles of binding theory, and from these and others discussed, it follows by computations similar to straight deduction that in [*I wonder who the men expected to see them*] the pronoun *them* may be referentially dependent on the men whereas in [*The men expected to see them*] it may not...That this is so is conscious knowledge”. (1986, 270)

Nenad (2009) expresses his commitment to VoC nicely in discussing the following pair of sentences:

(W) They want to be teachers.

(W*) *They want to be teacher.

Here is his commitment:

Imagine a native speaker, Ann, accepting the first and rejecting the second. Certainly, Ann sort of rehearsed the sentences in her inner fore, asking herself whether she would say them, simulating actual saying, as the standard description goes. So, how is Ann’s cognitive apparatus arriving to the verdict? Following the lead from the Chomskian tradition, I would claim that it is *mobilizing the particular competence*, i.e. *the same cognitive resource that produces or fails to produce similar sentences in real-life speaking*. It is the competence itself that is doing the work, the central processor at best just passively reports the verdict of the competence, which is the intuition.

I have argued that VoC is wrong (2006a,b; 2010b; 2013). I shall summarize my objections in section 4. But perhaps the best reason for rejecting VoC, is that there is a better explanation of intuitions and their evidential role.

⁴ I thought that the evidence for this attribution was overwhelming and so was surprised to find three knowledgeable philosophers rejecting the attribution: John Collins (2008, 17-19), Gareth Fitzgerald (2010), and Peter Ludlow (2011, 69-71). I have responded to Fitzgerald (Devitt 2010b, 845-7) and to Ludlow (Devitt 2013, 274-8). Ludlow’s discussion is notable for its egregious misrepresentation of the evidence. I have also provided more evidence (2013, 273) in the works of Barry Smith (2006), Mark Textor (2009), and Georges Rey (2013). I still think that the evidence is overwhelming. But see Jeffrey Maynes and Steven Gross (2013) for a nice discussion of the matter.

3. “Ordinarism”

If VoC is not the right theory of intuitions, what is? I argue that intuitive judgments about language, like intuitive judgments in general, “are empirical theory-laden central-processor responses to phenomena, differing from many other such responses only in being fairly immediate and unreflective, based on little if any conscious reasoning” (2006a, 103). Although a speaker’s competence in a language obviously gives her ready access to the *data* of that language, the data that the intuitions *are about*, it does not give her ready access to the *truth* about the data; the competence does not provide the *informational content* of the intuition. In this respect my view is sharply different from VoC. And it is sharply different in another respect: it is *modest*, making do with cognitive states and processes we were already committed to. This led Mark Textor (2009) to call it “the Modest Explanation”.

This is the sort of view that Nenad (2009) ascribes to Jutronic and me and calls “ordinarism”:

Roughly, the ordinarist hopes that the contribution of the competence is minimal, and the holistic contribution of CP [central processor] maximal and essential. For her, intuitions are basically the products of holistic theorizing, not of special, dedicated competence. This is why they are not special, why they contain so much empirical material, and why it is wrong to take them to be a priori.

Nenad characterizes the ordinarist as holding that intuitions are “products of holistic theorizing”. This needs to be taken with caution. It is prompted by my talk of intuitions as “theory-laden”. Nenad misunderstood this initially (2006, 539; cf. Devitt 2006c, 595) and may still do so. The idea is *not* that these intuitions are theoretical judgments or the result of theorizing. Rather, the intuitions are mostly *the product of experiences* of the linguistic world. They are like “observation” judgments; indeed, some of them *are* observation judgments (2006a, 103). As such, they are “theory-laden” in just the way that we commonly think observation judgments are. The anti-positivist revolution in the philosophy of science, led by Thomas Kuhn and Paul Feyerabend, drew our attention to the way in which even the most straightforward judgments arising from observational experiences may depend on a background. We would not make the judgments if we did not hold certain beliefs or theories, some involving the concepts deployed in the judgments. We would not make the judgments if we did not have certain predispositions, some innate but many acquired in training, to respond selectively to experiences.⁵

⁵ So ‘theory’ in ‘theory-laden’ has to be construed *very* broadly to cover not just theories proper but also these dispositions.

