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A new argument for ‘Thinking-as-Speaking’

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**Abstract**

Sometimes, thinking a thought and saying something to oneself are the same event. Call this the ‘thinking-as-speaking’ thesis. It stands in opposition to the idea that we think something first, and then say it. One way to argue for the thesis is to show that the content of a token thought cannot be fully represented by a token mental state before the production of the utterance which expresses it. I make an argument for that claim based on speech act theory. Many inner speech utterances are inner speech *acts*; as such they are individuated by an amalgam of semantic content and illocutionary force, which only come together with the performance of the speech act. Call the performance of a speech act its meaning and call its meaning its content. Since a token thought is individuated by its content it follows that the content of the speech act is not represented by any token mental state before the speech act is performed. Metaphysically, a thought, when it is an inner speech act, is not an object of any kind, but an action – the action of performing the speech act. I illustrate my argument with the action of deciding something.

**Keywords:** inner speech; speech act; speaker meaning; thinking; thought content

# Section 1. Introduction

Ever since Plato first suggested that thinking should be understood as silently talking to oneself,[[1]](#endnote-1) some philosophers have argued that, in some sense, thinking *just is* inner speaking, and that inner speaking *just is* thinking. Vygotsky (1987) seems to be saying something like this when he says: ‘Thought is not merely expressed in words; it comes into existence through them’ (218). Likewise Frankish (2018) when he says: ‘Rather than just enabling thoughts to become conscious, [inner speech] must enable a distinctive kind of thought, which is conscious. It must *make conscious thought*, rather than just *making thought conscious*’ (228). Since I’ll be referring to this idea a lot, I need to give it a name: call it the *thinking-as-speaking* thesis. The thinking-as-speaking thesis is not that all instances of inner speaking are instances of thinking, or that all instances of thinking are instances of inner speaking. It is generally agreed that inner speaking is involved in a wide range of cognitive functions; the thinking-as-speaking thesis is that one of those functions is thinking. It is also generally agreed that thinking can involve multiple formats, not just a linguistic one; the thinking-as-speaking thesis is that some instances of thinking are also instances of inner speaking.[[2]](#endnote-2) Explaining exactly what the thesis amounts to has proved challenging, not least because, while the idea has a lot of intuitive appeal, another intuition pulls strongly in the opposite direction; we feel that thoughts are things we have first, and only afterwards do we put them into words, often in order to communicate them to someone else. Furthermore, this intuition is thought by some to be supported by a great deal of philosophical argument and empirical evidence.

Several theorists have recently argued for different versions of what I’m calling the thinking-as-speakingthesis: Roessler (2016); Gauker (2018); Vicente and Jorba (2019); Kompa, forthcoming; Vicente, forthcoming.[[3]](#endnote-3) Two other versions, which are the ones I want to focus on, are Geurts (2018) and Deamer (2021), and their accounts are distinctive in that they invoke *speech act theory* to make their arguments.[[4]](#endnote-4) Crucially, for my purposes, they both deny that, before we perform a speech act, the determinate content of the speech act is represented by a mental state. But, while this is a *claim* they both make, it is not one that either of them offers an *argument* for, and that is the goal of this paper. I should stress that my goal is not to deny their claim, but to argue for it.

To do that I will argue that it is *inconsistent with speech act theory* to suppose that what is (silently) uttered by a thinker in inner speech can be fully represented beforehand by a mental state. My argument, in summary, goes like this:

1. Many inner speech utterances are speech acts and as such they are individuated by speaker meaning.[[5]](#endnote-5) Speaker meaning is an amalgam of illocutionary force and semantic content.
2. Semantic content is determined by the words (and syntax) of a natural language expression. The choice of words a speaker makes, and how she structures them, when constructing an utterance, is influenced by the illocutionary force with which she performs the speech act.
3. So, whatever mental state (or states) might exist before the performance of a speech act, the content of those states cannot represent the speaker meaning of the speech act because speaker meaning is only fully determined during the production of the (silent) utterance. The content of the mental state(s) and the content of the speech act are not the same.[[6]](#endnote-6)
4. If that’s right, then we have an argument for the key claim after all. When we perform an inner speech act in order to perform one of the functions which Deamer and Geurts describe, ‘there is no thought “in mind”, present and accessible, that is then articulated in language’ (Deamer 2021, 431) because no mental state can fully represent the speaker meaning of a speech act.

