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# *On the Possibility of a Solitary Language\**

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Imagine a man who, unlike the familiar Robinson Crusoe, has lived all his life on a desert island, with no other people around him, and hence no one with whom to communicate or from whom he could learn a language. (We may suppose him left on the island soon after he was born.) Call this man ‘Super-Crusoe’.<sup>1</sup> Can we conceive of Super-Crusoe as developing a language in which he describes his environment, poses himself questions and answers them, maybe gives himself orders? Such a language would differ from the natural languages we know in that, as a matter of fact, no one besides Super-Crusoe would have ever spoken it. His would be a *solitary language* (spoken—and developed—by a single individual), in contrast with a *social language* (spoken by a linguistic community). And it also would differ from a so-called *private language*<sup>2</sup> (the opposite of a *public language*), in that the words in the solitary speaker’s language are not supposed to refer, in the first instance, to essentially private sensations.

With a very few exceptions, discussions of the possibility of a solitary language have made it inextricably linked with the possibility of a private language. It has been generally assumed<sup>3</sup> that the two possibilities stand or fall together. As I will indicate briefly in the first section, I believe this conflation is mistaken.<sup>4</sup> My main aim in this paper will be to spell out what is specifically involved in conceiving of a solitary individual developing a language and to articulate some difficulties that are independent of Wittgensteinian considerations about privacy.<sup>5</sup>

## **(1) Could There Be A Solitary Language—the Question**

What is involved in conceiving of Super-Crusoe as developing a language which no one else (yet) shares? Presumably, we should be able to think of Super-Crusoe as coming, somehow, to possess a system of signs which he regularly employs, for various purposes, and which he has, somehow, invested with meanings. But we are *not* trying to conceive of Super-Crusoe as setting up a language in which he could talk about ‘essentially private objects’. Super-Crusoe’s mean-

ingful signs are supposed to apply, in the first instance, to external, publicly recognizable objects and features. So, at least on the face of it, Wittgenstein's private diarist and our Super-Crusoe are in entirely different predicaments. Whereas a private language, if it were possible, would be in principle unintelligible to others, a solitary language, if it were possible, should be in principle sharable by many speakers.

But the differences run deeper. The private diarist of *Philosophical Investigations* #258 is already a proficient user of linguistic signs asking whether he could set up a new sign—or even system of signs—to stand for his private sensations. On one plausible reading, the passages traditionally called the 'Private Language Argument' pose a dilemma. Either the diarist could not manage to set up a practice involving marks like 'S' and his private sensations which would qualify as a language, or the language he manages to set up would not be private—it would be parasitic upon the diarist's public language. What is supposed to be impossible, then, is the combination of the truly private and the linguistic.<sup>6</sup>

The second horn of the dilemma is clearly not relevant to Super-Crusoe's case, since his project is *not* that of developing a language unintelligible to anyone but him. On the other hand, the first horn of the dilemma depends, I believe (though I shall not argue this here) on special assumptions regarding the putative referents of the diarist's signs. Given these assumptions, it is argued that a private speaker could not fail (even in principle) to apply terms of his language correctly. Whatever seems right to him will be right. "And that only means that here we can't talk about 'right' " (Wittgenstein 1958: #258). If this is so, then a Wittgensteinian argument showing that a language designed to talk about truly private sensations is impossible would not offer any direct support for the claim that an actual multiplicity of speakers is necessary to set up any system of signs, even one whose intended referents are ordinary, publicly observable objects.

Which brings us back to our Super-Crusoe. No special assumptions are being made regarding the putative referents of Super-Crusoe's signs. Our question is whether, nonetheless, Super-Crusoe could come to employ certain sounds or marks to which the notion of linguistic correctness applies. And why not? Why should the *de facto* absence of other speakers prevent Super-Crusoe from coming to use signs so as, for instance, to describe (correctly or incorrectly) his environment?

Of course, there has been no one around to teach Super-Crusoe a language, or from whom he could learn it. This may make it psychologically impossible for Super-Crusoe to develop a language.<sup>7</sup> But further argument would be needed to show that there is any more interesting, principled difficulty with the idea that he could do so. Below, I wish to focus on the following question:

How can we *make sense* of Super-Crusoe's coming to employ signs with particular meanings?

Insofar as an answer to this question may reveal something significant about our concept of language, we may dub it the "conceptual question" regarding the pos-

sibility of solitary language. An adequate answer to this question should come in the form of a plausible, if fictitious story outlining a route Super-Crusoe might take to language, given that the normal route is unavailable to him. I am not concerned with the logical question, of whether there is a contradiction in the idea of a solitary individual becoming a language speaker. I shall assume there is none. I also want to set aside epistemological questions such as, How could we *tell* whether he has got a language like ours? or, What would justify us in ascribing a language to him?. Finally, since I believe that the solitary language issue loses special interest when one adopts a very general skepticism about meaning of the sort Kripke (1982) finds in Wittgenstein,<sup>8</sup> I shall prescind from such skepticism.

## (2) What Might Be Wrong with a Solitary Language?

In English, the plural is usually formed by adding an 's' to the singular. A simple declarative sentence usually cannot begin with a verb. The combination of words 'Milk me sugar' would ordinarily make no sense.<sup>9</sup> 'Good night!' is normally used at the end of a conversation, not at its beginning. Burrowing animals with long ears, a small nose and a short funny tail are called 'rabbits'. 'Can you pass the salt?' is ordinarily a request to pass the salt.

