

Intuitions Once Again! Object-level vs. Meta-level

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Firstly, I present some of my most important answers to Miščević's objections to my 2014 paper which I fully disagree with. Secondly and more importantly, I point out that there is a possible confusion or misunderstanding about the distinction between the object-level (sentence produced) and meta-level (sentence judged). I argue that competentialist actually conflates object and meta levels and show the final consequences of such a conflation. The ordinaryist firmly believes that there should be a separation between the object-level and meta-level and provides the explanation for this. Finally, I briefly comment on the so-called 'Route Question', the path from the underlying competence to the central processor and argue that competentialist cannot provide an explanation for it. The hope is that this discussion brings us closer to understanding the difference between the two opposing views.

Keywords: Linguistic intuitions, competentialism, ordinaryism, meta-level, object-level, the route question.

1. Introduction

This paper came out of a mini conference with Michael Devitt that was held in Rijeka under the title 'Linguistic Intuitions and Natural Kinds' in April 2017 organized by the Croatian Society for Analytic Philosophy. The part on linguistic intuitions was meant to be a continuation of Devitt's, Miščević's and Jutronic's ongoing discussion on linguistic intuitions¹ and here I present some of my most important answers to Miščević's objections to my 2014 paper. However, my main aim is to try to advance the discussion which, in my opinion, is coming to an un-

¹ See Jutronic (2012, 2014); Miščević (2012, 2014); Devitt (2014). The literature on linguistics intuitions has proliferated greatly. For more references see Jutronic (2014) and Schindler (Forthcoming).

profitable stand still. My hope is that this discussion brings us closer to understanding the difference between the two opposing views!

2. *Answers to Mišćević*

Let me start with a simple example. Say a speaker is presented with the following two sentences:

They want to be teachers.

*They want to be teacher.

If asked, the native speaker answers that only the first sentence is OK, or that this is a sentence of his language. His answer is the result of his intuitions about his language. It is very important to stress right at the beginning that the question under discussion is not whether the speaker *has* the linguistic intuitions (since she obviously does) or *how* intuitions are defined, or *how reliable* they are, but the question under discussion is the following: Where do language intuitions come from? The discussion is primarily and exclusively over *the source of linguistic intuitions*.

There are two main opposing views on the topic about the source of linguistic intuitions, i.e., there is a crucial disagreement what the source of linguistic intuitions is. *Competentialists* (i.e., Mišćević) believe and defend the view that linguistic competence is their source. *Ordinarists* (i.e. Devitt and myself) believe and defend the view that linguistic intuitions are not derived from linguistic competence. Intuitions do not flow directly from competence (says the ordinarist) but they are “immediate and fairly unreflective empirical central-processor responses to linguistic phenomena” (Devitt 2006a: 120). The intuitions are mostly the product of experiences of the linguistic world. They are like “observation” judgments.

The issue can be put as follows: a) Linguistic competence is the competence to process language; b) Does linguistic competence also come up with judgments *about* language? Mišćević agrees that we should distinguish these two levels: a) dealing with the proposed sentence, at the object-level, and b) reaching the verdict about its grammaticality, at the meta-level.

I was prompted by these words of Mišćević and in what follows I will first comment on Mišćević’s answers to me that I fully disagree with but my main objective is to concentrate on the distinction that Mišćević himself makes clear: object-level and meta-level. *The main aim is to make some steps forward since our discussion about linguistic intuitions has come, as I stressed, to a certain not very stimulating stand-still.*

In distinguishing the two levels Mišćević goes on to comment on the litmus analogy from Mišćević (2014). I have to include a longer quote for the present reader:

Mišćević says:

Let us assume that the person successfully produces the sentence. Is not that success like the information about the color of litmus? (2014: 148)

My answer was:

Yes, sure it is—but this is part of the production—either of litmus or of competence—which does not carry with it any judgement! (2014: 148)

Miščević's answer to the above is the following:

But this is all I need at the object-level. Namely, the 'parser in the competence' analyses the sentence and ends up with some mental equivalent of the tree diagram. And this is the main job to be done. If competence is doing this, then it plays the main role. And if Dunja admits this, how can she be an ordinarist, rather than a competentialist? If Devitt agrees with this, how can he be an ordinarist? (2014: 148)

The above is *a very curious* conclusion to say the least since there is NO disagreement between us of what language parser does! We have gone through this point many many times.² All that this shows is that competence plays the main role in production and comprehension of sentences. But there is no YES or NO answer in the very production or comprehension — competence does not come out with the judgement about its own doings. On the contrary, whether competence comes out with YES or NO answer is the bone of disagreement and the very difference between an ordinarist and a competentialist!

Miščević continues:

Alternatively, further research might show that competence does also issue a verdict, and I hope this is what will happen. My reason for thinking this is that I think competence participates in other linguistic tasks, in particular in immediate linguistic understanding. (2014: 149)

This is even more curious comment since contrary to the previous claim that competence does issue a verdict (YES or NO answer) here Miščević is expressing a possible hope/wish put in future research that might prove that the competence *will* issue a verdict. Since Miščević's main claim is that competence *does* issue a verdict how is the future research going to help?

Miščević continues:

Let me again state my view. First, in the context of explicit recognition of grammaticality, in which the work of the language module starts by simulating the production of the sentence, and continues by the parsing process, the analytic work is done by the competence, as Dunja agrees. (2014: 151)

Yes I do, apart from the fact that, once again, the workings of competence are *not* in question. I disagree also with the phrasing. I would not call parsing process as 'recognition of grammaticality' but use a more neutral term, 'the production of language strings'.

Then comes the passage where Miščević says: "Further, the general intelligence, and its equivalent, the CP, does not read parsing trees. Therefore, it cannot reach the first verdict" (2014: 151). But this is exactly what the ordinarist is stressing! What is the route from encapsu-

² Miščević (2006, 2009, 2012); Jutronić (2012, 2014); Devitt (2006c, 2013).

lated modular workings of the parser to the central processor? As Devitt stresses the explanation would require a relatively *direct cognitive path from the embodied rules of the language to beliefs about expressions of that language*. What could that path be? *There does not seem to be any direct path from these rules to relevant beliefs.*³

Commenting of Levelt's suspicion of the role of competence in issuing judgements Nenad says:

Isn't the performance, i.e. the behaviour, of a pianist often a clear window, almost a clairvoyant window, on her musical competence (and the same for cooking, acting and scoring: Ronaldo's scoring is a clear window on his sporting competence)? (2014: 153)

Surely! But the respective competences are not in question and furthermore they are not the subject of discussion. In other words, Ronaldo's competence is not in the subject of dispute. The question is his (our) judgement about his competence. A different matter.

At this point it became clear to me that there is some possible confusion or misunderstanding about the distinction between the object-level and meta-level and maybe that some progress can be made in our discussion if we see what is really going on here. Mišćević prompted me in that direction with his own observation about the analogy of competence with police spokesperson.

Mišćević says:

Let me stay for a second with the police analogy. The spokesperson comments and says: 'Joe was killed by Thomas Mair'. That's an object-level statement. 'And we are quite sure this is how things happened', she might add, either spontaneously, or in response to a question. There, she has passed to the meta-level, and there is nothing unusual about it (2014: 151).

Mišćević in criticizing my approach/belief that the main hero for the ordinarist is the central processing unit and that CP has access to the resulting output of a particular competence, so it does some reflection about the output, i.e., about the data provided by the competence says the following:

There are two assumptions behind Dunja's line of arguing. The first is that there should be a sharp separation between the analysis and the verdict, the object-level and the meta-level. (2014: 150)

And Mišćević thinks that "the report of the (alleged) fact and the report about the report's epistemic standing (that 'we' are sure about it) go naturally together" (2014: 151).

My question is: Do they go together? And what does '*naturally go together*' really mean? It seems that the competentalist (Mišćević) wants to minimize the distinction between the object-level and meta-level.

