Michael Devitt

PART I: VoC and ME

1. Introduction

Linguistics takes the intuitions that people have about the syntactic and semantic properties of their language 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, what Mark Textor (2009) has aptly named "the Modest Explanation" ("ME"). This has generated a lively debate.[1] The papers defending VoC by Steven Gross and Georges Rey in the present volume are the latest contributions to this debate.

I summarize my previous discussions of VoC and ME in part I and respond to Gross and Rey in part II,

2. Voice of Competence (VoC)

What is VoC? Consider the intuitive judgments that

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

is grammatical, and that in it 'himself' co-refers with 'John'. VoC is the view that intuitions like these 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 alone 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

---

[1] Collins 2006, Matthews 2006, Miščević 2006, Rattan 2006, Rey 2006, and Smith 2006, responded to in Devitt 2006c; 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 2014, responded to in Devitt 2014a; an exchange, Miščević 2009 and 2012, Jutronić 2012 and 2014, Devitt 2014b, Miščević 2014a,b, Devitt 2018, Jutronić 2018, Miščević 2018.

language, facts captured by the intuitions, simply in virtue of being competent… (2006a: 96)[2]

On this view, competence not only plays the dominant role in *linguistic usage*, it also provides *metalinguistic intuitions*. Those intuitions are indeed, "noise" aside, the voice of competence. That is why they are reliable.[3]

I argued that VoC was wrong (2006a,b, 2010b, 2014a). I shall summarize my objections in section 4. But the best reason for rejecting VoC is ME. First, two clarifications.

(a) Intuitions are propositional attitudes or thoughts in the central processor ("CP") with propositional contents expressible by sentences; thus, the content of our first intuition about (1) can be expressed by "(1) is grammatical". When I say that, according to VoC, linguistic competence provides "propositional knowledge" (2006a: 4), "information" (2006a: 96), and "informational content" (2010b: 834), I am referring to such propositional contents. VoC may allow *some* role to the CP in forming the intuition - perhaps some editing, correcting, or inferring – but it is essential to VoC, as defined, that any such CP processes start from a metalinguistic propositional content provided by competence. It is important to keep this in mind in considering what Rey presents as a defense of VoC.

(b), I have given the intuition that (1) is "grammatical" as an example. Linguists would now mostly prefer to talk of the intuition that (1) is "acceptable", elicited by asking whether (1) is "ok", "sounds good", and the like. The significance of this preference is a tricky matter that I have addressed elsewhere (2006a: 102; 2010b: 839-44). In brief, I have argued, the content of such a question is context-relative and that a speaker hearing the question from a linguist is likely to take it to be about what is grammatical, rather than about what is polite, acceptable in church, and the like. So it is appropriate to treat the intuition as about grammaticality. In any case, such an intuition is no more provided by linguistic competence than the other metalinguistic intuitions.

3. Modest Explanation (ME)

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 CP ready access to the *data* of that

---

[2] According to VoC, the "privileged access" is to linguistic facts but not, note, to the alleged fact that competence provides this linguistic information; cf. Gross (##10).

[3] I cited what I took to be overwhelming evidence that VoC is the received Chomskian view (2006a: 96-7). So I was surprised that the attribution was rejected by some: Collins 2008: 17-19; Fitzgerald 2010; Ludlow 2011: 69-71. For responses, see Devitt 2010b: 845-7; 2014a: 274-8. Ludlow's discussion is notable for its egregious misrepresentation of the evidence. I have also provided more evidence (2014a: 273). I still think that the evidence for the attribution is overwhelming.

language, the data that the intuitions *are about*,[4] it does not give her CP ready access to the *truth* about the data; the competence does not provide the propositional content of the intuition.

Textor (2009) rightly called this explanation "modest", for it takes metalinguistic intuitions to be just like intuitions in general, particularly intuitions about the outputs of other human competences; examples include chess, typing, and thinking (2006a: 106-8). So ME makes do with the sorts of cognitive states and processes, whatever they may be, that we have to posit anyway to explain intuitions in general. In light of this, I might have just left ME at that, but I felt the need to say more, at least to contrast ME with VoC. So I did say more about the etiology of the metalinguistic intuitions, speculating on the basis of what I thought we knew about intuitions in general (2006a). I have revised and developed these speculations since (2006c, 2010a, 2014b) in responses to Textor and Nenad Mišcević (2006, 2009).[5] And I continue revising and developing here. This is a tricky empirical issue because, as Rey is fond of saying, "*no one yet has an adequate theory of our knowledge of much of anything*" (1998: 29). I emphasize that a favorable comparison of ME to VoC should not depend on my speculations being dead right.