A few more points about this theory ladenness may be appropriate. (a) The power of the background to influence judgments should not be exaggerated. Thus a person observing the Müller-Lyer arrows will judge that one “looks longer” than the other even though she knows perfectly well that they are the same length. (b) The view is not that we consciously bring the background into play in a way that amounts to *theorizing* about the experience. Surely, we mostly don’t. Nonetheless, the background plays a causal role in the judgment. (c) The view is not that we need to have done a deal of thinking about language before having linguistic intuitions: a thoroughly ignorant person may *learn* to have intuitions in an experimental situation (2006a, 114).⁶

4. The Rejection of VoC

So why should we prefer ordinarism to VoC? What’s wrong with VoC? I have recently summed up my former criticisms of VoC (2006a,b; 2010b; 2013) as follows:

The main problems with it are, first, that, to my knowledge, it has never been stated in the sort of detail that could make it a real theory of the source of intuitions. Just how do the allegedly embodied principles yield the intuitions? We need more than a hand wave in answer. Second, again to my knowledge, no argument has ever been given for VoC until Georges Rey’s recent attempt (2013) which, I argue (2013), fails. Third, given what else we know about the mind, it is unlikely that VoC could be developed into a theory that we would have good reason to believe. (2015, 37)⁷

Should I revise this assessment in light of Nenad’s “Competent Voices” (2009)?

Well, concerning the first point, Nenad has, with his flow-chart, provided a bit more than a hand wave to explain how the allegedly embodied principles yield the intuitions. But it seems to me only a *very little* bit more and not nearly enough. We need an account of *how* Ann’s competence which, we are supposing, produces strings like (W) but not (W*),⁸ also “comes out with some kind of answer, some Yes or No signal” about the acceptability of these strings. *How* does competence

⁶ I claim that this is the way to view intuitions of the ignorant in the ingenious ‘minimal pair’ experiments (2006a, 110).

⁷ Maynes and Gross propose a possible defense of VoC (2013). For discussion, see Devitt 2013.

⁸ I’ll go along with this view of (W*) but I rather doubt that it is true. In children’s doctor-nurse games, we might properly say of Fiona, “She wants to be doctor”. Similarly in school games, we might properly say of several children, “They want to be teacher”.

move from (1) in the flow-chart to the “immediate spontaneous answer” of (2)? Why should we even suppose that there is such a move? I don’t see any explanation in Nenad’s discussion.

Concerning the second point, Nenad (2009, 2012) has produced an argument for VoC and against ordinarism, to his great credit. But, in my view, Jutronic (this volume) shows that this argument fails.

So far as I can see, Nenad has not addressed my third point, a point also emphasized by Jutronic: whichever way VoC is understood, given *what else we know about the mind*, VoC seems most unlikely to be true.

I have also drawn attention to some other implausibilities of VoC (2006a,b; 2010b; 2013) which I have recently summed up as follows:

- (i) If competence really spoke to us, why would it not use the language of the embodied theory and why would it say so little?
- (ii) There would be a disanalogy between the intuitions provided by the language faculty and by perceptual modules.
- (iii) Developmental evidence suggests that the ability to speak a language and the ability to have intuitions about the language are quite distinct, the former being acquired in early childhood, the latter, in middle childhood as part of a *general* cognitive development. (2015, 37)

An argument for VoC should confront these implausibilities.

5. Developing Ordinarism

My account in *Ignorance* (2006a) of intuitive judgments was criticized by Nenad (2006). I was grateful for the criticism because it made me aware of a careless error and led to a development of the view (2006c). I’m grateful now for Nenad’s latest criticism (2009). In this section I shall conclude my paper by revising and developing ordinarism further, stimulated by this criticism.

The beginning of my account of how a normal competent speaker makes a grammaticality judgment about an expression included the following:

she appreciates the connection between...grammaticality and competence in the language: roughly, errors aside, competent speakers produce and understand grammatical sentences. She knows that she is a competent speaker and so uses herself as a guide to what the competent speaker would do. So she asks herself whether this expression is something she would say and what she would make of it if someone else said it. (2006a, 109)

Before getting to his criticism, Nenad gives an interestingly different account of how a speaker begins the process leading to her intuitive judgment: she “might try to say the target sentence to herself, she engages in a ‘tentative production’, sometimes described as ‘simulation’” (2006, 526). So, where I talk of the speaker questioning herself about both the production and the understanding of the expression, Nenad talks only of production. And Nenad introduces talk of “simulation”.

I now think that both these aspects of Nenad’s account are mistaken, for reasons I will give in a moment. Before that, however, I must give two developments that I have already made to my ordinarism.