This offers a small mixed bag of grammatical, semantic and pragmatic norms by reference to which the linguistic performances of individual English speakers can be assessed as correct or incorrect. A speaker who calls a dog a "deer", who uses the wrong word order, who asks to be given "three pencil", and so on, is not like a speaker who uses an obsolete word, or a rarely employed grammatical construction. Though both deviate from certain statistical regularities in the use of words, the former, but not the latter, is subject to criticism; hers is a linguistic mistake. It is a matter of some interest that we are rarely prepared to forego our linguistic criticisms of individual speakers and to replace them by attributions of idiosyncratic linguistic norms.<sup>10</sup>

Normally, when we criticize a speaker's particular uses of linguistic signs as being incorrect, we make tacit appeal to the norms of her linguistic community. It seems unexceptionable to think of linguistic norms as, in some sense, the product of—or supervening on—the activities of speakers.<sup>11</sup> Partly for this reason, they have been compared to rules of a game like the rules of chess. The comparison is somewhat misleading, for unlike the rules of chess, the norms of social languages are not invented by communities of speakers. But at least this much seems true: it would be as strange to say of a whole linguistic community that it has accepted—or always applied—the wrong linguistic norm as it is say of an inventor of a game that she has made up the wrong rules for the game. Whereas we can perfectly straightforwardly say this of an individual speaker within a community.

The point is most easily seen in connection with phonological and syntactic norms. It seems to make little sense to say that a certain spoken English word, say "elephant", has *always* been mispronounced by all (or even most) English

speakers; it seems to make equally little sense to say that English speakers have always used the wrong word order or extracted a relative clause in the wrong way, etc. But a parallel point can be made about semantic norms, the more relevant ones for our present concerns. Can we sensibly say that English speakers have *always* misunderstood, or misused, say, the word “chair” (or “horse”, or “therefore”, or what have you)?<sup>12</sup> Suppose, due to some cosmic happening, the English speaking community suddenly came to think the sentence “Go to hell!” meant what the sentence “Watch your step” now means. Wouldn’t the sentence thereby come to have that meaning? Or, if all English speakers somehow came to think the word “water” means what the word “gold” now means, wouldn’t “water” come to have that meaning?

The point can be put by saying that a linguistic community has an authority over its linguistic norms which individuals within the community lack. This is not to say, for instance, that what is collectively ‘in the heads’ of the speakers of a language—in the sense of a set of associated necessary and sufficient—determines the extensions of their terms. Thus, so far as I can see, one can accept the point about community authority without doing injustice to the intuitions that have motivated the now popular Casual Theory of reference.<sup>13</sup> I believe the point can also be accepted by someone who, like Tyler Burge (see 1986), wishes to reject the “conventionalist” doctrine (often attributed to Wittgenstein) that community authority yields certain truths ‘in virtue of meaning alone’, which truths an individual can only reject or doubt at the price of being charged with changing the meaning of terms, or lacking relevant concepts.

The claim about community authority as I see it pertains to truths *about* meaning, rather than to truths in virtue of meaning, and thus need not betray commitment to any objectionable doctrine of analyticity. Very briefly, the community does not, in general, have authority over whether or not any particular statement is true (e.g., that gold is a soft yellow metal, or that sofas are pieces of furniture). So an individual may well be in a position to challenge any community-wide belief without ‘opting out’ of linguistic cooperation, *pace* conventionalism. But the community does have authority which individual speakers within it lack over what particular words and statements mean in the community’s language, as well as about phonological and syntactic norms. We can see this authority as stemming from (though not simply exhausted by) the fact that it is aspects of the whole community’s history, habits, practices, environment etc.—and not any single individual’s—which determine truths about meaning.<sup>14</sup> The authority in question is directly reflected in the contrast between an individual speaker coming to think “water” means what “gold” now means and the whole community’s coming to think that. In this sense—but only in this sense—we can claim that right and wrong in the linguistic performances of individuals is, ultimately, what their linguistic community would count as right and wrong.

Now consider our Super-Crusoe. By hypothesis, there *is* no language he could be said to speak prior to—or independently of—his own activities. If there are to

be norms governing his use of signs, they would have to be *his* norms. So right and wrong in Super-Crusoe's linguistic performances must be what he himself would, ultimately, count as right and wrong. This may tempt one to argue that it is not possible for him to make mistakes in uses of his signs. If he is so inclined, on an occasion, to call something "gabi" (supposing this to be a term of his putative language), well then, what could make this linguistic performance mistaken? Why wouldn't his inclination in this instance to call the thing "gabi" simply serve further to determine to what things the term "gabi" correctly applies?<sup>15</sup> But, then, can we not after all say of a solitary speaker what has been said of the putative private speaker, namely, that whatever *seems* right to him *is* right? And doesn't that mean that we cannot speak of right and wrong here either?

This is too hasty. Super-Crusoe would indeed enjoy a certain kind of linguistic autonomy: it is his (and no one else's) activities that would determine the norms governing his uses of linguistic signs. But unless we can argue that a solitary individual's activities could not determine linguistic norms, Super-Crusoe's linguistic autonomy should not stand in the way of his being capable, in principle, of going wrong in his particular applications of linguistic signs. (For all we have said, perhaps he could even, on occasion, be wrong about the relevant norm governing the use of particular signs, or combinations thereof). So our question becomes this:

Can we tell a plausible story showing Super-Crusoe capable of somehow developing standards by reference to which his particular linguistic performances could be evaluated as correct or incorrect?

### (3) Super-Crusoe and Teleology

I take it that proponents of solitary language are not proposing that someone like Super-Crusoe might up and invent a language the way one of us might up and invent a new game. Rather, the idea is that Super-Crusoe might gradually come to employ signs in such a way that it would make sense to speak of his uses of those signs as being linguistically correct or incorrect. I shall now consider a naive scenario which is intended to give sense to this idea. The scenario receives a brief statement by Ayer (1968). Ayer considers an individual like our Super-Crusoe, and says, "He will certainly be able to recognize many things upon the island, in the sense that he adapts his behaviour to them. Is it inconceivable that he should also name them?" (p. 259). Surely, Ayer thinks, someone like Super-Crusoe "could invent words to describe the flora and fauna of his island." (*ibid.*) This is all Ayer tells us by way of making sense of the possibility of a solitary language.<sup>16</sup> In what follows, I will try to fill out the story Ayer and other proponents of solitary language may have in mind. I shall refer to the story as the "evolutionary scenario".