³ See the section on the route question.

3. *Object-level vs. meta-level*

In what follows I will try to show that competentalist actually conflates object and meta levels and I want to show the final consequences of such a move. On the other hand, the ordinarist definitely believes that there should be a separation between the object-level and meta-level. *Intuitions are meta-level phenomena and they do not naturally flow from object-level.* Here are some supporting quotations.

Maynes and Gross say:

But the capacity for linguistic intuitions is a further, indeed dissociable, capacity that goes beyond the capacity for language production and comprehension. It is one thing to parse or understand a sentence; it is another to form an intuition that the sentence is acceptable. (2013: 717)

The psychologist and neuroscientist Barbara Luka says:

Processes of evaluation are not an automatic result of comprehension or parsing, but rather require attention. The ability to provide linguistic judgments is also dependent on metacognitive and analytic reasoning capacities of individual speakers (2005: 488).

In discussing speaker's introspective experiences Luka wisely warns us that many questions stay unanswered regarding the interaction between linguistic knowledge and the processes required to perform and report a linguistic judgement. For example, what is the nature of the interaction between sentence comprehension and sentence evaluation? Is evaluation of grammaticality an automatic result of parsing? Devitt stresses that the intuitions are declarative knowledge, the understanding, procedural and that these are very different kinds of knowledge here as elsewhere in our psychology. The behaviors are linguistic *performances* whereas intuitions are *judgments about* language. Two levels have been distinguished for sure and the ordinarist provides the explanation for this.

What about competentialists?

Miščević's previous answer that "the report of the (alleged) fact and the report about the report's epistemic standing (that 'we' are sure about it) go *naturally together*" indicates that the two levels are brought very close together. Even more, it seems that the object-level and meta-level are almost conflated. It is a conflation of behavior/performance and intuitions about behavior/performance. Miščević says that there is 'nothing unusual' about this. But how can one justify and explain this conflation? According to the mentalist conception, linguistic intuitions are the product of a modularized language faculty that alone delivers the relevant information to mechanisms responsible for judgment. But how does it do it? The answer seems to be 'naturally' but that is not a good or satisfactory answer, especially if we take seriously what philosophers and most importantly psychologists are warning us about⁴,

⁴ See the above quotes.

i. e. that that not much is known about the mechanisms implicated specifically in the formation of linguistics intuitions.⁵

Full discussion would involve the burning question about the route from the underlying competence to the central processor and that would be a different paper, much more complex one. Nevertheless, let me comment briefly on Mišćević’s and Rey’s attempts at providing the answer. Let us call it ‘The Route Question’.

4. *The Route Question*

Mišćević thinks that object-level and meta-level levels come together. In his chart the (core) intuition/ judgment is already made by competence (stage 3 on the flow chart below).⁶ Yes or No answer (presumably from stage 3) is simply passed to the central processor (stage 4 on the flow chart). If the central processor does not add anything then one can say that it is in a sense bypassed completely, i.e., does not play any role in forming (narrow) linguistic intuitions. Object-level (parsing, competence decision) and meta-level levels (decision simply passed to CP) are not distinguished.

0	1	2	3	4
sentence (1)				
presented				
to				
competence				
	tentative	immediate	competence	CP informed
	parsing →	SD	→	decides
	(by com-	of S		about
	petence)		co-reference	of competence
			etc.	

⁵ On the vexing point that the intuitions might be seemings Maynes and Gross say: “The distinction between judgments and appearances is arguably of limited significance, however, to linguistic practice. First, in an overwhelming number of actual cases of interest to linguists, subjects will judge things to be just as they experience them as being. *Second, in any event, if we are to make use of seemings in theorizing, they must be reported.* Thus, a judgment is required after all, albeit to the effect that things so seem to one. (Glüer (2009) argues that perceptual experiences just are judgments about how things perceptually seem.)” (2013: 716, italics mine). Devitt (2010) also argues that there are no such seemings.