I have already mentioned the first development: it was in response to Nenad’s earlier criticism. In this response, I adopted Nenad’s talk of “simulation” that I now think mistaken:

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 (pp. 109–11). So competence supplies the datum for the intuition, the central processor provides the intuition. (2006c, 594)

The second development was in response to Textor (2009) and continued with the talk of “simulation”. I found the just-quoted story of intuition formation a bit misleading:

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 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, 104; 2006b, 492).] 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. (2010a, 254-5)

What I am emphasizing here is that a person's linguistic intuitions are *perceptual* judgments that can be as immediate as those of the art expert and Braden, without the conscious and deliberate exercise of her competence in what, following Nenad, I am here calling "simulations". Just as the paleontologist's, art expert's, and Braden's years of experience and education have made them quick at deploying their concepts of *pig's jawbone*, *fake*, and *fault*, respectively, so too a speaker's years of experience and education is likely to make her quick at wielding her concept of *grammaticality*, at least in simple cases. Thus Ann may well arrive at her intuitions about (W) and (W*) without needing the help of a "simulation".

The following example, popular in discussions of linguistic intuitions (see, for example, Fitzgerald 2010, 139), both exemplifies such immediate perceptual judgments and shows that they can be wrong:

Many more people have been to France than I have.

When a competent speaker is presented with this she is likely to judge immediately that it is grammatical. Yet it isn't, as will become apparent to her as soon as she tests it against her own competence in what we are calling a "simulation": this string of words simply makes no sense.

A word of caution is necessary here. To say that a speaker may perceive that a string has a certain syntactic property without *a conscious and deliberate* exercise of her competence, without a "simulation", is not to say that her competence is not involved in her perception. As Fodor has pointed out, "you can't help hearing an utterance of a sentence (in a language you know) as an utterance of a sentence" (1983, 52-3).⁹

⁹ I am indebted to Georges Rey for reminding me of this important Fodorian point. Rey has emphasized it before, taking it as evidence for VoC and against my Modest Explanation (2013). I don't think that it is. Thus, after saying that I accept the point, I go on:

And Rey has me wrong in supposing that I find remarks like the following "implausible": "speech perception involves...a highly modularized perception of linguistic features of the speech vehicles themselves"; "we hear the utterances of a language we know in terms of [morphemic constituency, syntactic structure and logical form]" (2013, 254-5). In understanding (1) ["John seems to Bill to want to help himself"], we hear it as having those linguistic features and not others in that, as a result of all the processing in the language system, we come up with a representation that has those features and not others; for example, it has a feature that takes 'himself' to co-refer with 'John' not 'Bill. What I do find very implausible is that, in hearing (1) in this way, the central processor thereby has the informational basis for the intuitive judgment that 'himself' co-refers with 'John'. We have been given no reason to believe that. Hearing an utterance in a certain way is one thing, judging that it has certain properties, another. (2013, 286-7)

So because of Ann’s English competence she is almost certain to *hear* (*W*) *as a sentence*, “automatically”, and may then, partly as a result of that experience, make the immediate perceptual judgment that it is grammatical. And she is almost certain to *hear* (*W**) *as a string of words but not a sentence*, “automatically”, and may then, partly as a result of that experience, make the immediate perceptual judgment that it is ungrammatical. But this automatic engagement of her competence is not to be confused with a “simulation”.¹⁰

It follows from this that my earlier discussions (2006a,b,c) were mistakenly focused only on cases where a person’s linguistic intuitions arose from reflecting on a conscious and deliberate exercise of her own competence. Nenad’s discussion makes a similar mistake. Intuitions may be formed immediately in the CP (central processor) simply on the basis of perception of a string.

I turn now to my criticisms of two aspects of Nenad’s discussion of intuition formation: (a) his talk of producing the string in question but not of understanding it; (b) his description of the process as a “simulation”.

Consider (a). Suppose that when Ann is asked about (*W*) and (*W**) she does not immediately perceive the answer and decides to test these strings against her own competence. One thing she will surely do is consciously try to *understand* the strings in just the same way as she would any string presented in conversation that she had difficulty with. She may go further, of course, and *produce* the strings, saying them to herself or out loud. But she will surely begin with the understanding test.

Consider (b) and, first, the understanding test. Since Nenad does not mention this test, he obviously does not describe it as “simulating” an attempt at understanding. But I did so describe it. I said that a person “will first simulate the behavior of attempting to produce or understand the string” (2006c, 594). This now strikes me as a mistake. In executing the understanding test on (*W*) and (*W**), Ann will deliberately go through a process of understanding of the sort that she goes through “automatically” when presented with a string in normal conversation. This is a straightforward exercise of her linguistic competence. It is an *actual* attempt at understanding, not a simulated attempt. Ann will then reflect on this attempt, deploying her concept of *grammaticality* in her CP to come up with an intuitive judgment.