What Ayer and others suggest all too briefly is that nature might exert various pressures on Super-Crusoe to mark regularities in his environment. For instance,

he might discover a connection between eating a certain kind of berries and suffering a severe skin-rash and then have a reason to mark the poisonous fruits, perhaps by attaching pieces of red string next to the bad berries, blue strings next to the good ones. But then he would have developed techniques involving marks for getting on better in his environment, which could succeed or fail. In time, we are to think, Super-Crusoe could come to possess a mini-science of his environment encoded in a notational system which serves as an instrument for avoiding trouble and gaining better control over his surroundings. Since Super-Crusoe's use of this instrument could succeed or fail, it seems that we already have an objective difference between his going right and his going wrong with his use of marks. Unlike the putative speaker of a private language, it is not the case that what will seem right to Super-Crusoe will be right. Could we not give sense along these lines to the idea of our Super-Crusoe coming to have at least descriptive language?

As a preliminary, let us consider the following case. Suppose, after various attempts to bring down apples from tall trees in my yard, I arrive at the following routine: I look for a long stick, pick it up, then gently hit the apple near its base, etc. My steps can be evaluated as good or bad, depending on how successful they are. We have here a clear element of what I shall call "teleological normativity". Teleological normativity abounds: there is right and wrong about how to build a boat, how to bake a torte, how best to attract someone's attention at some given moment. Teleological normativity is not restricted to intentional purposeful actions: there is right and wrong about how to build a decent nest, which direction to swim in when winter comes (remember poor Humphrey the Californian whale), and so on.

Once a technique for achieving a given purpose is established (by natural design or by conscious habit), we can distinguish between cases in which the technique has been followed and cases in which it has not, independently of whether the desired overall result has been successfully achieved. Having noticed that using sticks in the above way works quite well in getting me apples, I may actually decide to stick to my routine. If I then do not follow the steps, but nevertheless manage to bring an apple down, there is still a clear sense in which, despite my success, I have failed: for I didn't do what I had decided or intended to do. Thus, we can distinguish two kinds of success and failure. There is success or failure in achieving a set goal, and there is success or failure in following a chosen routine. I shall speak of *both* kinds of success and failure as teleological success and failure. For in both types of cases evaluation involves norms which make essential reference to the purpose of the activity. (We can think of a norm as a standard by reference to which actions can be judged as ideal, correct or incorrect, required or prohibited—something whose function is to regulate and/or evaluate action or behavior. Legal rights, a carpenter's square, yardsticks, industrial regulations, paint chips, traffic laws, role models, rules of etiquette, are all examples of norms.<sup>17</sup> *Teleological* norms, then, set standards for purposive

behavior and actions; they allow us to evaluate means *given* a specific, pre-existing end.)

Now, Super-Crusoe can surely desire to get apples down from a tree, and can discover various means of doing so. This would require of him no more than what most of us believe higher animals can do.<sup>18</sup> Being human, he can probably do even better. He can notice steps he has taken and make a point of adhering to the steps themselves, because of their usefulness, or perhaps just because it amuses him. He could then fail—and notice he has failed—to follow a routine (or employ a technique) which he has come to favor. Thus, there should be no special difficulty in thinking Super-Crusoe capable of discovering and adopting a wide variety of teleological norms.

#### (4) Linguistic Normativity

Super-Crusoe's string-using activity, we have conceded, could become governed by teleological norms. But this does not yet guarantee that it can be governed by linguistic norms. The naive scenario, I believe, trades on the idea that there is a smooth transition from teleological normativity to linguistic normativity. The idea is tempting, but problematic. This is because the 'logic' of teleological norms is different from that of linguistic norms. Linguistic success and failure is not, on the face of it, success or failure in doing what works, or in achieving one's purposes. A teleological failure, we saw, is a failure to do what the activity or action was designed to do, by nature or by intention. It is an agent's failure to adjust the world to suit some given plan or purpose. The intended 'direction of fit' (to borrow a phrase from Anscombe (1959)) is here from the world to the activity or action. But at least in the semantic case,<sup>19</sup> we have the opposite 'direction of fit'. For instance, the failure involved in calling a dog "deer" would be a failure to fit your utterance to the world. Such failures, unlike teleological failures, are not assessed by reference to what their use is supposed to get for the user.<sup>20</sup> In the first instance, linguistic norms, like norms governing some games, do not seem to be norms governing the achievement of purposes which exist prior to, and independently of, the norms.<sup>21</sup>

Super-Crusoe, we have said, can fail to achieve the purpose which his use of colored strings was designed to achieve. But our question is whether he can fail the way the person who calls a dog a "deer" has failed. Here we can distinguish (at least) the following three species of error, based on the source of the error:

(a) 'recognitional errors': thinking of some dog that it is a deer, and calling it "deer". Such mistakes can in principle be recognized (and corrected) by the speaker herself on the spot (she can think better of it, on a second look, for instance);<sup>22</sup>

(b) 'performance errors': using the word "deer" to talk about some dog due to a slip of the tongue, or mental 'cross-wiring'. Again, a speaker can in principle recognize (and correct) such mistakes on her own on the spot.