We should not conclude from this that having a token thought actually involves having *two* token thoughts – a mental state in a non-linguistic format, and an expression in natural language – each individuated by slightly different contents. Nor should we conclude that we have one token thought which has different content at different times – that falls foul of the principle that a thought is individuated by its content. Better to say that neither of these objects is *the* thought, and that *the* thought is not an object of any kind, but an action – the action of performing the speech act.

The rest of the paper goes as follows. Section 2 provides a short account of the arguments of Geurts (2018) and Deamer (2021). I explain that, while their respective arguments lead them both to *claim* that the content of an inner speech act is not represented beforehand by a mental state with the same content, neither provide an argument for this claim. In section 3 I turn to speech act theory. Despite the complete absence of any references to inner speech in the speech act literature, I make a case for the existence of *inner speech acts*. Section 4 takes the inner speech act of deciding something as a case study, to illustrate the argument sketched above in points 1 - 4. Section 5 raises an objection to my account and responds to it. Section 6 concludes.

# Section 2. Do we think before we speak?

Geurts (2018) uses speech act theory to answer a puzzle about inner speech: if the main purpose of *overt* speech is to communicate something to someone else, why would we need to use *inner* speech to communicate with ourselves? Don’t we know what we think already? His answer to the puzzle, roughly, is that inner speech utterances are speech acts, and the function of speech acts is to get something done; in the case of *inner* speech acts what is being done is ‘entraining commitment’. When I say to myself ‘Time to leave the house, or I’ll be late’ I am performing the speech act of committing myself to leaving the house now, so I won’t be late. When I say to myself ‘It’s sunny today’ I am performing the speech act of committing myself to behave in the future in ways that are consistent with what I said. (To put on sunscreen, for example.) Note something else Geurts says: ‘… I oppose the widely held view that, inevitably, a sincere speech act must be preceded by the mental state it expresses. It is perfectly coherent to hold that a self-addressed statement may be a way of *forming* a belief, that a self-addressed command may be a way of *forming* an intention, and so on’ (278, emphasis added). In other words, Geurts rejects the view that there is a mental state which represents a fully specified thought (a ‘belief’ or an ‘intention’) which is subsequently expressed in words. But note, also, that he does not claim that what he says about the ‘commitment entrainment’ function of inner speech is an *argument* for rejecting the view that ‘a sincere speech act must be preceded by the mental state it expresses’, only that it is *consistent* with it: ‘[I]n this paper I will neither defend nor presuppose that self-addressed speech acts may serve to form intentions and beliefs. However, my theory is consistent with that possibility, which I consider to be an important selling point’ (278). I mention this because the purpose of *this* paper, unlike Geurts’, is precisely to argue that no mental state *could* fully represent what an inner speech act then expresses.

Next, let’s turn to Deamer (2021). She agrees with Geurts that at least some inner speech utterances have the function of committing the inner speaker in some way, but she denies that they all have that function. Geurts’ idea, she says, seems to work well for promises and directives, but less well for questions and assertions. If I ask myself (silently) ‘When do I need to leave the house to get my train?’ it is hard to see what I am committing myself too. More likely I am simply deliberating about when to leave home to catch my train. And if (once on the train) I say to myself ‘The state of this train is disgraceful!’ it is very unclear what I am committing myself to, exactly. Deamer doubts the subject is committing herself to anything.

Deamer offers an alternative explanation for the function of at least some utterances of what she calls ‘self-talk’:[[7]](#endnote-7) We talk to ourselves because we are ‘to some extent, self-blind’ (431) when it comes to our ‘communicative intentions’, and we need self-talk to find out what they are. (She reminds us of the well know quote from E. M. Forster: ‘How can I tell what I think, until I see what I say?’) What she means by ‘communicative intention’ is ‘(the thought/intention/belief) underlying the utterance’ (429). In keeping with the interpretivist position of Carruthers (2009, 2011) and Cassam (2011) – the idea that we must interpret our own inner speech to find out what we think – she claims that we don’t have access to our mental states *in general*. She builds on this idea to argue that our communicative intentions are among the mental states we don’t have access to *in particular*:

Just as we don’t know our own mental states until they make themselves manifest to us via some medium on which we have a grip, so we don’t know our communicative intentions, until we have spoken (429)

She then offers an alternative analysis of why we might sometimes have the *impression* we know what we are about to say before we say it (even though we don’t really) which, with its emphasis on achievement, is very much in keeping with speech act theory:

[W]hat guides our self-speaking is typically not prior knowledge of what we’re going to say, but rather a vaguer sense, prospectively, of what we’re trying to *achieve* by speaking given the context, and, retrospectively, whether we have expressed ourselves aptly or not once we have spoken. (432. Emphasis added)

Deamer also says that inner speech sometimes performs another function, an ‘expressive’ one, meaning that it sometimes *reveals* things to us about ourselves, rather than *communicates* them.

Saying ‘Ouch!’ *reveals* that I am in pain, it doesn’t describe me as in pain (unlike saying ‘I’m in pain’ does). Similarly, saying ‘To hell with you!’ reveals that I am unhappy with what you’ve done, it doesn’t describe my unhappiness (unlike saying ‘I’m unhappy with what you’ve done’). Similarly saying to yourself ‘Come on!’, or ‘I’m such an idiot!’, or whatever, reveals something about you. It seems that a great deal of self-talk is expressive in this sense. (431. Emphasis in the original)

In her final remarks Deamer makes a claim that echoes Geurts’:

Contrary to many views of communication, there is no thought ‘in mind’, present and accessible, that is then articulated in language (431)

In other words, there is no representation of what the thinker is about to say instantiated in the thinker’s head, the content of which is fully determined, and which is then subsequently made available to the thinker by being translated into a natural language format. The speech act involved in communicating the thought (to oneself) *is* the thought.

I agree with Deamer’s claim. The only problem I have with it is that it doesn’t follow from her argument (i.e., her argument that the function of inner speech is to reveal to us our communicative intentions, or to be expressive). It would be quite consistent to say that inner speech utterances are used to perform all three of the functions she and Geurts argue for and yet still maintain that these thoughts existed as mental states, with determinate content, before the utterance was made. Perhaps, when I said to myself ‘Time to leave the house, or I’ll be late’, I already instantiated a mental state which represented the content ‘Time to leave the house or I’ll be late’, and the inner speech utterance was my way of committing to it. Perhaps, when I asked myself, ‘When do I need to leave the house to get my train?’, I already instantiated a mental state which represented the question ‘When do I need to leave the house to get my train?’ and the utterance was a way of revealing to myself that I need to catch a train. When I said to myself ‘I’m such an idiot!’, perhaps I already instantiated a mental state which represented ‘I’m such an idiot!’, and the utterance was my way of expressing it. In short, inner speech utterances might have all the functions Deamer and Geurts say they have, but that does not show conclusively that ‘there is no thought “in mind”, present and accessible, that is then articulated in language.’ For all either of them has said, there might be.

# Section 3. Inner speech utterances as inner speech acts

I claimed in section one that at least some inner speech utterances function as inner speech *acts*, and some readers will find this at best surprising, and at worst implausible. The purpose of this section is to justify that claim.

The idea that *inner* speech utterances are at least sometimes speech *acts* appears to be entirely absent from the speech act literature.[[8]](#endnote-8) Inner speech is not mentioned by either Austin (1962) or Searle (1976) and, to take a more recent example, neither inner nor silent speech get a single mention in any of the 15 essays published in *New Work on Speech Acts*, (Fogal, D., Harris, D. W., Moss, M (eds.), 2018). This is surprising (to me) for two reasons. Firstly, speech act theory orthodoxy has it that speaker meaning is underdetermined by semantic content alone and depends also on illocutionary force. If that’s true of overt speech, then we need a special reason for why it isn’t also true of inner speech. (You might think it is just *assumed* to be true of inner speech, and not worth special attention, but this can’t be right. So-called ‘reactive’ inner speech for example (see Gregory 2020), where inner speech phrases just pop into your head, would seem to lack illocutionary force. These utterances appear to be ‘acts of speech’ which are nevertheless not ‘speech acts’.[[9]](#endnote-9)) Other questions present themselves: Where inner speech *does* have illocutionary force, does it function in just the same way as when that same utterance – an utterance with the same semantic content – is made overtly? Are there some kinds of illocutionary force which are *exclusive* to inner speech acts, given its private nature? If ‘inner speech acts’ are not accommodated by the Searlean classifications of speech act (see below), in what classification *are* they accommodated? I am not aware of any discussion of these interesting questions.