¹⁰ It is a mark of a skill that it is “automatic” in this way: it can be performed whilst attention is elsewhere (Anderson 1980, 230-5; Reisberg 1999, 460). So I see the “automaticity” of linguistic usage as part of the evidence that linguistic competence is simply a skill (2006a, 210).

Consider (b) and, second, the production test. This test is not aptly called a “simulation” either. For, what could the test for a word salad like ‘responded the quickly speaker’ be simulating? Certainly not a piece of language production. For, in language production a person’s competence produces a string to *express a thought*. So to simulate that process would be to take some thought and go through the motions of expressing it without actually expressing it, as in acting or rehearsing. That is a *very* different process from the production test. Thus, in saying ‘responded the quickly speaker’ to oneself or out loud, *there is no thought* that the person simulates expressing. Indeed, what could the thought be?! Rather, the person’s CP, *not* her English competence, produces the word salad: the person *deliberately repeats* the string that has been presented to her. This is not to say, of course, that her English competence plays no causal role in the production. Because of that competence she will first hear the string as a string of words and so she will repeat it as a string of words. But the CP is what produces it, just as it would a repetition of another person’s wave, giggle, utterance in a foreign language, or any other action. Her CP is causally responsible for such behaviors.

What happens after she repeats the string? It is not too clear. She needs to discover whether, as a competent speaker, she would ever produce this string. But how will she tell? It rather looks as if the person will check whether she, as a competent speaker, understands the string she has repeated. She will then reflect on this experience. If this is right, the production test collapses into an understanding test. And, once again, there is no simulation.

The inappropriateness of talk of simulation in describing this production test is brought home by the contrast between this test and a production test that does involve a simulation:

Touch-typing provides a nice example of reflecting on the output of one’s own competence. Ask a touch-typist whether a ‘k’ should be typed with a middle finger and, very likely, he will think to himself, “How would I type a ‘k’?” He will attend as he goes through the actual or mental motions of doing so and respond immediately, “Yes”. (2006a, 106)

In this case, the act of typing a ‘k’ is simulated. In the language case, the act of expressing a thought by a word salad is not.

In sum, a speaker may make her intuitive judgments about a string immediately in perception, without reflecting on any conscious and deliberate exercise of her own competence. And she is likely to do so in easy cases. Should she feel the need for such an exercise, she is likely to start with an understanding test rather than a production one. The mental processes involved in these tests are not aptly described as “simulations” of linguistic usage.

In *Ignorance* I described a person’s behavior in the linguistic tests as follows: “she asks herself whether this expression is something she would say and what she would make of it if someone else said it” (2006a, 109). This is too brief but it is right for difficult cases. I shouldn’t have let Nenad lead me into talk of simulations.

Finally, I turn to one of Nenad’s latest criticisms (2009). (I am leaving the others to Jutronić.) The criticism is of my talk of *experience* in describing my tests:

The experience, as made clear by the context, is “the experience of simulating the behavior” (2006, 594, the body of the text), i.e. the neural-verbal behavior of producing or trying to produce the target string.

This is hard to believe. First, subpersonal experiences hopefully don’t have qualitative character, so the experience of producing the string is just the very producing. Suppose competence thus produces the string, and the CP takes this producing as its datum; it is almost like CP watching the competence producing the string. But what kind of information can *this* give to the CP?

I would no longer talk of simulations, of course. Beyond that, I have three responses.

(1) In an understanding test, a speaker is consciously aware of the difference between understanding a string and not understanding it.¹¹ In a production test, a speaker is consciously aware of repeating the string and then, it seems, seeing if she understands it. By “experience” I simply have in mind these mental processes of which the person is thus consciously aware. The person having these experiences goes on to judge whether they are of something grammatical. Such perceptual judgments are likely to be quite reliable for she will have acquired her ability to deploy her concept of *grammaticality* by reflecting on such experiences.

(2) We might metaphorically describe reflecting on experiences in the understanding test as “watching the competence attempt to understand a string” but we should not describe reflecting on experiences in the production test as “watching the competence producing the string”. For, as just noted, the competence does not produce the string, the CP does. So, the first stage of Nenad’s flow-chart for the production test is wrong: there is no “tentative production (by competence)”.

(3) Perception of the string, with or without an understanding or production test, provides information to a speaker’s CP about the properties of the string in just the same way that perception of a white stone, marble statue, and serve provide information to a paleontologist, art expert, and Vic Braden about the properties of their respective entities.

¹¹ For more on what might go on in this test, see Devitt 2013, 287-8.

Perception, perhaps accompanied by some introspection, is a way of learning about the world.

My thanks to Nenad for prompting this revision and for further development of my view.¹²

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