(c) ‘meaning errors’ (thinking the word “deer” would correctly apply to (at least a certain type of) dogs, as well as to deer, and calling some dog “deer”). Unlike the previous two kinds of mistakes, recognition (and correction) of mistakes about the meaning of a term in a public language typically require the assistance of other competent speakers, or at least further observation of their uses of the term.<sup>23</sup>

Notice that the possibility of both recognitional and performance errors presupposes the possibility of meaning errors, because it requires that the word “deer” have a specific meaning—that it be correctly and literally applicable only to deers, and not to dogs. Calling what is in fact a dog a “deer” may be blameless in many ways, and may even on particular occasions achieve whatever extra-linguistic purpose the speaker had in using the word “deer” (e.g., draw the audience’s attention to the ‘right’ object, get the audience to have the ‘right’ belief). But it still represents a semantic failure. A particular application of “deer” to a dog ‘misfits’ the world. (Whereas in the case of a teleological failure, it is the world that misfits the performance.<sup>24</sup>)

Back to Super-Crusoe. *If* he could have a sign meaning *deer*, he could make recognitional mistakes, as well as performance mistakes. But, given that at least in a public language, the recognition and correction of meaning mistakes seem to require assistance from other speakers, it seems in order to ask whether Super-Crusoe, being on his own, is nevertheless capable of making such mistakes. And this depends on whether he can come to use signs with particular meanings (say, the meaning we associate with, e.g., “berries”, or even with “Edibles here!”, or whatever).

If Super-Crusoe’s blue string is to have the particular meaning of, say, *good berries*, there ought to be a sharp contrast between the case in which he puts up a blue string next to bad berries, later eats them, and gets a skin-rash and the case in which he puts up a blue string next to the edible berries and still gets a rash (because nature has betrayed him). Yet, from the teleological point of view—from the point of view of his purpose in putting up strings—the two failures are indistinguishable. Clearly, bringing in the purpose behind putting up the strings cannot suffice to allow us to make sense of the idea of particular applications of the strings being linguistically correct or incorrect. For, whether or not bad berries are the wrong things to attach the blue strings to, linguistically speaking, does not depend on the purpose or outcome of using the strings. Nor can it depend simply on what sorts of things Super-Crusoe is disposed to mark by blue and red strings. Rather, it depends on what the strings are *supposed to* apply to.

We may be helped here if we think about the following example. Consider some nest-building bird, an individual sparrow. There are various ways in which the sparrow could fail to build a structure capable of holding sparrow-eggs and later sheltering little sparrow-babies. To minimize such failures, Mother Nature has kindly set up in sparrows a rigid inborn technique. Suppose now that our sparrow deviates from this technique, but still manages to build a perfectly

functional nest. Despite this teleological success, we might say: "Look, that sparrow did it all wrong!", and with perfect sense. For, our sparrow has failed to do what she was supposed to in building the nest. In saying this, we are tacitly appealing to a biological norm, which norm applies to the individual biological organism *in virtue of its membership in whole groups of similar organisms*.<sup>25</sup> The sparrow's being supposed to build the nest a certain way is a matter of how sparrows build nests (how they are programmed by nature to do so).

Now, it may be argued that all biological norms are teleological in nature. So we could only evaluate the sparrow's deviation as wrong if we thought such deviations could, in the long run, be damaging to sparrows—only if we thought it in general good for sparrows to abide by the relevant norms. Let me grant that, and point out that in our story about Super-Crusoe so far, we do not even have a norm of the sort that governs the sparrow's nest-building steps. Insofar as we agree that such norms require appeal to the behavior, environment and history of a community of nest-building sparrows, we can see that norms of this kind cannot govern Super-Crusoe's marking activity. For, by hypothesis, there is no community of string-users of whom Super-Crusoe is a member.

#### (5) Intentions, intentions...

I think the naive scenario may seem convincing because it trades on a tacit assumption that Super-Crusoe's goal was from the outset not merely to avoid bad berries so as to avoid skin-rashes, but to avoid the bad berries *by marking them with red strings*. This requires ascribing him the specific (intermediary) goal of *marking bad berries with red strings*. But marking bad berries with red strings is not simply having a way of telling apart good from bad berries. And having some way of telling two kinds of things apart (which is something animals undoubtedly have) does not amount to being able to mark the two kinds of things in the relevant, linguistic sense. To assume as does the naive scenario that Super-Crusoe has the goal of marking bad berries with red strings, is to assume that he takes interest not only in avoiding the bad berries, but also in doing it in a particular way—by attaching to them red strings. But this requires him to know already what it is to use red string to mark bad berries, as opposed to, say, good ones. And that assumes tacitly—and question-beggingly—that we have already made sense of his having apprehended what it is for there to be a specific way red strings are supposed to be applied.

Applying the lesson from the sparrow case, perhaps we can make some progress, if we press the question how Super-Crusoe might develop standards for how red strings, or any other mark, are supposed to be used—how red strings might become his standard means for avoiding bad berries. For this is what the naive scenario so far seems to be missing.

Suppose food is scarce in Super-Crusoe's vicinity, and there are just two bushes, which look very similar to him, one bearing good berries, the other bearing bad ones. Suppose next that one day he notices a bird hovering by one of

the bushes. The bird eats some berries and then drops dead. Something happened. Nature has set up a new correlation in front of his eyes; one which he can exploit. Returning the next day and noticing the dead bird again, he could be reminded of the previous day's events and be driven away from the bad bush. At least until it rots away, or gets eaten, the dead bird could signal for Super-Crusoe the presence of bad berries. Given the event Super-Crusoe has witnessed, the bird can become like a natural sign for bad berries; a sign possessing—at least for Super-Crusoe—what Grice (1967) has called “natural meaning”. And he could gradually come to use the presence of dead birds (and maybe of other dead animals) as a warning against touching the food substances in their immediate vicinity. Then, if on a particular occasion he were to ignore the dead bird and eat the bad berries, it would make sense to say he did something wrong, even if he escapes the bad consequences. For he would be deviating from an adopted technique.

What makes the dead bird like a natural sign is the fact that there is a natural, causal relation between the presence of the dead bird and what it signals—Super-Crusoe had nothing to do with setting up the signalling relation. It is only the fact that Super-Crusoe was there when the relation was manifested that enables him to use the dead bird's presence as a means for avoiding the bad berries. But we can compare the way the dead bird functions to get Super-Crusoe away from the bad berries with the way that a barrier he might build around the bush would work to the same end. The barrier would be his intentional doing—there would be no natural relation between its presence and the presence of bad berries. Still, there would be a natural, causal relation between its presence and the fulfillment of the intention with which it was built. The barrier would simply function to block (or make difficult) Super-Crusoe's access to the bad berries. Though both the dead bird and the barrier could become Super-Crusoe's standard means for avoiding bad berries, I don't think either would be properly described as something like *a linguistic sign for bad berries* (not even as *Super-Crusoe's sign for bad berries*). This is because there is no sense in which either is supposed to apply to bad berries or to anything.

