

Intuitions: Rijeka Response to Nenad Mišćević

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This paper is a response to Nenad Mišćević's "Reply to Michael Devitt", the latest in an exchange on the source of linguistic intuitions. Mišćević defends a modified version ("MoVoC") of the received view that these intuitions are the product of a linguistic competence. I have earlier rejected all versions of the received view urging instead that intuitions are, like perceptual judgments, empirical theory-laden central-processor responses to phenomena. (1) I emphasize here, against Mišćević, that this claim about a speaker's intuitions about strings is not to be conflated with a claim about her understanding of strings. (2) I develop my claim, addressed by Mišćević, that MoVoC is implausible in three ways. But these are not the main problems for MoVoC. For further discussion of those, see Jutronic's paper in this volume.

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Nenad Mišćević (2006, 2009, 2012, 2014a, b), Dunja Jutronic (2012, 2014), and I (2006c, 2014) have been in an exchange about linguistic intuitions for more than a decade. I have found this very productive but I suspect that we have now reached the point of diminishing return. So I shall be brief.

1. VoC ("*The Voice of Competence*")

I claim that VoC is the received view of intuitions in linguistics. Consider the intuitive judgments that

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

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

provides information about the linguistic facts... So these judgments are not arrived at by the sort of empirical investigation that judgments about the world usually require. Rather, a speaker has a privileged access to facts about the language, facts captured by the intuitions, simply in virtue of being competent... (2006a: 96; 2006b: 483–4).

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

Mišćević holds to a “modified” version of VoC, “MoVoC”. I reject all versions of VoC partly because I think I have a better view, “The Modest Explanation”, which unfortunately has been labeled “ordinarism”.

2. *The Modest Explanation or “Ordinarism”*

The Modest Explanation of linguistic intuitions arises from a view of intuitive judgments in general. I argue that intuitions are empirical central-processor responses to phenomena, differing from many other such responses only in being fairly immediate and unreflective, based on little if any conscious reasoning. These judgments are theory-laden in the way observation judgments are in general. Related to this “we should trust a person’s intuitions...to the degree that we have confidence in her empirically based expertise about the kinds under investigation” (2006a: 104; 2006b: 492). Sometimes the folk are as trustworthy as anyone in an area but where there are experts, particularly scientists, the folk are not. So we should prefer the paleontologist’s intuitions about old bones, the physicist’s, about certain physical facts, the psychologist’s, about certain cognitive phenomena, the art expert, about a sixth-century Greek marble statue, and Vic Braden about tennis serves (2006a: 104–5; 2006: 492–3). And when it comes to linguistics, “the intuitions that linguistics should mostly rely on are those of the linguists themselves because the linguists are the most expert” (2006a: 111; 2006b: 499).

Just as the paleontologist, the art expert, and Vic Braden, immediately recognize the relevant property in their cases, so too does the speaker in easy linguistic cases. Consider the strings, ‘responded the quickly speaker’ and ‘the speaker responded quickly’. I have pointed out that “the speaker is likely to recognize immediately, without reflecting..., that the former word salad is unacceptable and the latter simple sentence is acceptable” (2010a: 255). In my paper, “Linguistic Intuitions: In Defense of ‘Ordinarism’” (2014), I emphasize that these “linguistic intuitions are *perceptual* judgments...as immediate as those of the art expert and Braden, without the conscious and deliberate exercise of her competence” (2014: 14).

In his “Reply to Michael Devitt”, Mišćević says he agrees “completely” with this claim (2014a: 25).¹ But he continues on as if my claim is

¹ Hereinafter, all citations of Mišćević and me are of these 2014 papers unless specified otherwise.

about a speaker's *understanding of* strings: that understanding is what he takes to be like percepts. Yet my actual claim is not this quite uncontroversial one but rather that *intuitions about* strings are like percepts. The conflation of this crucial distinction between understanding a string and having an intuition about it runs right through Mišćević's discussion. This is a common conflation among defenders of VoC, as I have pointed out (2010b: 839). That is my first point in this response to Mišćević.

Let me give just one other example of the conflation. In response to my claim,

To say that a speaker may perceive that a string has a certain syntactic property without *a conscious and deliberate* exercise of her competence... is not to say that her competence is not involved in her perception (p. 14),

Mišćević responds: "if the competence is involved, as the just quoted passage suggests, why is VoC on the wrong track?" (p. 26). And the answer is: because the competence is involved in understanding the string not in providing the informative content of the intuition, as VoC requires.

3. *Criticism of VoC (MoVoC)*

So why should we prefer ordinarism to VoC? I quoted (p. 11) the following summary of my reasons:

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

I went on to look critically at Mišćević's MoVoC in light of these problems (pp. 11–12). So too did Jutronić (2014). Mišćević has responded to her (2014b). I leave it to her to pursue the matter (this volume).

Apart from these three main problems, I also summarized three other implausibilities of VoC (p. 12). Mišćević addresses these in his reply to me and so I shall develop them in more detail here.

- (i) There are clearly lots of linguistic facts about which ordinary speakers have few if any intuitions: facts about heads, c-command, and so on. Why is that? "If our competence...speaks to us at all, how come it *says so little*?" (2006a: 101; 2006b: 489). We wonder what account of the causal route from embodied rules (and principles) to intuitions could account for this. In his reply, Mišćević emphasizes how many intuitions about grammaticality and binding hearers have (p. 23). They do indeed have many tokens of these types of intuitions. But my point was about types not tokens: How come competence does not deliver intuitions about

many other types of grammatical facts, like about c-command facts?

- (ii) Chomsky has, in effect, found support for VoC in an analogy with the intuitions yielded by the visual system (1965, pp. 8–9; 2000, p. 125). Others have followed him in this (Rey 2006, pp. 563–8; Collins 2007, p. 421; Fitzgerald 2010: 134–42). I have rejected the analogy (2006a: 112–3; 2006b: 500–1; 2010b: 850–2). Indeed, I argue that there would be a disanalogy between the intuitions provided by the language faculty and by perceptual modules which undermines VoC. Mišćević doesn't "get it. Why would the MoVoC proposal be committed to any such disanalogy?" (p. 23) Here is the answer that I cited:

According to the standard explanation, the language module delivers syntactic and semantic information about expressions to the central processor. If it did this it would be disanalogous to perceptual modules.... For, if [the language module delivers syntactic and semantic information about expressions to the central processor], the central processor would have direct access to information that the language module allegedly uses to fulfill its task of processing language. But nobody supposes that the central processor has direct access to analogous information used by perceptual modules to fulfill their processing tasks (2006a: 114; 2006b: 503).

- (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)

Mišćević doubts that these developmental stages are really distinct, citing a "proposal that ties the acquisition of full competence to a later stage" (p. 24). This proposal talks of

language users who might be described as 'not fully competent', such as very young children, second language learners, or aphasics who have lost access to part of their language competence. Such language users may resort to simplified strategies or heuristics for sentence processing (Ingram 2007: 18).

The evidence I cite (2010b: 853 n. 27) distinguishes two stages of cognitive development, early childhood up to around 3, and middle childhood from around 4 to 8. It is alleged that syntactic competence is achieved in the early stage, metalinguistic intuitions, in the middle one. This could be quite consistent with what Ingram claims; in particular, "very young children" may be ones who have not completed early childhood.

I emphasize that implausibilities (i) to (iii) are not the main problems for VoC and MoVoc. For further discussion of those main problems I direct the reader to Jutronic's paper in this volume.

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