The second reason to be surprised is that, by contrast, among some philosophers who write about inner speech, the concept of ‘inner speech acts’ is more or less taken for granted. This follows from the widespread agreement among these philosophers that ‘IS [inner speech] has almost as many functions or uses, as we can discover in OS [overt speech]’ (Martinez-Manrique and Vicente 2015, 7). Since one of those common functions or uses is performative (in a broad sense), it follows that inner speech must be performative too. It also follows from the widespread agreement among these philosophers that inner speech is, in very many ways, much the same as overt speech *minus the physical vocalisation of the words* (see Loevenbruck et al. 2018, for a review of the scientific and psycho-linguistic evidence and which finds in favour of this view). If inner speech is so closely related to overt speech, and if overt speech is performative, it would be just extraordinary if at least some inner speech utterances were not also speech acts.

Geurts (2018), for example, thinks it follows straightforwardly from the Vygotskian idea (see Alderson-Day and Fernyhough 2015) that inner speech is a form of internalised outer speech:

Speech acts start their career as a form of social interaction, but almost as soon as they begin to talk, children will also talk to themselves, using speech acts to shape their own behaviour… social talk becomes private talk, which at first is mostly overt, but is increasingly internalised to become inner speech, or ‘verbal thought’ (272).

Wilkinson and Fernyhough (2018) think the ‘primal use’ of inner speech is to make speech acts:

[W]hat is [inner speech]? In line with a number of other theorists (Vygotsky 1987/1934, Fernyhough 1996, Martínez-Manrique & Vicente 2010) our answer is: *it is speech*. It is speech in two important senses. First, it is a productive rather than re-creative activity. Second, its primal use is in making *speech acts*: asserting, questioning, insulting etc. (247. Emphasis in the original).

Machery (2018) writes: ‘Most speech act types are found in inner speech*.* In inner speech, one finds assertive speech acts, directive speech acts, commissive speech acts, and expressive speech acts (Searle 1969)’ (262–263). I agree with Machery. To illustrate the point, suppose we adopt Searle’s (1976) taxonomy of illocutionary acts into five mutually exclusive and jointly exhaustive classes. The following lists and defines each class. I have added to each category an example of a speech act which, I suggest, could easily have been uttered in inner speech:

* *Representative* or *assertive*. The speaker becomes committed to the truth of the propositional content; for example, asserting (silently): ‘It’s raining’.
* *Directive*. The speaker tries to get the hearer to act in such a way as to fulfil what is represented by the propositional content; for example, (silently) commanding (oneself to): ‘Hurry up!’
* *Commissive*. The speaker becomes committed to act in the way represented by the propositional content; for example, (silently) promising (oneself): ‘I’ll finish the washing up tomorrow’.
* *Expressive*. The speaker simply expresses the sincerity condition of the illocutionary act: saying (silently, to oneself) ‘He’s arrived – thank God!’
* *Declarative*. The speaker performs an action just representing herself (silently) as performing that action: ‘I hereby promise not to touch another drop’.

In short, those philosophers of inner speech who take it for granted that inner speech utterances are, at least sometimes, speech acts, seem to be justified.

# Section 4. No mental state represents the speaker meaning of deciding

Readers might be persuaded by the previous section that inner speech utterances can sometimes function as inner speech *acts*, but still not convinced that the contents of a speech act, silent or otherwise, cannot be previously represented by a mental state – the claim I made in section 1. In this section I want to make good on that claim and illustrate my argument using the case of deciding something. To recap: I said in Section 1 that the speaker meaning of a speech act is an amalgam of illocutionary force and semantic content. I argued that, since semantic content is determined only by the production of a natural language expression, no mental state which precedes the production of such an expression can claim to represent the speaker meaning of a speech act. How does that claim hold up in the case of deciding?