But, you might think, we are now on our way to seeing how Super-Crusoe could make it the case that a mark should be supposed to apply to bad berries. Suppose that, upon noticing the dead bird's gradual decay, Super-Crusoe removes a feather from the bird's remains and ties it to one of the bush's branches, intending to use it instead of the bird so as to keep avoiding the berries. Like building the barrier, tying the feather to the bush is intended to keep him away from the bush. But unlike the barrier, it is not intended to do so by simply blocking his access to the bush. Rather, the feather is supposed to function as a *reminder* of the presence of bad berries. Natural signs like the dead bird involve no one's intentions, but they do seem to signal, or indicate something. The barrier, on the other hand, involves someone's intention but does not directly indicate, convey or signal anything. Reminders seem both to involve intentions and to convey something to the person being reminded.

Knots in handkerchiefs provide a good example of reminders. But, typically, people who tie knots in their handkerchief (or anything equivalent), associate with it a kind of 'generic' message, something like: "Try to remember something important". *What* they ought to remember is typically to be figured out contextually, and not a matter of what the knot is supposed to mean. Super-Crusoe's feather is not generic the way handkerchief knots usually are, for the simple reason that we imagine him stumbling upon the idea of using it as a reminder for the first time. On that first time, it is meant to convey to him a rather specific message, regarding the presence of the bad berry bush. But how exactly is the feather-reminder supposed to work?

A Gricean proposal invites itself. In "Meaning", Paul Grice suggested that the difference between signs with natural meaning, like the dead bird, and signs with the kind of meaning we take natural language expressions to have (what he called "non-natural meaning"), lies in the absence or presence (respectively) of a special kind of communicative intention on the part of the sign user. At the heart of the original Gricean analysis is a '*reflexive*' communicative intention. The user of an indicative sign must intend not only to induce a certain belief in the audience; she must also intend that the belief be induced via the audience's recognition of her first intention to induce in them that belief.

The Gricean proposal has seemed highly implausible to many as an account of ordinary language use. But I believe it gains plausibility when interpreted as a kind of 'rational reconstruction' of the emergence of linguistic meaning where none is around.<sup>26</sup> This is precisely Super-Crusoe's predicament. And that is why I think the Gricean proposal seems so tempting in the present context.

Now, Grice has insisted that when the '*reflexive*' intention is irrelevant to—or not needed for—the production of the relevant belief in the audience, we don't have non-natural meaning. To have the non-natural meaning *That's a bad bush*, a sign must offer an audience *intention-dependent evidence*<sup>27</sup> that that is a bad bush. Where the evidence offered is 'intention-free', or where the reflexive intention is idle, we may well simply have a case of reliance on natural meaning or on some causal mechanism of inducing the belief.<sup>28</sup>

Applied to our solitary case, the Gricean account would require that Super-Crusoe should tie the feather to the bush with the following complex intention. He must intend to induce in his future self the belief that that's a (the) bad bush, and, further, to remember that very intention. To form that intention, it is not enough for him to be able to think of his future behavior, and intend to affect it in a certain way. He must also be able to think of his future recognition and memory of a present belief and intention. Could the prelinguistic Super-Crusoe form such complex intentions? This is a hotly debated issue, which I cannot discuss here.<sup>29</sup> But, even if we think that he could, I submit that, *because* of his solitariness, the '*reflexive*' intention in Super-Crusoe's case is bound to be idle.

The reason is this. If the purpose of Super-Crusoe's use of the feather is to remind him of a belief he now has, then the '*reflexive*' intention, to remember

also the present intention with which the feather is tied, has no point. For Super-Crusoe later to remember with what intention he had tied the feather to the bush, he would have to remember, *ipso facto*, the belief he had when tying it. Since remembering the belief is what he wants to achieve in the first place, there could be no point to trying to induce it indirectly, by trying to remember the intention. If he thinks the feather can trigger memory of the intention, why shouldn't he think it can trigger, more directly, memory of the bad-bush belief? This seems to be the case whenever someone uses something as a reminder. When I tie a knot in the handkerchief as a reminder to go to the bank, I don't need to form any complex Gricean intentions. I just tie the knot in the hope that when I notice it later I will be likely to remember the belief I had when I tied the knot. I might say to myself: "Maybe later, when I see the knot, I won't remember the intention with which I tied it, maybe I'll think I did it just for fun; but no matter, as long as I'll remember the present belief." Reminders used in this way are not objects endowed with non-natural meaning through Gricean intentions. One could, I suppose, form a complex Gricean intention in issuing a reminder to oneself, but, on Grice's account, unless the reflexive intention is *needed* for the production of the relevant belief, we do not have non-natural meaning.

Notice that the inevitable idleness of the 'reflexive' intention is peculiar to the solitary case. When two people are involved (whether at the same or different times), there can be no question of *remembering* the intention with which a sign has been produced. So the audience's recognition of the 'reflexive' intention may very well form a necessary link in the chain of reasoning leading to their forming the relevant belief. (You may not be able to figure out what to make of my frantic handwave, unless you recognize that I intend for you to move out of my way.)

The point can actually be made without bringing in reliance on memory at all, not even memory of the communicative intention.<sup>30</sup> Suppose Super-Crusoe starts out simply putting up the red string with the intention to remember in the future that that is the bad bush. No Gricean intentions. Then he discovers that when he comes across the string, although he remembers *that* he himself had put it up, he can usually not remember *why* he did so—the string doesn't trigger memory of the relevant belief. However, he learns that he can usually figure out the belief afresh, by reconstructing the intention with which he had put up the string. Couldn't he from then on, whenever he puts up the string, not only intend to induce in his future self the belief that that's a bad bush, but also intend that his future self recognize that intention (as required by the Gricean account)?

