

CHAPTER 1:

Introduction

The objective of the research project is to analyse and examine the possibility of private language argument after later Wittgenstein. Whether language is private or public is a long-standing debate among philosophers. It has been a recurrent theme since Descartes and it deserves equal philosophical interest in present contemporary philosophy as well. Historically, there are two divergent of opinions regarding private language of which one view holds that private language is possible and another view just denies it. Those who stick to the view that private language is possible would like to say that one's sensations and feelings are exclusively personal. Here we remember the view of Descartes. The most kernel point of the *Cartesian* view is that sensations and feelings are only contingently related to the manifest behaviours and circumstances of the person who has the experience in question. The observation of the workings of the person's own mind is immune from doubt, illusion and confusion. The present thinking, feeling, willing, perceiving, remembering and imaginings of a person are intrinsically phosphorescent. Since the inner life of a person is a stream of consciousness, it would be absurd to suggest that the mind would be

unaware. Descartes has given a sketch of a mental reality that gives the primacy to our thoughts; our language has to be driven by the thoughts, there is an inner world of being in us. This idea has given a rise to the possibility of private language.

Professor A. J. Ayer also supports some sort of private language. In his essay "Can there be a private language?"¹ Ayer has imagined a Robinson Crusoe who lives in an island with the creatures that are non-human. In spite of being in such a state, Crusoe formulates his ideas and expresses in a language that is unique to him. In fact, Ayer thinks that Crusoe invents a language. His language is private in the sense of its level of incommunicability to the general persons.

Contrary to the above view, we can equally notice the impossibility of private language after later Wittgenstein. The private language argument is found in Ludwig Wittgenstein's later work, especially in his *Philosophical Investigations* and in his *The Blue and Brown Books*. The argument of private language was central to philosophical discussion at the end of the last century, and it continues even in today's philosophical

¹ A.J. Ayer, "Can There Be A Private Language?" *Aristotelian Society Proceedings*, Supplementary Volume 28. In this essay Professor Ayer has given an example of private language that can be understood only by its speaker, e.g. Robinson Crusoe uses a language which is unfamiliar with the common usage, even then he is able to communicate his feelings.

discussion. The argument is supposed to show that the idea of a language understood by only a single individual is incoherent. The *Investigations* notoriously does not present its arguments in a succinct and linear fashion. Wittgenstein instead chooses to describe particular uses of language, and then to ask the reader to reflect on the implications of that use. As a result, there is a considerable dispute about both the nature of the argument and its import. Indeed, it has become common to talk of private language arguments. Archaeologists of philosophy have located precursors of the private language in a variety of sources prior to Wittgenstein. Locke is also a prominent exponent of the view targeted by the argument, since he proposed in his *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* that the meaning of a word is the idea it stands for.

The origin of the private language problem:

(i) What is a private language and why does its possibility matter?

Wittgenstein would say a private language is that whose words “refer to what can only be known to the person speaking, to his immediate private sensations. So another person cannot understand the language.”² But he denies the possibility of private language as he conceives that ‘obeying a

² Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, tr. G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1970), §243.

rule' is a practice. For him language is rule following. So to follow a rule is to conform to a practice, i.e. to act in the generally acknowledged way.

(ii) Different senses of privacy: By and large, one could find at least three different senses of privacy that language can talk about. These are:

⇒ A language is private in the sense that only the speaker can speak of it, though the language could be taught to others in any of the various normal ways we have. One can teach a new language to someone who does not know it already. Two questions may arise at this juncture: first, the question whether I can keep a diary in ordinary English to record my pains, moods and so on; secondly, the question whether there could be a language in fact used by only one person but capable of being understood by any explorer clever enough to see the connection between certain marks and certain circumstances. The second prospect always remains as an objection against the private language.

⇒ A language is private in the sense that no one other than the speaker could understand it even if all experiences of the speaker were available to others. One can reject this type of private language by claiming that such type of language does not qualify as a language at all.

⇒ One might consider the possibility of a language which cannot be taught or learnt by anyone other than the speaker because it is a language

which is used to talk about objects that are private in the sense that no one other than the speaker is directly acquainted with them.

(iii) How is the problem of other minds related with the private language argument?

It is said that the problem of private language is intimately connected with the problem of other minds. The problem of other minds was found in Plato's *Theaetetus*. Here it is asked, "Are you quite certain that the several colours appear to a dog or to any animal whatever they appear to you? ... Or that anything appears the same to you as another man?" The sceptical position, however, can be framed with the help of the following models:

P₁: I can't experience another person's thoughts or feelings, and vice-versa. The way I have access to my own mind, is not the same with knowing other minds.

P₂: A necessary condition for knowing what another person is thinking or feeling is experiencing his thoughts or feelings. For this to happen, one has to have the access to the mind of the other.

