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How Language Powers the Mind

Abstracts for the Rotelli Lectures 2020

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The theme of the lectures is the constitutive dependence of characteristic mental capacities on the ability to communicate in words or similar signs, and the social life it makes possible. The claim defended is that language is more or less bound to generate certain distinctive mental capacities, which are not themselves presupposed to having language. The method followed is to explore, counterfactually, how the advent of even a simple, information-sharing language would elicit the capacities in subjects otherwise like us.

Minds with words, so the argument goes, will more or less inevitably 1. decide about how to judge and what to think; 2. control their thinking by rule-based reasoning; 3. enjoy a special perceptual consciousness; 4. make commitments and form community; 5. assume responsibility for what they do; and 6. constitute persons and selves. Is language necessary for the capacities it is said to catalyze? Perhaps not, at least in the case of the first three, more purely psychological abilities. But even if they might exist without language—nothing is said about that topic here—the important point is that language itself does not presuppose them.

Lecture 1. Minds with words decide how to judge and what to think

Take beliefs and desires to constitute functional states that must be present in any agent, however simple. Acting on such attitudes, agents will do things intentionally. But they may not be able to act intentionally so as to shape their own attitudes: say, for example, to check their beliefs for responsiveness to data. If agents share a common language for reporting on their environment, however, things are bound to be different. Being able to decide what to say truthfully and carefully on some issue—being able to decide how to judge—they will be able to

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decide what, in light of the data, to believe. Why? Because otherwise what they say would be no guide to how they are likely to act, and their language would be manifestly dysfunctional. But how do the on-off judgments associated with speech relate to the scalar credences that, by received accounts, constitute functional beliefs? They are consistent with credences insofar as they are stakes-sensitive: you may judge that p , without a credence of 1, provided you treat the non- p possibilities as unworrying or unlikely. Even if credences are behaviorally prior, however, judgments still play important roles. They can elicit credence as needed. They can make the contents of credences more articulate. And they can enable subjects to extend credence to novel (e.g. evaluative) contents; to mimic credence in acts of acceptance, trust and hope; and, of course, to mask credence in deception and self-deception.

Lecture 2. Minds with words control their thought by rule-based reasoning

Minds with words might make judgments carefully but only in a 'blind' or 'brute' manner; registering perception or belief that things are thus and so, they might just rationally transition, without knowing why, to believing a further fact supported by things being that way—say, that p . In such an exercise they would not reason their way to believing that p , as in concluding 'so, p ' or 'it follows that p '. That would require them also to have beliefs about the linkage between what the premises or perceptions indicate and what the conclusion says. Reasoning is bound to appeal as a way of building up common ground between speaking minds. And, happily, the language that facilitates communication also enables speakers to form the required sorts of linking belief. But while reasoning makes special demands in those ways, it does not fit an intellectualist image. It remains tied to rational transitioning, as the Lewis Carroll's Tortoise shows; it may operate on a standby basis, intervening only when normal processing raises red flags; and the linking beliefs it presupposes may be held in a case-by-case, not a general way. Moreover, reasoning must be able to operate at bedrock, when the rules followed cannot be explicated further and must be salient from examples. The problem of how it operates at bedrock involves the rule-following problem associated with Wittgenstein and Kripke. The best story suggests with wordsing minds can access bedrock rules insofar as instances exemplify the

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rules for them: this, in a proleptic way—via dispositions to extrapolate in certain ways from examples—and subject to mutual correction in the event of divergence between the parties.

Lecture 3. Minds with words enjoy a special perceptual consciousness

If I make a judgment that p , as minds with words can do, I will have a ‘maker’s knowledge’ of what I am doing, and recognize what (and that) I believe. Thus, my belief will be conscious in a perfectly ordinary sense of that term. But if I reason from things I believe, then by our account of the reasoning available to minds with words, I will also hold those beliefs consciously; in this case, I will have a ‘taker’s knowledge’ of what I believe. So what then of the perceptions I reason from? Do I have a taker’s knowledge of what I perceive? And if I do, does that ensure the presence of a rich form of consciousness? Perception is a process, potentially present in mute as well as speaking creatures, that classifies directly available items by directly available properties; makes and accumulates its classifications as it varies attentional focus; and normally but not invariably triggers belief and action. Even unreasoning subjects, then, may not form perceptual beliefs in a wholly ‘blind’ manner—say, that associated with ‘super blind-sight’—and must count in a suitably contrastive sense as conscious. But perception becomes conscious in a richer sense among subjects who speak like you or me and can reason from perception. It will present a field for us to mine in forming our judgments, that is manifestly defeasible, indefinitely explorable, and directly accessible. Is perceptual consciousness in that richer sense the real thing: does it qualify as phenomenal consciousness, as it is now often put? Perhaps. There are certainly more things to say in favor of that view than are generally recognized.