But, supposing Super-Crusoe has learned that he needs to figure out his earlier intentions in order to recover the belief with which he had placed the string, what purpose would be served by forming the more complex Gricean intentions from then on? After all, he has been successful in figuring out the message so far, having only formed the simple intention to remind himself of the bad bush. If he is rational, I see no reason why the knowledge that he will in fact be trying to figure out his earlier intention afresh should lead to any change in his communicative

intentions involving the strings. He can trust it to his nature that he will in fact figure out the original intention. Experience has taught him that this is what will happen. What need is there for him, as it were, to *intend* for it to happen?

As in the case of knots in the handkerchief, there may be no logical obstacle to someone going ahead and forming the relevant complex intentions anyway, maybe just for the fun of it. But the Gricean mechanism should not be thought of as some kind of a magic way of converting a dead sign into a linguistically meaningful one by surrounding it with the right intentional aura. The requirement that the second-order 'reflexive' intention not be idle, as I see it, comes here into play precisely to place a kind of check on just how much of our intentional life can be drafted in the service of meaningful speech. The question about the Gricean scenario is not whether it is logically possible for Super-Crusoe to have the Gricean intentions—we may suppose it is. The question is rather whether there is a plausible story to convince us that Super-Crusoe might have any use for them and thus come to have them.

The last attempt to step up Super-Crusoe's marks from mere reminders to meaningful quasi-linguistic signs is self-defeating. The history we have supplied—according to which he discovers that he usually needs to figure out what intention he had behind putting up the strings—establishes in fact that there is no need for him to form any more complex intentions than he has so far. If he did form such intentions it would not be rational, from the point of view of his communicative behavior, in that it would be wasted effort.

In the paradigm Gricean set-up, we do not have an established history of successful communication. It is precisely in such cases that the 'reflexive' intention has some bite. We are in the presence of someone with whom we have no prior rapport; we share no common language, and have no agreed upon means of communication. We may start out by drawing the person's attention to natural signs. But these may give out, or may not even be around to serve our specific communicative purposes. All we can do is perform some act—make a gesture, scribble, or whatever—hoping, and intending, that they recognize *why* we are doing what we are doing.

### (6) Is a Solitary Language Possible?

Could an individual like our Super-Crusoe develop a system of signs governed by linguistic norms? I have argued that the naive evolutionary scenario, which answers affirmatively, is no more than a handwave. Developing the scenario, we considered a promising Gricean proposal: that Super-Crusoe might come to use some mark as a reminder, and endow it with meaning by forming a certain complex communicative intention toward his future self. I have argued that, in the solitary case, the Gricean meaning-inducing mechanism is bound to be idle. But without the Gricean mechanism, the Gricean route to solitary language is blocked. Perhaps a "sub-Gricean" route can be conceived, one which began with

simple reminders issued without the complex Gricean intention. And perhaps there are other, completely non-Gricean routes. At the very least, I hope to have set the stage for these yet-to-be-conceived scenarios, and thus put the ball in the solitarists' court.

I have already indicated how the Gricean route to language, which involves the 'reflexive' intention, may open up once we have more than one individual. But even putting aside the Gricean reflexive intention, we can appreciate that, once there are others in the picture, communicative needs of a special sort arise: an individual may have very good reasons for trying to get their attention and for structuring it. Standardized means in the form of linguistic signs (with various semantic properties) can allow individuals to do that effectively, reliably and productively. And a group of individuals attempting communication with one another can have clear advantages over a single individual trying to communicate with his or her future self. This is because of a certain asymmetry between the two- (or more) persons case and the case of one-person over time. Briefly, a person trying to communicate with someone present using signs has the luxury of seeing on the spot how her signs are taken. There can be immediate transactions between her and her audience involving the very sign she has used, so she can modify the use of the sign to suit her communicative intentions. Her audience, in turn, can adapt the way they take her sign in accordance with their perception of her intentions. Such immediate mutual adaptation seems essential to the process of stabilizing the use of linguistic signs. By its nature, Super-Crusoe's communicative set-up is radically impoverished compared to the multi-person set-up, to the detriment of his efforts to develop linguistic norms.

Linguistic norms can in certain respects be likened—though not reducible—to (at least some) biological norms.<sup>31</sup> We can perhaps compare the question whether the idea of linguistic norms of a solitary speaker makes sense to the question whether it would make sense to speak of certain biological norms applying to a *single-membered species*. I mean: a creature which is a complete freak of nature, not one whose fellows suddenly became extinct. Would there be wrong ways for it to go about its business of survival (assuming it manages to survive)? Could we say, for instance, that its digestive system, though it allows it to process food, is all wrong? Just as we may need a biological community to make sense of some biological norms, we may need a linguistic community to make sense of linguistic norms.

The following consideration is also relevant. An important aspect of a person's being, say, an English speaker is the fact that she would in principle stand corrected in her uses of English words, phrases, sentences. As an English speaker, she subscribes to an ongoing practice an important part of which involves treating various kinds of definitions as normative (e.g., '*This is a chair*'). These norms enter into the teaching of language to novices, and it plays a role in the justification of various linguistic acts. One becomes a subscriber to these norms in virtue of learning the language from the English speaking community

and engaging in linguistic transactions with its members. But linguistic authority (perhaps like moral authority) does not simply rest on the power wielded by a community to issue sanctions. To think it does is to conceive of the linguistic authority of a speech community as crudely teleological. Linguistic correction typically takes the form of explanation and justification rather than straight punitive measures. Unlike Mother Nature, a linguistic community provides for the possibility of a rational dialogue among its members concerning language use itself. It is this sort of give and take, back and forth, that seems so hard to make sense of—even in an incipient form—in the case of a solitary individual who has no one but his future selves to negotiate with.