The term ‘deciding’, of the kind I am interested in here – the kind associated with an episode of deliberation – has two meanings. It can refer to the activity of trying to bring it about that one comes to a decision (call this *deciding-as-activity*), and it can refer to the event of deciding something in particular (call this *deciding-as-action*). Let’s illustrate the difference with an example that includes both senses of the term. Suppose I am trying to work out the best time to leave home for a meeting; that is, I consciously engage in an episode of deliberation with the explicit purpose of trying to decide, at the end of it, when to leave home. How do I go about this? I might ask myself a few pertinent questions: How much time ahead of the meeting do I want to arrive? Which mode of transport will get me there fastest or most reliably? How long will the journey take? etc. All these questions will receive a response of some kind. (By my lights, many of the utterances which constitute this inner dialogue, and which precede the conclusion to it, are *also* inner speech acts, but I am not going to argue for that here. For an argument for this claim see Kompa and Mueller 2022).[[10]](#endnote-10) This inner dialogue is an example of deciding-as-activity. Suppose, at the end of this episode of deliberation, I decide that 10.30 is the time I should leave home. This is an example of deciding-as-action, and the question is: What form will the event of my deciding-as-action take? I say that it will take the form of an inner speech act, the function of which, in this case, and in line with Geurts’ (2018) argument, is to entrain my commitment – to commit myself to leaving home at 10.30. The full speaker meaning of the deciding-as-action speech act will depend on the content generated by the deciding-as-activity which preceded it, some of which, at least, is being held in my short-term memory. For example, if the meeting is very important, and being late is of great concern to me, I might make my commitment a strong one. I might say to myself ‘I must leave the house at 10.30 at the absolute latest’. If I am more relaxed about being on time, I might say something like ‘Around 10.30 should be fine’. If my main concern is leaving myself an acceptable margin of error, I might say, ‘10.30 will get me there with lots of time to spare’. My speech act might be the (silent) performance of one of these (or one of many other possible) expressions, each with its own distinct combination of semantic content and illocutionary force, and therefore distinct speaker meaning. In cases like this, deciding-as-action is like any other speech act: there is no mental state which represents the speaker meaning of the act because the full meaning only comes into being with the performance of the act.

But one might think that any of these speech acts could be performed just as successfully by a much more minimal inner speech utterance – something like ‘10.30 it is’ or even just ‘10.30’. If that’s right, then the semantic content might appear to be doing almost no work at all, in which case there is no reason to think that the speaker meaning of the speech act is not represented by a mental state – the mental state of intending to choose 10.30 as the time to leave the house. If that’s right, then there is, after all, a mental state which represents the speaker meaning of the speech act. And this contradicts my key claim.

But this is too quick. If I make my decision-as-action by inner speaking nothing but ‘10.30’ then part of the function which this speech act is performing, as well as the function of entraining commitment, is the function of selecting (choosing) one of the options previously considered during the episode of deliberation. Since the option being selected is already in the format of natural language (because, of course, the deliberation was conducted in natural language) the option being selected already *has* semantic content.[[11]](#endnote-11) The speech act ‘10.30’ has the function, in effect, of pointing at a natural language expression (the option being held in short term memory) and saying, ‘That one’. (The speaker meaning of ‘10.30’ on its own doesn’t have enough semantic content to achieve what the speech act has the function of achieving – committing to leaving the house at 10.30, with whatever level of urgency the deliberation determined. The missing semantic content comes from the option being selected by the speech act.) The option being selected (and its semantic content) is represented by *one* mental state; the intention to perform a speech act with the function of selecting it, and committing to it, is represented by *another* mental state. If that’s right then, as with other speech acts, there is no single mental state which represents the full speaker meaning of the speech act, because no single mental state represents *both* its semantic content *and* its illocutionary force.

# Section 5. Objection

You have gone to great lengths to argue that no mental state can represent the full content of a speech act (i.e., speaker meaning), but you accept that, before a subject performs a particular speech act there must be, at the very least, a corresponding mental state which represents an *intention* to do whatever it is the subject wants to do with the act (i.e., with the performance of the utterance). Surely that intention will be characterised by very much the same sort of content as the speaker meaning of the speech act itself even if, strictly speaking, the content is different. Why does it really *matter* if the content of the mental state which represents the intention to perform the speech act is different from the content of the speech act?