P₃: I can never know what another person is really thinking or feeling, and vice-versa.

Therefore, everyone's mental contents (thoughts and feelings) are self-experiencing and hence private to himself. The above propositions raise the problem of other minds that will be discussed in detail in the Fourth Chapter of the thesis.

The origin of the private language argument actually hinges on the following two claims:

- ◇ The meaning of a word is the object the word stands for. (*PI* §1)
- ◇ Sensations are private. (*PI* §248)

Hence a language that refers to the private objects could only be understood by the owner of the sensations. Nobody else could understand it, because he has no access to the inner world of another person.

The origin of the confusion derives from the typical way philosophers tend to approach the problem, e.g. by introspection, the headache-approach, or by falling victims to the picture offered by our language. Wittgenstein does not want to deny that there are sensations, but only that the picture of an inner process could give us the right idea for the use of a word. He is not interested in ontology but in grammar, because grammar reveals the nature of our sensations. If someone wants to know

what pain is, he should not introspect himself, but examine the meaning of the word and its use.

The rationale of my approach adopted in this research will be to unveil the problematic interpretations of the private language argument. Saul Kripke conceives that the core of private-language discussion already lies in the preceding treatment of rule-following; a rule only adds content to illustrate the rule-follower as part of a wider community. From Hume to Russell and virtually in the case of all philosophers the problem appears as a tricky issue. Gilbert Ryle conceives of a private world of all experiences parallel to the public world because there is a soul in each of us. He calls it the 'para-mechanical world' of the mind as a substance. John V. Canfield thinks of a possibility of the notion of a private rule. For example, we might show that 'red' has a private meaning, in addition to its public significance, pointing within that what 'red' means to me, or really means.³ So the debate on the possibility of private language will proceed and take a more interesting shape. The interesting thing with the PLA is its variety of examples that have created a larger liberty for the commentators and interpreters to put them in shape and thus the PLA has become a masterpiece of a literature.

³ John V. Canfield, "Private Language: The Diary Case", *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* Vol. 79, No. 3 (September, 2001), pp. 377-394.

The significance of the private language problem:

The importance of the private language argument derives from its centrality in debates about the nature of language. One compelling theory about language has it that words map to ideas, concepts or representations in each person's mind. On this account, the concepts in my head are distinct from the concepts in another one's head. But I can match my concepts to a word in our common language, and then speak the word. Another person matches the word to a concept in his mind. So our concepts in effect form a private language which we translate into our common language and so share. This account is found, for example in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* and more recently in Jerry Fodor's *Language of Thought* theory.

Wittgenstein's argument seeks to show that this sort of account is incoherent. If the idea of a private language argument is incoherent, then it would follow that language is essentially public: that language is at its core a social phenomenon. This would have profound implications for other areas of philosophical study. For instance, if one cannot have a private language, it might not make any sense to talk of private sensations such as qualia; nor might it make sense to talk of a word as referring to a concept, where a concept is understood to be a private mental representation.

Apart from the theoretical and methodological significance, the research can have a practical importance also which cannot be ignored either. Language is a social phenomenon for Wittgenstein. He explores the picture of persons as immaterial souls seated in physical bodies. He focuses on our attention upon the persons as living human beings, existing in a shared, public, inter-subjective, spatio-temporal world. Language is the most predominant resource in the public forms of life and psychological concepts are inextricably interconnected with concepts relating to the human body and to naturally expressive human behaviour. Therefore, an intensive study in this area could open many new possibilities in terms of social and behavioural aspects of human beings.

Human beings are essentially social. They are always on the verge to express their feelings, and expressions are mediated by means of language. Language has the capacity to motivate a person to manifest their innermost feelings, as language functions like a tool to express the sensations. But the question arises: Can language be private? Is there any language that can be understood only by its speaker? Language is shared between persons of different locality in different forms of life. Even when the persons of different dialects talk with each other, there is every possibility of their dialects being shared. This is the same with decoding

possibility of their dialects being shared. This is the same with decoding certain codes which are private, used by a particular group of people.

The codes are essentially sharable and can be known by others too provided that they master the technique of the language used in the codes. This is the most important thing in the PLA – mastery of a technique or practising the use of the language.