A proponent of solitary language might maintain that the considerations of this paper can still do no more than point to a psychological—as opposed to ‘real’, or metaphysical—impossibility of a solitary language. The difficulties I have raised (even those pertaining to the Gricean scenario) could apparently be overcome if we simply suppose that our solitary speaker sincerely *thinks* that there are—or will be—others around to whom a message is to be communicated. Thus, we might consider another Super-Crusoe who is deluded into thinking there are others around. This could be either because she suffers permanent hallucinations or because her environment has been rigged (or just so happens) to appear exactly like a normal linguistic environment. Since, for all she knows, there *are* other individuals in the picture, whatever I have taken to be needed in order to start the communication game on the road to language seems available to her.

I now seem caught in a dilemma. I can concede that this other Super-Crusoe could develop a language. This would amount to conceding that, at most, developing a language requires only a belief in the presence of others; it does not require an actual multiplicity of speakers. So a solitary language would turn out to be merely psychologically—but not ‘really’—impossible. On the other horn of the dilemma, I can insist that twin Super-Crusoe, just like Super-Crusoe, could *not* develop a language; but then I would have to face the charge that I have not argued for this strong claim.<sup>32</sup>

I submit that the objection shifts the grounds of our discussion. The dispute over solitary language which I initially joined in this paper has been over whether we can tell a *plausible* story about a route to language travelled by a single individual. A scenario involving a hallucinating individual or a wildly rigged environment would hardly seem to qualify.

The opponent may insist that this should make no difference, since the imagined story still suggests how it may well be true, for all I have argued, that a solitary individual could develop a language. In response, let me remind the reader that I have not set out to cast doubt on the *logical* possibility of a solitary language; that is, I have not set out to argue that the notion of a solitary language involves some logical contradiction. So it would not be enough for my opponent

to insist that there is no logical inconsistency in her proposed scenario. Whether or not it could be true that a radically deluded individual as described has developed a language would now turn on whether or not it is ‘really’ possible for such an individual to have acquired the imagined ‘other-directed’ thoughts, beliefs, intentions, concepts etc. This is a difficult issue which goes well beyond the scope of our discussion. I believe it touches on deep and yet-unsettled matters (for instance, ones concerning individualism in the philosophy of mind<sup>33</sup>). To take for granted the ‘real’ possibility of the bizarre scenario would be to regard these matters as settled.

Suppose the bizarre scenario can be properly fleshed out. It still trades on taking the solitary speaker’s efforts to develop a language to be essentially *communicative* efforts—efforts to communicate messages to what she believes to be other individuals, using signs. Insofar, then, the proponent of a solitary language affirms, rather than rejects, at least the *conceptual* centrality of a multiplicity of agents to the development of a language. The proponent’s solitary individual whose ability to develop a language depends on her delusion that she is communicating with other individuals seems a far cry from Ayer’s Crusoe who is simply “able to recognise many things upon the island”, and invents “words to describe the flora and fauna of his island”.

### Notes

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<sup>1</sup>The name is due to David Pears.

<sup>2</sup>In the sense of Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations* 1958, (henceforth *PI*), #242ff.

<sup>3</sup>See, e.g., A. J. Ayer (1968), Rush Rhees (1968), and Crispin Wright (1989). Jay Rosenberg (1976) is an exception, although the argument he develops against the possibility of a solitary language is intimately related to the Wittgensteinian argument against the possibility of a private language.

<sup>4</sup>For a full discussion see my “Private and Solitary Language” (in preparation).

<sup>5</sup>The difficulties I will raise, however, are related to a certain conception of linguistic normativity which can arguably be found in Wittgenstein. See especially (1974) sections 23, 30, 32, 133-5 and 140 and (1958) sections 496-499 and p. 230. This, if anywhere, is where I believe a Wittgensteinian anti-solitary language argument can be located, rather than in the wholesale skepticism about meaning of the kind attributed to him by Kripke (1982).

<sup>6</sup>Versions of this reading of the argument occur in Barry Stroud, in Fodor (1975), Ch. 2, and in David Pears (1988), Ch. 13 and following.

<sup>7</sup>This may be so on the Chomskian model according to which the acquisition of a natural language requires the full cooperation between an inborn language-specific ‘scheme’ and special kinds of input provided exclusively by a linguistic environment. Chomsky himself (1984), interestingly, argues that a solitary language *must* be possible, suggesting clearly that he must take the necessity of the scheme/linguistic input cooperation to be merely psychological. (Also, see below, note 10.)

<sup>8</sup>I spell out the reasons for this claim in my “Private and Solitary Language” (in preparation).

<sup>9</sup>The last example is due to Wittgenstein (1958) #498, and compare (1974) #135. (Paul Ziff has pointed out to me that we can easily give sense to this sentence, given the right intonation. I leave it to the reader to find the appropriate interpretation.) I deliberately avoid examples of the highly abstract syntactic rules often proposed by linguists, since their controversial status would tend to confuse certain issues. See next section.

<sup>10</sup>Contrary to what views which treat the notion of an idiolect as logically prior (such as Chomsky's (1984) and Davidson's (1984) and (1986)) would lead us to expect). This suggests that such views are revisionary rather than descriptive of our ordinary practices of ascribing linguistic mistakes.

<sup>11</sup>Even if one holds that meanings are abstract, mind-independent denizens of a Fregean 'third realm', the story of how a word of any particular natural language comes to be associated with one Platonistic meaning rather than another would plausibly implicate *something* about the activities, perceptions, habits and/or history and environment of speakers of the language.

<sup>12</sup>Jonathan Bennett (1976), for instance, describes as "ludicrous" the suggestion that "no one has ever known what any part of our language really means", and connects this with the idea that "what an expression means in language L is logically connected with what the users of L generally mean by it" (p. 8).