First, consider "theory-laden". Intuitions are theory-laden in the way that perceptual judgments are commonly thought to be; indeed, some of them *are* perceptual judgments (2006a: 103).[6] The anti-positivist revolution in the philosophy of science drew our attention to the way in which even the most straightforward judgments arising from observation 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.[7]

Next, consider a native speaker of a language asked to make a syntactic judgment about a string of words in that language. According to ME, she might respond as follows. She starts by trying to *understand* the string: she *deliberately* goes through a process of understanding of the sort that she goes through "automatically" when presented with a string in normal conversation. This test is a straightforward exercise of her linguistic competence (along with some "pragmatic" competencies). She will then go in for some quick CP reflection upon this experience, deploying her concept of *grammaticality* 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 trying to understand the string, which is no more propositional than is an experience of actually producing or understanding a string in normal language use (2006a: 109–

---

[4] Rey responds: "Devitt doesn't provide any clear indication of precisely what he means by 'the data of language' to which speakers are exposed" (##4). This is odd: see 2006a: 98-9, 106-9; also: "'data' is to be understood on the model of 'primary linguistic data': the data are linguistic expressions (and the experiences of using them)" (2010a: 254; also 2010b: 835 n. 4).
[5] I am indebted to Dunja Jutronić for a series of comments and questions that had a major role in prompting this development.
[6] And I argue that perceptual judgments should be thought of as intuitions (2015: 39-42).
[7] So 'theory' in 'theory-laden' has to be construed *very* broadly to cover not just theories proper but also these dispositions. For further discussion, see Devitt 2011: 19.

3

11). So competence supplies the datum for the intuition, the CP provides the intuition (2006c: 594).

I say she "might" respond in this way because, although this "understanding test" is a likely response to a *difficult* case, it is not 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 reflection on a deliberate attempt at understanding, that the former word salad is ungrammatical and the latter simple sentence is grammatical. 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). Just as the paleontologist, the art expert, and 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 perform the above understanding test. (2010a: 254-5).

What I am emphasizing here is that a person's linguistic intuitions may be immediate *perceptual* judgments just like these others. Years of experience and education have made the paleontologist, the art exert and Braden quick to recognize when to deploy their concepts of *pig's jawbone*, *fake*, and *fault*, respectively; these perceptions are theory-laden but immediate. Similarly, a speaker's years of experience and education, though less substantial, is likely to make her quick to recognize when to deploy her syntactic concepts in easy cases; those metalinguistic perceptions are also theory-laden but immediate. Doubtless the speaker's past experiences included understanding tests in which, as noted, her linguistic competence plays a role. (In principle, a field linguist could come to have good intuitions about a language in which she is not competent, but perhaps this is not likely in practice.) So that competence helped to bring about her current capacity to immediately recognize the grammatical features of simple cases.

The following example, popular in discussions of linguistic intuitions, 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 runs an understanding test: this string of words simply makes no sense.

Perceptions of strings, with or without an understanding test, can yield theory-laden intuitions about the properties of the strings in just the same way that perceptions of a white stone, marble statue, can yield theory-laden intuitions about the properties of those entities. And, the greater the expertise, the more theory-laden the intuitions.

Finally, I emphasize two crucial respects in which ME differs from VoC. First, unlike VoC, ME is not committed to novel sorts of cognitive states and processes but simply to those we must be committed to anyway to explain intuitions in general. Second, according to VoC,

4

linguistic competence provides the metalinguistic propositional content of intuitions (perhaps after some editing, correction, or inference). ME denies this. Relatedly, "the grammatical… notions that feature in these judgments are not supplied by the competence but by the central processor as a result of thought about language" (2006a: 110-11). But, note, ME does *not* deny that competence plays a role in the etiology of an intuition; see its role in an understanding test.

4. The Rejection of VoC

So why should we prefer ME to VoC? What's wrong with VoC? I have recently summed up my former criticisms of VoC (2006a,b, 2010b, 2014a) 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 (2014) which, I argue (2014a), 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)

In brief, VoC needs details and evidence before we should take it seriously.

I have also drawn attention to some other implausibilities of VoC (2006a,b, 2010b, 2014a); in brief:

> (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.

An Occamist consideration counts heavily against VoC. ME seems like a good explanation and has not been shown to be otherwise. So there is no explanatory need to posit the special states and/or processes required by the immodest VoC.

If ME is right and VoC wrong then there are serious methodological consequences. Thomas Wasow and Jennifer Arnold, in a rather damning criticism of the methodology of generative grammarians, rightly claim that "intuitions have been tacitly granted a privileged position in generative grammar" (2005: 1482). Furthermore, they claim that "usage data gets almost no attention from generativists" (2005: 1486).[8] They note also: "For reasons that have never been made explicit, many generative grammarians appear to regard primary intuitions as

---

[8] I think this exaggerates a bit (2006a: 98-100).

more direct evidence of linguistic competence than other types of data. But there is no basis for this belief" (p. 1484) As I have indicated (sec. 2), generativists have this view of intuitions because they embrace VoC. And although *sometimes* they make this explicit – I cite evidence of this (2014a: 272) – it is true that *mostly* they do not. Rather, they "seem to just presuppose VoC without even stating it explicitly" (p. 273). So the first methodological consequence of the truth of ME and falsity of VoC is that the evidential focus in linguistics should move away from the indirect evidence provided by intuitions to the more direct evidence provided by usage, by the processes of linguistic production and understanding. The second consequence is that, insofar as the evidence of intuitions is sought, there will seldom be good reason for preferring those of folk over those of experts about language. And the third is that we should only use intuitions where we have some ground to believe that they are reliable.[9]

In light of this, it seems to me, ME is very plausible, whether or not my speculations on its details are right. Against the background of this plausibility I respond to Gross' "Linguistic Intuitions: Error Signals and the Voice of Competence" and Rey's "A Defense of the Voice of Competence". I must perforce be briefer in my response than I would like and their papers deserve.