## Response

The significance of the difference is metaphysical; it concerns the ontological nature of a token thought. If I am right, and neither the mental state which represents an intention to perform a speech act, nor the natural language expression which the thinker utters, fully express the content of the speech act (its speaker meaning), then neither one can be said to fully represent the thinker’s thought. The metaphysical question is: When we say that a subject has *had* a thought, or *expressed* a thought, or *entertained* a thought, what sort of *thing*, exactly, are we referring to? My suggestion is that we are referring to the speech act itself. A thought which is individuated by the speaker meaning of a speech act is not an object of any kind (such as a mental state, or an expression in a language of thought, or an expression in a natural language) but an *action*: the action of performing the speech act. (To explore the full significance of the idea that thoughts are actions not objects is beyond the scope of this paper.)

# Section 6. Conclusion

A number of philosophers are attracted to what I have called the *thinking-as-speaking* thesis – the idea that some thoughts *just are* inner speech utterances. Standing in the way of this thesis is the popular idea that the content of a thought is fully determined before it is translated from a non-linguistic format into the thinker’s natural language. I argued against this by appealing to speech act theory. I argued that many inner speech utterances are inner speech *acts*. If that’s right, then inner speech utterances, like other speech acts, are individuated by their speaker meaning – an amalgam of illocutionary force and semantic content. I argued that the full and final meaning of a speech act only comes into being with its performance, and therefore cannot be represented beforehand by a mental state. In other words, the content of the thought being expressed by the inner speech utterance is different from the content of any mental state (or states) which might have existed before the performance of the utterance. I argued that we should reject the assumption that a thought is *any* kind of object, such as a mental state or an expression in a natural language, and recognise that a thought is a kind of action – the action of performing a speech act.

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1. **Notes**

   ‘[Thinking is] the talk which the soul has with itself about any subjects which it considers…. [T]he soul…when it thinks, is merely conversing with itself, asking itself questions and answering, affirming and denying…’ (Plato 1921). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. For example, the *thinking-as-speaking* thesis as I interpret it is entirely consistent with the idea that animals and pre-linguistic children can properly be described as capable of some kinds of thinking (Bermudez 2003). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. I should emphasise that this is how I interpret these theorists. They might disagree. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Wilkinson (2020) also makes good use of speech act theory – in his case to argue for the agentive the role of inner speech in self-knowledge. As I read him, his position is similar to Deamer’s. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. I use this phrase to refer to what the speaker means in the broadest sense of that term, not in the narrow (Gricean) sense of conversational implicature. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. A more traditional way of expressing this point would be to say that the *propositional* content, which many philosophers assume is represented by a mental state before being ‘translated’ into natural language, is not the same as the *semantic* content of the final utterance. Vicente (forthcoming) argues convincingly that ‘there can be a lot of *transformation* in the process of converting a thought into words’ (1, emphasis added). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Both Geurts and Deamer (whose paper is a response to Geurts’) use the term self-talk rather than the term inner speech. They do this to draw attention to *what* is being done, rather than *how* it is being done. Geurts (2018) writes: ‘Much of the previous research on self-talk is focused on inner speech. To my knowledge, there is no evidence that the dichotomy between inner and outer speech is of any great significance, and therefore I prefer the term ‘self-talk’, which is neutral between “inner” and “outer”’ (273). My thanks to an anonymous referee for encouraging to make this clarification. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. At least this is my impression; I may be doing some speech act theorists an injustice. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. This way of putting things comes from Roessler (2016). [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. They write: ‘We will argue that *pragmatically expanded* inner speech may assist deliberative thinking and reasoning by re-purposing pragmatic principles that also guide conversations with others’ (2, original emphasis). When explaining their use of the term *‘pragmatically’* they refer explicitly to Austin (1962). [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. This is not to deny that non-linguistic formats are also involved in the cognitive processes involved in deliberation. I only mean that for the subject to have become aware of the options they must be in a natural language format.

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