<sup>13</sup>A Causal Theorist would have to refuse to characterize the above-imagined change in term extension simply as a change in the descriptive contents speakers have come to associate with the relevant term.

<sup>14</sup>One may be tempted here to re-introduce the doctrine of truth-in-virtue-of-meaning as applying to statements of the form "Sentence S means that p". This would be a mistake. Such statements, when taken to be genuine assertions, rather than mere stipulations, are true in virtue of something about the world: the habits, judgments, history etc. of users of the sentence S.

<sup>15</sup>As Rush Rhees has put it, each application of a term in his language would be "at once a statement and a definition" (1968: 274).

<sup>16</sup>Simon Blackburn (1984) who challenges the necessity of "pressure from surrounding speakers creating standards" for linguistic correctness offers only this by way of making sense of a solitary speaker developing a language on his own: "It is easy to go through the thought-experiment of coming across such an individual. A ... born Robinson Crusoe—might give all the appearances of following rules, including linguistic rules, and of having a practice which embodies a distinction between correct and incorrect performance." (p. 84) This way of putting things speaks more to the epistemological questions identified at the end of section 1 than to the question which concerns us here, namely, how to make sense of a solitary speaker coming to develop linguistic norms.

<sup>17</sup>I have benefited here from a discussion by Andrew Hsu, in an unpublished manuscript (UCLA, 1987).

<sup>18</sup>Some philosophers, most notably Davidson (see, e.g., "Thought and Talk", in 1984) have argued that a languageless creature can have no propositional attitudes such as beliefs and desires. Apart from its unintuitiveness, such a position would make the question we have been exploring—viz., How can we make sense of someone like Super-Crusoe developing a language?—hopeless from the start.

<sup>19</sup>Arguably, the phonetic and the syntactic cases are different in this respect.

<sup>20</sup>It is for this reason that linguistic rules are sometimes described as 'constitutive' as opposed to 'regulative' rules (see Rawls 1955, and Searle 1969: sec. 2.5). But the present contrast between theological and linguistic norms cuts across the constitutive/regulative division. From the point of view of our contrast, linguistic norms have something in common with at least one paradigm case of regulative norms—the norms of etiquette. In both types of cases, normative evaluations appeal directly to how things are *supposed* to be, rather than to the goal of the activity.

<sup>21</sup>I say "in the first instance", since certain pragmatic norms (e.g., Grice's 'conversational maxims') can be evaluated by reference to given communicative purposes. But such norms seem to presuppose the existence of norms which, if I am right, cannot be so evaluated. I have set aside pragmatic norms (as well as non-descriptive uses of language) in this paper, since discussion of them may conceal a question-begging appeal to the specifically social character of language.

<sup>22</sup>We may want to subsume under recognitional errors the error of someone who mistakes a dog for a deer because of a cleverly set up illusion. Such a person would not be guilty of what I call below "meaning error".

<sup>23</sup>There may be a fourth species of error relevant here, which is not due to a mistaken grasp of

meaning but rather due to a bizarre theory. Someone might call some dog “deer” because she believes that (some) dogs *really are* a kind of deer. Some will insist that this is simply an instance of ‘meaning’ error, since it would reflect a misunderstanding of the meaning of “deer”. That is, they will insist that a sincere, unconfused assent to “This (pointing to a dog in plain view) is a deer” would attest to lack of the concept of a deer. Considerations of the kind advanced by Tyler Burge (1986) should caution us against such conflation. For simplicity’s sake, I shall omit this fourth species of error.

<sup>24</sup>One may try to bring the two kinds of failures together by invoking a primary goal of *describing things correctly* which ultimately lies behind all use of words. It will then be said that a semantic failure is still a failure of the world to fit our performance—a failure to achieve one’s purpose. But the goal in question presupposes that there is such a thing as correct description, and the idea of correct description itself requires the notion of a direction of fit which goes from linguistic performances to the world.

<sup>25</sup>Biological norms seem typically—perhaps even essentially—to have this communal aspect. I shall not explore this intriguing matter here, for reasons of space.

<sup>26</sup>I develop a reading of the Gricean project along these lines in “‘Meaning’ Resurrected?” (in preparation).

<sup>27</sup>The phrase is due to Jonathan Bennett (1976: 171). The present discussion of the reminder proposal was partly stimulated by a conversation with Bennett.

<sup>28</sup>As Grice puts it, the speaker must not “regard it as a foregone conclusion that the belief will be induced in the audience whether or not the intention behind the utterance is recognized” (1967:45).

<sup>29</sup>Opponents might argue that once we concede that our solitary Super-Crusoe can have the requisite beliefs/intentions—i.e., intentional states which represent the environment—there should be no real difficulty in taking the further step and allowing that he might have linguistic signs that go proxy for those mental representations. (This objection was raised to me by Richard Fumerton in correspondence.) It seems to me that an interesting issue regarding solitary language remains, *even if* we allow solitary beliefs/intentions, although I cannot argue the point here. The present question concerns the availability to a solitary languageless creature of the intentions specifically required by the Gricean account of non-natural meaning.

For materials suggesting that a languageless creature could intend to induce a certain belief in his future self, see Bennett’s 1976 (Chapter 4). In personal communication, Bennett suggested that there is no problem with Super-Crusoe’s intending to remember the present intention with which he has tied the feather. However, in the end, he agreed with the claim I am about to defend, namely, that in the solitary case such an intention would be idle, and would have no point.

<sup>30</sup>The following discussion is inspired by a case Michael White suggested to me in his comments on an earlier short version of this paper (presented at the Pacific APA in March 1990).

<sup>31</sup>For a reductive view, see e.g. Millikan (1984).

<sup>32</sup>This objection is due to Barry Loewer. Takashi Yagisawa has raised (in discussion) what I take to be a closely related objection.

<sup>33</sup>For discussion, see, e.g., Burge (1979).

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