PART II: GROSS, REY, AND THE DEFENSE OF VOC

5. Background

I have just pointed out that VoC, although apparently the received view among linguists and philosophers of linguistics, was left largely unsupported until recently. Then Rey (2014), to his credit, argued for it. He is doing so again here. Gross also argues for it here, to his credit. But I don't think that their arguments succeed.

Rey's defense of VoC stemmed from the widespread view that the non-central language system for language processing generates "structural descriptions" ("SDs"), metalinguistic representations of the syntactic and semantic properties of the expressions being processed. Rey's VoC proposes that *the CP has access to these SDs*. On the basis of the information they provide, the CP forms the speaker's intuitive judgments.

In response to this proposal, I made "two serious objections":

(I) *Why* should we suppose that the language system, in processing (1) ['John seems to Bill to want to help himself'], makes [an] SD of (1) available to the central processor? (II) Even if it did, how would the SD's information "fairly directly cause" the intuitions that are the concern of VoC? (2014a: 283)

---

[9] The methodological situation is worse in the philosophy of language. Thus, in the theory of reference, philosophers seem to rely on *nothing but* intuitions. According to Michael McKinsey, most philosophers of language think that such intuitions are a priori (1987: 1). However, some philosophers may implicitly embrace the more respectable VoC. On this, see Stich 1996, Devitt 2012. There has recently been a move toward testing theories of reference against usage: Domaneschi et al. 2017; Devitt and Porot 2018.

6

Concerning objection (I), I claimed that Rey cites "no evidence that the non-central language system provides SDs to the CP" (p. 287). But suppose that we did get some evidence. The proposal would still face objection (II). I argued that "those SDs would mostly not provide the informational content of speakers' intuitions. So Rey has not provided a respectable model of VoC" (p. 288).

An analogy with vision was central to Rey's argument for VoC. He takes the non-central vision system to deliver descriptions to the CP that are analogous to SDs and that provide the content of visual intuitions. I criticized a version of this analogy in *Ignorance* (2006a: 112-4). This led to an exchange (Rey 2006: 563-7; Devitt 2006c: 596 n. 25; Rey 2014: 253-4; Devitt 2014a: 281-2; see also, 2010b: 850-2, 854). I am not satisfied with my response.

I still think that comparison with the vision system – and, I might have added, with the audition system – does not support the idea that the language system provides SDs to the CP; indeed, the comparison supports the idea that it does not. But I should have emphasized that syntactic intuitions are *examples of*, rather than *analogous to*, perceptual intuitions; see section 3.[10] They are theory-laden perceptual judgments, reflecting past CP conceptualizing of experiences, just as are the intuitions of the paleontologist, the art expert, and Braden. The immediate causally relevant background for these linguistic perceptual judgments is *thought about* the language not *competence in* the language (although, of course, the competence will have provided data for those thoughts).

Rey makes many mentions of the vision analogy in his present discussion. I don't find anything there to change my negative view of the analogy and will say no more about it. I will attend instead to what Rey sees as advancing his 2014 case for VoC.

Gross' case for VoC focuses on the role of "error signals". My 2014 response to Rey yields a response to some of Gross' argument.

6. Intuitive Linguistic Usage versus Intuitive Metalinguistic Judgment (=Linguistic Intuition)

A certain distinction is crucial to identifying clearly the disagreement over VoC. The distinction is between linguistic intuitions and the processes of language use. The intuitions are *judgments* about linguistic expressions. These are quite different from the *behaviors* of producing and understanding those expressions. Those speedy, largely automatic, behaviors[11] might well be regarded as intuit*ive* but they are not judgments and hence not intuit*ions*. The distinction is crucial for two reasons. First, because it is the very nature of linguistic competence to play a direct role in causing those behaviors, whereas competence's causal role with intuitions is

---

[10] And I should have made much less of the analogy between visual intuitions about *what is seen* and linguistic intuitions about *what is said*; but that's another story.

[11] 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).

precisely what is at issue in the challenge to VoC. For, that issue is whether competence provides the propositional content of the intuitions *as well as* its obvious role in language use. Second, whereas the evidential status of the intuitions is controversial, the behaviors indubitably provide evidence about the language.[12] These behaviors are the "evidence from usage" that I emphasize in presenting ME (2014a: 271-2).

> In light of this, consider Rey's claim that

> there is a crucial difference between Devitt's and a Chomskyan conception of "intuitions": on Devitt's view, intuitive verdicts about a string are understood as straightforward *claims about the strings*…For Chomskyans…"[u]nacceptability reactions" need not be in the least self-conscious or meta-linguistic in the way they typically are for linguists and their reflective students. It would be enough that speakers simply produce *some* idiosyncratic reactions to various strings: hesitation, perplexity or just pupillary dilation would suffice as well. (##3)

Now I'm not sure what Rey sees as the "crucial difference" but let me emphasize what it is *not*. I very much agree with Rey that both sorts of "verdicts"/"reactions" are, and should be, used as evidence. But hesitation and the like provide evidence from *usage* not from intuitive *judgments* and so are not relevant to the disagreement over VoC.