The practice of spoken language is a public activity. It is not possible to practise a language privately, as it is not possible either to obey a rule privately. To carry out the task of letting the others know about my pain I have to master the technique of linguistic practice. Children cry to inform the elders about their pain, they do not speak until they are able to do so. Elders show certain indications to the children, and they follow those while being in pain. Wittgenstein has discussed about the exclamations of the children when expressing their pain at the start of the *Investigations*. He cites from Augustine's *Confessions* to show that the individual words name objects, the meaning is correlated with the word and the word stands for the object.⁴ It is the origin of the confusion we guess, as it paves the way for ostensive definition. Here Wittgenstein has been able to grasp the root cause of the problem. The reason he might have thought is the general tendency of a human being to point inwardly

⁴ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §1.

to describe his pain. Pointing towards an inner object is an act of ostention that one makes to convince others about his sensation. But it is not an act of language-game, since language is spoken when there is something sharable between persons. An essentially shared language is what Wittgenstein is asking for. The debate about the possibility of a private language stands on the possibility of a private rule. Now the question is whether there can be a private rule or not. If it were so, then anyone could employ a rule that is unique only to him and thereby could speak a private language. However, this seems to be a distant possibility since a rule is not kept in a secret place, it is 'in principle' possible to know the rule and apply it according to the use of the language.

We speak in ordinary language to put across our thoughts to other persons. In order to communicate, we generally use the language in a conventional way, so that others can follow it too. Wittgenstein has regarded conventions, customs, rituals etc. as intimately related to our mode of being. His notions of 'rule-following', 'language-game', 'form of life' are taken from the daily life of human beings. If we look at the human life from this point of view, we will find that a human life is a lived experience; it is not something hidden in a metaphysical world. Having said that, one has to admit that an individual has existence independent of others, and therefore, he has some sort of privacy

attached to his personality. We may assume that there are persons who have a special way of communicating, as they could employ certain techniques like building codes secretly within a few persons. For example, there could be e-mail communications between two sisters using particular sibling codes which are even lesser known than family codes.⁵ In e-mail communications, there is text visibility and people can develop in-group solidarity which is required for humour or linguistic performance also.⁶ The possibility of a private language is a much debated issue, although developing codes in e-mail is one of those options. Question remains, whether the codes can be broken or not. There is every possibility of decoding codes as this is also a case of expertise in a particular field and one can logically break the codes into formal language.

An overview of the thesis:

The following chapters critically aim to discuss about the *Private Language Argument*. The historical significance of the argument and the history of the problem have been discussed. The Second Chapter

⁵ Charley Rowe, "Building "Code": Development, Maintenance, and Change in a Private Language", *American Speech*, Vol. 82, No. 3, Fall 2007 (Available online @ <http://americanspeech.dukejournals.org/cgi/reprint/82/3/235.pdf>).

⁶ Nancy K. Baym, 'The Performance of Humor in Computer-Mediated Communication', *Journal of Computer-mediated Communication* Vol.1. Issue2 (Available online @ <http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol1/issue2/baym.html>).

discusses the origin of the private language argument. PLA dates back to the time of Descartes, when the *Cartesian Meditations* tried to prove that the human existence comes from the thinking, and therefore it has the maximum importance. Man is a thinking being as he can believe, introspect, evaluate his actions and all these are done with the supremacy of mind. For Descartes, mind is better known than the body. Here his position is completely opposite of Wittgenstein and this very notion of the mind has been severely attacked by Wittgenstein. This is the source of the privacy, if not the private language. But this proportionately makes the private language problem an issue of philosophical discourse. The representational role of mind has been given importance by Descartes and the innatism has even been able to inspire Chomsky's view on language. On the other, the *Cartesian* doctrine has been criticised by Gilbert Ryle as a "ghost in the machine." The doctrine has taken a form of myth in the sense that it has been able to grip the minds of both rationalist and empiricist philosophers.

In the contemporary period, Professor A.J. Ayer has talked about the issue on private language. Ayer is one of the foremost logical positivists and a central figure of the philosophical discussions on private language in post-Wittgenstein era in the British philosophy. According to Ayer, there is no reason to believe that there could not be a private language, in

principle. He thinks that a private code can be broken, and in the same way a private language which is spoken or understood only by a single speaker or a group of speakers, can be widely understood. Ayer has criticised Wittgenstein for not taking memory seriously as a criterion of truth, as memory can be cross-checked with others in the event of some incidents. In his view one can invent a language and develop this even though it is an idiosyncratic, private language.

Chomsky and Fodor are the ones who support the possibility of private language to a considerable extent. Chomsky was inspired by Descartes; Descartes's innatism has motivated Chomsky to develop his view of language that led to form his internalist structure of language. For Chomsky, the 'I-language' is an internal property of an individual when it is in use. He takes language as the mirror of the human mind. Fodor is famous for his 'Language of Thought' (LOT) hypothesis. He thinks that his LOT does not confront with Wittgenstein's view of language, because LOT is not necessarily determined by public events, neither it is determined by private events. The term signifies that one learns a language only when he has a language. He gives importance to the internal representations that unless someone is aware of the representation he is not in a position to express his thoughts, neither can he speak the language that is understood by others.