⁶ The chart from Mišćević (2104: 149).

Georges Rey in response to Devitt's claim that hearing an utterance in a certain way is one thing, judging that it has certain properties, admits that it is true that hearing is one thing and judging quite another: nevertheless, Rey comments, sometimes our best judgments are based on what you hear. Again near conflation of object (hearing) and meta (judging what is heard) level!

Miščević, and especially Rey, put a lot of stress on competence delivering structural descriptions (SD, stage 2 on the given chart above) on which (supposedly) judgements are made by the central processor.

The question that Devitt asks is the following: Suppose that the language system did deliver a partial SD (structural descriptions) to the central processor, how would the SD's information 'fairly directly cause' the intuitions that are the concern of VoC? The question stands unanswered. Rey's answer to Devitt's question is that this is 'trivial'. He claims that going along with the modularity story, there's no reason that attention can't be drawn to the informational outputs of a module, say, by it simply getting highlighted, i.e., computationally enhanced, or sent to a special attention address or something.⁷ This again is no good answer, not to mention no explanation at all, since *nobody* has ever claimed that the output of the competence comes highlighted or with some kind of enhanced information apart from simple deliverance of SD's. In other words, nobody has claimed that SD's come with a sign saying "ungrammatical" or "grammatical" or Miščević's YES or NO answers. What is important for our discussion is that it is evident that the object-level and meta-level are conflated.

On competentialist's view SD's are somehow (naturally, not unusually) miraculously 'mainlined' in(to) the central processor. On the ordinary view there is no mystery. The object-level and meta-level are kept distinct and here is a very short story. I quote Devitt: "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). On this view, there is no unexplainable cognitive penetration of the central system or SD being 'computationally enhanced, or sent to a special attention address or something'. The object level (competence and the data that it provides) are kept separate from the content of the judgment, i.e. intuitions, that are in the central processor (the meta level). The central processor is the home of inferences and judgements, including intuitive ones.

On the final note, it is instructive to quote an interesting and revealing part from the correspondence between Rey and Devitt on the very question that is being discussed.⁸ Rey says that Devitt allows that

⁷ The best and the most relevant place for this dispute is Devitt (2013) and Rey (2013) but there are also some email exchanges among them available at request.

⁸ Email correspondence but see also Rey (2013) and Devitt (2013).

syntactic properties can cause intuitive judgments as responses and that Devitt just thinks this is mediated by the person's central appreciation of some bit of the theory of grammar, folk or otherwise. But the Chomskyan (competentialist) argues there is a more direct route: we are *so wired* that the outputs of the language module more directly cause some of our intuitive responses, without the mediation of a *central* theory.

Thus, not only that the object-level and meta-level have been brought closely together (which was Nenad's suggestion) but they have been conflated altogether and moreover finally reduced to an innate instinct (we are so wired)! This seems to me to be a desperate move, not to mention that this is no explanation at all.

5. Conclusion

1. I have argued that most of Mišević's (2014) arguments to my objections (Jutronić 2104) are not well founded.

2. In distinguishing and stressing the difference between the object-level from the meta-level I have tried to show that there is a failure from the competentalist to keep our access to linguistic data provided by competence (object level) sharply distinct from our alleged access to linguistic information provided by competence (Devitt 2010b). There is access to data provided by competence on anyone's view (object-level)! But the ordinarist rejects the view that we have access to linguistic information (meta-level) since this information does not reside in competence.

3. Competentialist claims that linguistic intuitions are largely supplied by linguistic competence with the penetration from the central processor. Ordinarist claims that the intuitions are supplied solely by the central processor and there is no question of the competence being cognitively penetrated. The distinction between source of data and information is crucial to ordinarist's discussion. The data for judgments (object-level) are not judgments (meta-level). Hearing an utterance in a certain way is one thing, judging that it has certain properties, another. One might comment that there might not be an abyss, or even sharp distinction between the two but one cannot deny that there is at least a 'thin red line' between the two, and that line makes all the difference in finding out who is right in this debate.

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