> Next consider the following from Gross, repeating a line in Maynes and Gross 2013:

> Mentalists needn't commit themselves to the view that the language faculty itself outputs a state with the content *That string is unacceptable*. It can suffice that the parser fails to assign a structural description to the string and that the *absence* of a parse can in turn play a causal role in the process that leads the speaker to judge that the string is unacceptable. (##5)

(i) Right: mentalists *need not* commit to VoC. But, as a matter of fact, they *seem to* (sec. 2). And I suggest that they are *encouraged* to do so by their mentalism, by what I call their "psychological conception" of grammars (2014a: 273-4). (ii) The absence of a parse may indeed play a causal role in the process that leads to the intuition but that is accommodated by ME; see the role of an "understanding test" in section 3. So no disagreement.[13]

> Gross (##6) cites evidence that there is a monitoring mechanism that generates an "error signal" when presented with an ungrammatical string. He suggests that this "may play a causal role in the generation of a linguistic intuition (##8). Furthermore, the signal "may have

---

[12] Textor (2009) hankers after non-judgmental "linguistic seemings" that fall somewhere "in between" processing behavior and metalinguistic judgments and yet have epistemic authority; see also Fitzgerald (2010: 138); Smith (2014). I argue (2010a) that there are no such seemings.
[13] Gross thinks there is a disagreement (##4) because he thinks that Culbertson and Gross (2009) have shown that linguistic intuitions are not theory-laden in the way ME requires. I don't think they have shown this (2010b); Gross and Culbertson (2011) is a response.

associated phenomenology: a *felt sense* of badness, motivation, and/or norm-violation" (##8). This also fits nicely with ME: see the talk of "experience" in section 3. Again, no disagreement.

7. Rey's Bait and Switch

Ignorance discussed both sides of section 6's distinction. My rejection of VoC and embrace of ME is, of course, a thesis about the metalinguistic intuitions. That thesis is the "third major conclusion" of the book (2006a: 120). Many chapters later I *entertain* a thesis about the very different matter of the processes of language production and understanding:

> the speedy automatic language processes arising wholly or, at least, partly from linguistic competence are fairly brute-causal associationist processes that do not operate on metalinguistic representations of the syntactic and semantic properties of linguistic expressions. (2006a: 229)

This was not a "main conclusion" but rather a "tentative proposal". It was tentative because, I argued, we don't have nearly enough evidence about the workings of the mind to adopt it *or* its rival, the widespread Chomskian view that SDs are involved in processing. I summed up my attitude to the brute-causal alternative:

> The point is not, of course, to offer the alternative as a complete explanation of language use. Like the received view, it is far far too lacking in details for that. The point is rather to suggest that the best explanation is more likely to comply with the brute-causal alternative than the received view. And the considerations favoring the alternative are, it goes without saying, far from decisive. The…proposal really is tentative. (2006a: 221; see also p. 229)[14]

My proposal on this fascinating empirical issue was thirteen years ago. Perhaps if I examined the latest evidence I would change my view (but I doubt it). The important point here, however, is that *this processing issue is not what we are debating, and my tentative proposal about it plays no role at all in my argument against VoC*.

So, why do I raise the issue? Because although Rey promises to provide "evidence" for VoC that seems to him "to make it…empirically plausible" (##2), what he mostly provides is evidence for the widespread Chomskian view of processing and against my tentative proposal. His promise requires him to produce evidence that the SDs that he thinks play a role in processing *are also accessible to the CP and used to form intuitions*. What Rey delivers, time and again, is evidence that SDs do play a role in processing. Rey's case for VoC is largely a bait and switch.

This is very puzzling. (a) My argument against VoC in *Ignorance obviously* does not rest on my processing proposal; indeed, it precedes that proposal by more than a hundred pages. (b) I *could not* rest that argument on a "tentative proposal" given that the rejection of VoC is (part of) a confidently presented "main conclusion". At least, I could not if in right mind, (c) I started my

---

[14] David Pereplyotchik (2017) offers a detailed defense of the widespread view and criticism of my tentative proposal.

2014 exchange with Rey, described in section 5 above, by declaring that "I will go along with the widespread view [of processing] for the sake of argument" (2014a: 280). So my tentative proposal plays no role in my criticism of VoC in the 2014 exchange either. (d) Finally, I noted there that the evidence Rey cites in support of VoC "provides *no evidence at all* of what is needed: no evidence that the non-central language system provides SDs to the central processor" (2014a: 287). Rather, the cited evidence is for the aforementioned widespread view that processing involves SDs (2014a: 285-6). I was, in effect, accusing him of a bait and switch, Yet, despite all this, he's still baiting and switching.[15]

The bait and switch is very important to the dialectic. For, whereas Rey is on very weak ground in arguing for VoC, he is on quite strong ground (even though not strong enough!) in arguing for the widespread view of processing.