In the Third Chapter we examine the views of Wittgenstein and his followers in evaluating language as a social phenomenon. Language is a driving force that enables our thoughts to be expressed. The main function of language lies in its expression. The sometimes inexplicable remarks of Wittgenstein in his later period have given a view of language that is totally associated with our thoughts. From a Wittgensteinian standpoint one can say that language is like a game; like games are determined by the rules, language also is governed by certain rules. Rules, according to Wittgenstein, are public. One cannot dream to follow a rule, if he wants to obey a rule he has to practise it. Practice is something related with technique or skill, and technique or skill cannot be mastered unless and until one tests himself out in the public zone. It is similar with the game, when a performer in a game wants to improve on his technique he goes to the coach to get the guidance. This is a testimony to the public stage-setting or standard of meaning where there is a need of criterion based approach toward meaning. Wittgenstein has given so much emphasis on an independent criterion that he has rejected memory as a criterion of identity, because memory cannot be independent due to its dependence on the previous one to check whether the incident is remembered correctly or not. Therefore, a person is not able to privately remember his sensation and give them names. This approach toward meaning has made Wittgenstein distinguished among his

contemporaries and we consider this as a greater achievement in the philosophy of language than even his refutation of the *Cartesian* dualism of mind and body and the *Cartesian* conception of mental model. Wittgenstein has not taken any mystical approach regarding his view on language, neither was he a behaviourist, rather he has made his position clear that the meaning of a language cannot be confirmed if we look to our mind and sensation; instead it would be established only when it is in use. As the use is always public, therefore language also cannot be private.

One of the most crucial factors related with the private language problem, is the knowledge of other minds. This is a problem that talks about our self-centred perspective of persons. This problem is observed in the Fourth Chapter of the thesis. The problem of 'pain' has been discussed in the *PI* extensively and thus leaving a space for the problem of other minds. The problem starts with the sceptical perception of knowing the mind of other persons. The sceptic never believes that the other can think in the same way as he can. When he takes the position that only he can know about his pain and others can only surmise it, he is inviting a gap between him and the rest. This comes as an inference and at the same time it presumes that there is a private entity in a person that encourages him to fortify the claim that the way he knows his own pain

cannot be compared with the way others can know it. What Wittgenstein does is to search for a criterial justification to resolve the matter. Although, it is very difficult to deny that the intensity of pain is entirely private, but the communicatory level of pain is public and that can be known by other persons. Here again Wittgenstein's notion of grammar comes as the most handy option since grammar reveals the sensation and makes the other know about someone else being in pain. It is language that can bridge the gulf between the persons by the power of communication.

An intertwining between language, thought and meaning is being discussed in the Fifth Chapter. This is a vital portion of the thesis as it tends to unlock various interesting channels related with the PLA. At the end of the day the query is: What is the relation between language and thought? Another point that we would like to make about the chapter is that it connects both the philosophy of language and the philosophy of mind in the spirit of the PLA. We have to turn up to the transition from the *Tractatus* to the *PI* to see the methodological difference and the thread as well between the two phases. His later phase cannot be properly appraised if we overlook certain parts of his *Tractatus*. The picture theory of *Tractatus* might be seen as the groundwork of his philosophy in the later parts of his life as it talks about the meaningfulness of language. The



difference is in his approach – the earlier one was more atomistic, whilst the later one is more holistic. It is because in the later half of his thoughts there are provisions of various sectors of human work, and because he has gone for a communitarian view of language, the aesthetics has got the opportunity to participate in his philosophy. The layers of language are not only confined to the verbal interpersonal communication, they expand to the artistic and musical aspects of meaning. Language itself has art and musicality when it comes to the human cognition, and consciousness is something closely allied to the human use of language. Therefore, when an artist makes a painting or when a composer tunes the musical notes in a chord, their consciousness drives them into the perfection of their work. Then it relates to the audience who would assess the merit of their work and recognise the creative talent in them. The whole process is a gamut of activities or use of language. The foundation of language, thought and meaning lies in their understanding as a whole, not in isolation. The language may have applications that are private, but it does not make the language necessarily private. Thought is there to be expressed by language, but whether there can be thought independent of language is a critical question that has also been dealt with in this chapter.

The issue is whether one can employ a language that is private in nature. So far as Wittgenstein is concerned, that is not possible. PLA starts with an imaginary idea of a private language, but logically it is not possible to have a private language. The present thesis ventures into the broad areas of the problem that are stemmed from the discussions of a large number of philosophers. It is almost futile to prove that there is any sort of private language, rather the attempt is to disentangle the intricacies related with the problem. Since it is about the foundation of language and thought where one is looking for the meaning and how to establish that within the framework of a broad spectrum, it was due for us to plan the research into the scheme of the prescribed chapters.