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Lecture 4. Minds with words form commitments and community

In our discussion of the capacities of judgment, reasoning and consciousness, we have been focused on the personal psychological impact of speech. In the remaining lectures, we shift the focus to the social psychological impact of speech, as we might describe it. The first effect, explored here, is to make such minds capable of mutual commitment: capable of speaking with authority for themselves in communicating with others. Minds with words can rely on a maker's knowledge of their attitudes to set aside misleading-mind excuses—'I misread my thoughts'—and thereby avow (rather than just report) various attitudes. And they can rely on that knowledge to set aside changed-mind excuses also—'I changed my view'—in pledging (rather than just avowing or reporting) their intentions. In such exercises, they make their words more expensive and credible than they would otherwise be and, in that game-theory sense, make commitments to one another. As a result of that capacity for commitment, they can form distinctive kinds of community. They can build up common ground with one another—say, a set of beliefs to which each is manifestly committed—in any conversation. They can readily form joint intentions, positioning themselves to be able to avow an intention on behalf of a collectivity. And they can constitute themselves as a group agent, with each being manifestly committed to acting by established protocols when they act for the group as a whole; and this, across any in a range of possible scenarios.

Lecture 5. Minds with words assume responsibility for what they do

Assume that I hold you responsible for acting (only) on judgments of value that we share. To hold you responsible for a particular failure, then—to blame you—must be to make two assumptions. First, that you have the general capacity to understand what it is to make judgments of value. And, second, that you had the capacity to act on our shared judgments of value in the case where you failed: that you could have done otherwise. Must minds with words have the capacity to understand

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values? Yes. They will avow many desires, based on desiderata that make avowal sensible, both in an active manner and a virtual: that is, by failing to disavow desires that others manifestly expect them to act on. But they may often be unmoved by desires they previously avowed, while recognizing at the same time that it is a failure for them as commissive subjects not to stand by the avowed desires. And that should give them access to the idea of something's being desirable in a familiar sense for any agent: it answers to desires that they may not feel but are committed to stand by. Must they also have the capacity to act on shared judgments of value associated with fitness for responsibility? Again, yes. In any functional society certain shared, routine norms of non-violence, non-fraudulence, and so on, are bound to materialize. Members will virtually avow the desirability of abiding by such norms, and virtually pledge to conform to them, insofar as they are manifestly expected both to judge conformity desirable and to intend to conform, and they acquiesce in that expectation. Registering that you have an important stake in proving faithful to those norms, then, I can exhort you to act appropriately, relying on your responsiveness to the considerations that triggered your commitment, including the reliance on others that it invited. I can say 'you should and can tell the truth', expecting this to help elicit the very responsiveness it posits: I can hold out the ideal in the expectation that it will move you, so that the 'can' does not just mark a (bare or robust) possibility. And if you fail to tell the truth, and I continue to think that you were (and are still) exhortable—whether by me, another or yourself—I will naturally express my impatience in words of a similar hortatory character: 'you should and could have told the truth'.

Lecture 6. Minds with words constitute persons and selves

Adult, able-minded persons are subjects like you and me who by their nature command certain rights. But what is the nature in virtue of which they command such rights? It is unsatisfactory to respond by offering a list of agential capacities that distinguish such human beings from other animals. What unifies these, and what gives them a connection with rights? A more promising approach starts with a prominent capacity that speech confers on minds with words. This is the ability we have to make commitments in which we speak for ourselves and, as a byproduct, project an authorized *persona* on which we invite others to rely; it is the ability, in an old word, to *personate*.

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We make commitments of this kind, not just actively, but virtually: that is, by not rejecting the many expectations that others manifestly make about us in social life. This account explains why persons must have some rights: in their absence, invitations to reliance would mean nothing. And it also explains the connection between persons and selves. Every adult, able-minded person must have a 1st-person self that they identify indexically—this will be their reference point in attitude and action—so that they cannot misidentify this self yet, as Hume stresses, may learn little about it from introspection. Every person must have a 2nd-person self that they project in inviting others to rely on them: this is who I am, each suggests in this vein. And every person must have a 3rd-person self, or indeed set of selves, that is constituted by the picture of them that emerges, subject only to their partial control, among their fellows; this is the self that concerns them in *amour propre*. The three selves vary in the requirements for their survival, in how epistemically accessible they are, and in how far they command our investment or care.

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