The first clear sign of the switch comes after Rey summarizes four problems, (A) to (D), that I raise in my "serious objection (I)" to Rey's VoC (2014a: 284-5). Rey responds by immediately (##8) drawing attention to my view that the literature on skills - such as catching a ball or playing a piano - "should make us doubt that language use involves representing syntactic and semantic properties; it makes such a view of language use seem too intellectualist" (2006a:221). I am there doubting - what Rey of course does not doubt - that language processing involves SDs. But *my doubt is irrelevant to the issue at hand*! For, my four problems are with Rey's view that *the language system provides SDs to the CP*, with Rey's view of *how* competence provides the content of intuitions. So *that* is the view that Rey needs to be arguing for. My discussion of Rey's VoC does not challenge the widespread view that SDs play a role in processing; indeed, I have explicitly gone along with the view that they do.

After a discussion of "non-conceptual content" - to be addressed in section 8 - the switch continues. My four problems are with Rey's VoC. Yet he responds to them by criticizing, at length (##9-11), my tentative proposal about processing. For example, he claims that I owe "*some* story about how the central processor could *recognize*, e.g., a word, a noun, verb, NP, VP, IP, so as to summon up the 'same sentence' in Mentalese" (##10). Indeed, I owe at least a favorable comparison of my proposal's handling of this recognition problem with its handling by the received view of processing that Rey likes. And I provide that comparison (2006a: 225). I'm sure it is not to Rey's liking, and he may be right: we have little basis for confidence on this processing issue. But what I am now emphasizing is that *these processing issues are beside the point of VoC*, which is what Rey presents himself as arguing for.

When Rey comes to provide "the evidence" for his VoC (##12-14), the focus is again on arguing about what is not at issue: that SDs are involved in parsing. Finally, consider Rey's "Conclusion". It begins: "It certainly appears that the evidence seriously favors (VoC) over [(ME)], at least for *some* standard phonological and syntactic properties". There's the bait, promising evidence that SDs delivered by competence provide intuitions about those properties. The switch follows immediately:

---

[15] Related to this, Rey's "summary" of ME's view of intuition formation - his "(Dev)" (##12) - is actually, until its final mention of "intuitive reports", an account of my proposal about language processing. It does not capture ME.

10

speakers can be intensely sensitive to phonological and syntactic properties independently of the "message" that might be conveyed by perceived speech –or might not be in the case of technical prose and syntactic nonsense! It is hard to see how this apparently perceptual sensitivity could be explained other than by presuming many standard phonological and syntactic properties are perceptually represented… (##14)

This might be evidence that SDs play a role in language processing. It is not evidence for VoC.

In sum, a great deal of Rey's paper is relevant to theories of language processing but simply irrelevant to VoC.[16] I turn now to the rest of the paper. I seek arguments that are *actually* for VoC (but passing over the frequent mentions of the vision analogy, which I am not discussing further).

8. Rey's Arguments for VoC

At this point we need to take account of a new feature of Rey's discussion of VoC: his emphasis on the distinction between "conceptual and non-conceptual content":

It seems pretty clear that Chomskyans are attributing non-conceptual content to the states of the I-language and associated systems, such as parsing….(let's call them "NCSDs")…The NCSDs *structure* our perception with relations like c-command and inaudible elements such as copies or PRO, (##8-9).

Rey charges me with overlooking the distinction he is here emphasizing (##abstract).[17]

First, he claims that two of the problems I raise "are easily met by invoking appeals to [NCSDs]" (##8). I wonder why he thinks so. These problems are part of my serious objection (I) to Rey's view that the CP has access to SDs which the speaker uses to form linguistic intuitions. Problem (A) is that ordinary speakers are not consciously aware of these SDs. Problem (B) is that it is hard to see how ordinary speakers could use SDs, given that it takes a few classes in syntax to understand them (2014a: 285). But taking SDs to be NCSDs *strengthens* the case that ordinary speakers are not aware of them and would not understand them if they were. The move to NCSDs seems to worsen the problem for VoC.

Later, Rey claims that my serious objection (II) "misconstrues the VoC proposal" in taking it to concern SDs with conceptual content (##11). In objection (II), I give reasons for thinking that even if SDs were available to the CP they could not "fairly directly cause" the intuitions (p. 287-8). Now it is true that I did not take Rey's proposal to be about NCSDs (even

---

[16] My tentative proposal would have been relevant to VoC had I argued, as I did not, that since the processing system does not use SDs it could not provide them to the CP.

[17] He also charges me, mysteriously, with overlooking the distinction between "a grammar and a parser". It's hard to think of anything more central to *Ignorance* than this and related distinctions; e.g. between the rules described by the grammar and the rules that govern parsing (2006a: 24-5).

though I agree with him that the plausible view of processing involves NCSDs). I did not do so because taking them that way makes objection (II) stronger: if SDs are not conceptual how could they provide the content of intuitions that are conceptual? Does *Rey* perhaps misconstrue VoC? More on this below.

Rey is strikingly unimpressed with objection (II). He quotes my argument that the allegedly presented SDs could not directly cause an intuition about an ungrammatical string and has two responses. (a) "It's enough that the perceiver in one way or another detects a difficulty in dealing with the material" (##11). But this is *not* enough for Rey's VoC. *Of course*, a detection of difficulty may play a causal role in an intuition (secs. 3, 6). And SDs may well play a causal role in the parser's difficulty and hence in the intuition. But VoC requires much more: that the SDs provide the intuition's content as a result of being presented to the CP. Indeed, if detection of difficulty were enough, VoC's requirement would be explanatorily otiose and should be abandoned in favor of ME (as I point out; 2014a: 287). (b) "In any case…there is a simple answer" to how NCSDs "would 'fairly direct cause' VoC intuitions: they would do so by serving as the representations on which intuitive judgments are causally, computationally and evidentially based" (## 11). But this is not an answer; it is just a pronouncement that VoC *can* answer. We need some idea of how this story is possible and some evidence that it is actual.

Finally, consider the following passage:

I shall be assuming that if some conscious (i.e., introspectible) perceptual task is sensitive to certain phenomena, that is a *prima facie* reason to suppose that phenomena is in some way (e.g., at least non-conceptually) available for intuitive verdicts. (##12)

There are surely countless conscious perceptual tasks that falsify this assumption; for example, an outfielder catching a fly ball is sensitive to the acceleration of the tangent of the angle of elevation of gaze: his behavior keeps the acceleration at 0 (McLeod and Dienes 1996: 531). Yet that phenomenon is surely not available to his intuitions! Indeed, I have claimed the opposite of Rey's assumption: the operation of the rules governing perceptual modules

may yield information that guides the module in arriving at its message to the central processor about what is perceived. Yet the central processor has direct access only to the message, not to any intermediate information involved in arriving at it. (2016a: 118)

When I last looked, this claim was supported by the psychology of skills (2006a: 210-20). Rey's assumption may be the crux of his case for VoC, yet it seems baseless.

In criticizing my view, Rey emphasizes that "it's virtually impossible to hear one's normally pronounced native language as mere noise". He continues:

Thus, just as visual SDs are the output of a visual one, linguistic SDs provide the input to (let us suppose) a central processing system, which then processes them in combination with other representations e.g., of the experimental context of an utterance to produce more or less spontaneous verdicts on what has been said (or, in the case of vision, seen). (##6)

The "thus" illustrates that Rey takes the indubitable "hearing-as" fact as somehow counting for VoC and against ME. But it does not. That fact is simply a sign of the effectiveness of our largely "automatic" language processing system. As I have pointed out, we hear a sentence *as* having certain 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" (2014a: 287).[18]

Rey notes this response (##12) and refers to an earlier criticism. In that criticism, Rey insists that it is *not* enough for the representation that we come up with to merely *have* those properties. For, something could have them without being

> *thereby* incorporated into a mind and *treated* as having those properties by any system in the mind, central or otherwise. They are certainly not *perceived* as having those properties. For that to happen, one would think the properties had better be *represented*, i.e. made available to presumably computational processes of, e.g., early vision, recognition, comparison and memory. (##9)

True enough, but not an objection! For, my proposal is that the properties *are* incorporated in the mind: they are incorporated in the sub-central processing system that delivers to the CP the representation that has the properties. And I'm going along with the view that these properties are indeed represented by SDs which are available to computational processes in that system. So Rey seems to have misunderstood the proposal. Furthermore, he has not addressed the critical point that follows it. We have no reason to believe that, in thus hearing the sentence, the CP *thereby has access* to the SDs and hence to the informational basis for intuitive judgments about its syntax. "Hearing an utterance in a certain way is one thing, judging that it has certain properties, another" (2014a: 287).[19] Hearing-as provides no support for VoC.

It's tempting to say that Rey's responses to the considerable difficulties facing VoC are reminiscent of the old comic book line: "With one bound, Jack was free".

But perhaps I have misunderstood Rey.[20] He claims to "defend…a version of what Michael Devitt…has called the "Voice of Competence" ("VoC") view" (##2) and seems to be doing so in, for example, describing metalinguistic intuitions as "manifestations of an I-language" (##4). But perhaps he is not really doing so. Gross thinks that Rey has dropped "the content requirement" of VoC that competence provides the propositional contents of intuitions (##6 n. 5). If so, Rey has dropped something essential to the VoC that I have attributed to

---

[18] Rey wrongly takes this as requiring that "the natural language sentences themselves are actually *entokened* at the interface between the language module and the central processor" (##9). It requires only that there be a representation of *some* sort with the appropriate features. (For my views about what sort, see 2006a: 142-62.)

[19] On one occasion, in a strange slip of the mind, I have written as if there were a direct route from hearing-as to intuition (2014b: 15).

[20] I thank an anonymous referee for raising this issue and Steven Gross and Georges Rey for comments.

linguists and rejected (sec. 3). I took Rey to hold that the CP "has access" to SDs (2014a) and he has not denied that he does. But perhaps, contrary to what I assumed, this "access" is not supposed to provide the intuition's content but simply to identify a reliable source of evidence for the intuition. But then he is defending a version of ME not VoC, and we have been at cross purposes.

9. Gross' Argument for VoC

As mentioned in section 6, Gross takes competence to play a role in causing intuitions about an ungrammatical string because it includes a monitoring system which generates "error signals", perhaps associated with a phenomenology (##7-8). I had no problem with this: it's an example of competence providing evidence from usage. But, as Gross well realizes, it does not get us to VoC. To get there it is necessary that these error signals be *representations that are presented to the CP and provide the contents of intuitions*. Gross claims that "it is a natural thought" that the signals indeed meet this "content requirement (##8-9).

I can be brief in response because my "serious objection (I)" to Rey's proposal (2014) carries straight over to this "natural thought". As I have emphasized here, Rey provided evidence of the role of representations, SDs, in sub-central language processing. But, I argued (2014a: 284-7), he did not provide evidence that the CP has access to these representations. Similarly, Gross provides evidence that language processing involves a monitoring system that provides error signals which may well be representations. But he provides no evidence that the CP has access to those representations. (Gross does not take account of my 2014 exchange with Rey.)

My "serious objection (II)" to Rey's proposal for an ungrammatical string was that even if the language system did provide an SD to the CP it would not thereby provide the informational content of a speaker's intuition, the content that the string is ungrammatical (unacceptable). For, the "SD does not come with a sign saying 'ungrammatical'" (2014a: 287). Rey agrees in the present paper (##11). Interestingly, Gross suggests that the language system delivers an error signal with a content that is indeed along the lines of *This string is unacceptable*. This could of course provide the intuition. But we have even less reason to believe that the language system outputs a representation with this content to the CP than an SD.

So we should reject Gross' VoC account of intuitions about ungrammatical strings. What does Gross say about our intuitions that a string is acceptable or, as I prefer to say (sec. 2), grammatical?

> There is an obvious asymmetry here. In such cases, there is presumably no error signal to play an etiological role, so the content of the intuition would not seem to be the content of some output of the language faculty. (##11)

Gross contemplates several possible answers: (i) the "*absence* [of error signals] leads to judgments of acceptability"; (ii) there is a "non-error" signal "with content to the effect that: *This string is acceptable*"; (iii) "the speaker's having comprehended what was said" causes the intuition (##11-12). In response, I note that only (ii) would meet VoC's content requirement.

14

Indeed, the roles that (i) and (iii) give to competence in causing intuitions fits ME nicely (sec. 3). And the problem with (ii) is, of course, that we have no reason to believe that competence does provide such a representational content.

Finally, Gross considers an intuition about co-reference. He claims that "the intuition amounts to little beyond comprehension - the content requirement is fulfilled and arguably the Voice of Competence is vindicated" (##13). Now I allowed that such intuitions are the most plausible ones for VoC (2014a: 287). Thus, suppose speakers are presented with our example

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

and asked, "Who does John think that Bill wants to help?" Almost all speakers will answer "Bill" thus providing evidence that 'himself' must co-refer with 'Bill'. This evidence from usage is provided simply by the speakers' linguistic competence. And, as Gross in effect points out (##14 n. 13), it is only a short step from such an answer to the metalinguistic intuition expressed by answering "'Bill'" to the question "Which name does 'himself' co-refer with?".[21] Still, it is a step: competence does not provide the concept of *coreference* and so not the content of the intuition. Still, we should resist Gross' claim.

10. Conclusion

Gross presents his VoC cautiously: his "speculation deploys a fair number of 'maybe's and 'perhaps's" (##16). Rey's presentation is similarly cautious: his claim is not that "the model is *true*" (##2), just that it is "scientifically reasonable" (##14). I don't think that either Gross or Rey have supplied the sort of empirically based details that make VoC worth pursuing. Aside from that, what is the theoretical motivation for their VoCs, each requiring the positing of novel and dubious cognitive states and processes? ME seems to do the explanatory work without this novelty. Neither Gross not Rey have attempted to show that ME does not do this work. Occam favors ME.

REFERENCES

Anderson, John R. 1980. *Cognitive Psychology and its Implications*. San Francisco: W. H. Freeman and Company.
Collins, John. 2006. "Between a Rock and a Hard Place: A Dialogue on the Philosophy and Methodology of Generative Linguistics", *Croatian Journal of Philosophy* VI: 469-503.
___. 2008. "Knowledge of Language Redux". *Croatian Journal of Philosophy* VIII: 3-43.
Culbertson, Jennifer, and Steven Gross. 2009. "Are linguists better subjects?" *British Journal for the Philosophy of Science* 60: 721-36.
Devitt, Michael. 2006a. *Ignorance of Language*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.
___. 2006b. "Intuitions in Linguistics". *British Journal for the Philosophy of Science* 57: 481-513.
___. 2006c. "Defending *Ignorance of Language*: Responses to the Dubrovnik papers". *Croatian Journal of Philosophy* VI: 571-606.

---

[21] The step would seem particularly short if 'refer' were like 'true' in having a purely "expressive" role. But I rather doubt that it is (Devitt and Porot 2018: 1564-1565).

___. 2008. "Methodology in the Philosophy of Linguistics". *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 86: 671-84.

___. 2010a. "What 'Intuitions' are Linguistic Evidence?" *Erkenntnis* 73: 251-64.

___. 2010b. "Linguistic Intuitions Revisited". *British Journal for the Philosophy of Science* 61: 833-65.

___. 2011. "Whither Experimental Semantics?" *Theoria* 72 (2011): 5-36.

___. 2012. "The Role of Intuitions". In *Routledge Companion to the Philosophy of Language*, eds. Gillian Russell and Delia Graf Fara. New York: Routledge: 554-65.

___. 2014a. "Linguistic Intuitions are not 'the Voice of Competence'". In Haug 2014: 268-93.

___. 2014b. "Linguistic Intuitions: In Defense of 'Ordinarism'". *European Journal of Analytic Philosophy* 10 (2): 7-20.

___. 2015. "Testing Theories of Reference". In *Advances in Experimental Philosophy of Language*, ed. Jussi Haukioja. Bloomsbury Academic: 31-63.

___. 2018. "Intuitions: Rijeka Response to Nenad Miščević". *Croatian Journal of Philosophy* XVII (53): 277-82.

___, and Nicolas Porot. 2018. "The Reference of Proper Names: Testing Usage and Intuitions". *Cognitive Science* (2018), pp. 1552-1585. doi.org/10.1111/cogs.12609

Domaneschi F., Vignolo M., Di Paola S. (2017). Testing the Causal Theory of Reference, *Cognition*, 161, 1-9.

Fitzgerald, Gareth. 2010. "Linguistic Intuitions". *British Journal for the Philosophy of Science* 61: 123-60.

Fodor, Jerry A. 1983. *The Modularity of Mind: An Essay on Faculty Psychology*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.

Gross, Steven, and Jennifer Culbertson. 2011. "Revisited Linguistic Intuitions". *British Journal for the Philosophy of Science* 62: 639-56.

Haug, Matthew, ed. 2014. *Philosophical Methodology: The Armchair or the Laboratory?* London: Routledge.

Jutronić, Dunja. 2012. Je li jezična sposobnot izvor jezičnih intuicija (Is languge competence the source of linguistic intuitions). In *Nenad Miščević - Sva lica filozofije (Nenad Miščević – all faces of philosophy)*, eds. Prijić-Samaržija, Snježana & Petar Bojanić. Beograd: Institut za filozofiju i društvenu teoriju. 129-143.

___.. 2014. "Which are the Data that Competence Provides for Linguistic Intuitions?". *European Journal of Analytic Philosophy* 10 (2): 119-43.

___. 2018. "Intuitions Once Again! Object-level vs. Meta-level". *Croatian Journal of Philosophy* XVII (53): 283-91.

Ludlow, Peter. 2011. *The Philosophy of Generative Linguistics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

McKinsey, Michael. 1987. "Apriorism in the Philosophy of Language". *Philosophical Studies* 52: 1-32.

McLeod, Peter, and Zoltan Dienes. 1996. "Do Fielders Know Where to Go to Catch the Ball or Only How to Get There?" *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Human Perception and Performance* 22: 531-43.

Matthews, Robert J. 2006. "Could Competent Speakers Really Be Ignorant of Their Language?" *Croatian Journal of Philosophy* VI: 457-67.

Maynes, Jeffrey, and Steven Gross. 2013. "Linguistic Intuitions". *Philosophy Compass* 8/8: 714–30.

Miščević. Nenad. 2006. "Intuitions: The Discrete Voice of Competence". *Croatian Journal of Philosophy* VI: 523-548.

___. 2009. "Competent Voices: A Theory of Intuitions". http://oddelki.ff.uni-mb.si/filozofija/en/festschrift

___. 2012. "Odgovor Dunja Jutronić (Answer to Dunja Jutronić)". In *Nenad Miščević – sva lica filozofije (Nenad Miščević – all faces of philosophy),* eds. Prijić-Samaržija, Snježana & Petar Bojanić. Beograd: Institut za filozofiju i društvenu teoriju. 194-198.

___. 2014a. "Reply to Michael Devitt". *European Journal of Analytic Philosophy* 10 (2): 21-30.

___. 2014b. "Reply to Dunja Jutronić". *European Journal of Analytic Philosophy* 10 (2): 145-53.

___. 2018. "Intuitions: Epistemology and Metaphysics of Language". *Croatian Journal of Philosophy* XVII (53): 253-76.

Pereplyotchik, David. 2017. *Psychosyntax: The Nature of Grammar and Its Place in the Mind*, Springer.

Pietroski, Paul. 2008. "Think of the Children". *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 86: 657-69.

Rattan, Gurpreet. 2006. "The Knowledge in Language". *Croatian Journal of Philosophy* VI: 505-21.

Reisberg, Daniel. 1999. "Learning". In *The MIT Encyclopedia of the Cognitive Sciences*, eds. Robert A. Wilson and Frank C. Keil. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press: 460-1.

Rey, Georges. 1998. "A Naturalistic A Priori". *Philosophical Studies* 92: 25-43.

___. 2006. "Conventions, Intuitions and Linguistic Inexistents: A Reply to Devitt". *Croatian Journal of Philosophy* VI: 549-69.

___. 2014. "The Possibility of a Naturalistic Cartesianism Regarding Intuitions and Introspection". In Haug 2014: 243-67.

Smith, Barry C. 2006. "Why We Still Need Knowledge of Language". *Croatian Journal of Philosophy* VI: 431-56.

___. 2014. "Philosophical and Empirical Approaches to Language". In Haug 2014: 294-317.

Stich, Stephen P. 1996. *Deconstructing the Mind*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Textor, Mark. 2009. "Devitt on the Epistemic Authority of Linguistic Intuitions". *Erkenntnis* 71: 395-405.

Wasow, Thomas, and Jennifer Arnold. 2005. "Intuitions in Linguistic Argumentation". *Lingua* 115: 1481–1496