Why Language Exists: Stating the Obvious
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Abstract

There are words. There are sentences. There are languages. Commonsense linguistic realism is the conjunction of the three preceding claims. Linguists and philosophers including Noam Chomsky (1986, 2000), Georges Rey (2006, 2008), and Barry C. Smith (2006) have presented skeptical doubts regarding the existence of linguistic entities. These doubts provide no good reason to deny commonsense linguistic realism. Some skeptical doubts are in fact not directed at the metaphysical thesis of commonsense linguistic realism but rather only at non-metaphysical methodological concerns. In some instances, linguistic antirealists make their case by foisting upon the realist assumptions that she need not hold regarding the nature of linguistic entities. Furthermore, those who have denied the existence of linguistic entities have not themselves presented an alternative account of words, sentences, or languages that is coherent or defensible. I present an elaboration and defense of commonsense linguistic realism as a metaphysical thesis, with the aim of deflating concerns that have arisen about the existence of language.

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The case I will present for commonsense linguistic realism is a simple one: I conclude that words, sentences, and languages exist. One can tell that such entities exist by noting that words, sentences, and languages are referred to in obviously true statements such as the following:

Obvious Facts

1. 'Aristotle' is a name.

2. 'Aristotle had a beard' is a meaningful sentence of English.

3. 'Aristotle had a beard' is true.

4. Bill Clinton said "It depends on what the meaning of the word 'is' is."

5. 'Achtung' is not a word in the vocabulary of English.

6. The German word 'Achtung' means attention.

7. The vocabulary of English contains a significant number of French terms due to the Norman Conquest of 1066.

The burden on linguists and philosophers who would want to persuasively deny commonsense linguistic realism would be to provide an alternative account that explains the

truth of sentences 1-7 and the wide range of metalinguistic statements we make in English. While there has been a raging debate over the existence of languages within both philosophy and linguistics since the publication of Chomsky's *Knowledge of Language,* the opponents of commonsense linguistic realism have yet to provide such an alternative.

I will dub the position that denies that there are words, sentences, and languages 'linguistic nihilism.' Much of the recent philosophical debate over linguistic nihilism has focused on the best-worked out and most detailed version of this view, due to Georges Rey. Rey has done admirable work in taking the position of Noam Chomsky and linguists and philosophers influenced by him, and spelling out and defending this position within a metaphysical framework. Rey has tried to present a coherent alternative to commonsense linguistic realism in his work. Neither Rey's arguments in favor of his linguistic nihilism, nor his alternative approach to linguistic entities are, as I will argue below, successful.

Rey's Linguistic Nihilism

In "The Intentional Inexistence of Language—But Not Cars," Rey argues that languages do not exist, and he presents an alternative account according to which linguistic entities are "intentional inexistences" like mythical creatures, fictional characters, and the pseudo-objects apparently seen in the case of perceptual illusions. There are two main arguments in Rey's papers on this topic. The first argument is that there is no clear way to present a reductive definition of words or sentences in terms of acoustic phenomena, due to differences in the sounds produced by individuals who apparently utter tokens of the very same word and sentence type. I will call this argument the *acoustic argument.* The second argument notes that the syntactic structures discussed by contemporary linguists bear little resemblance to the apparent structures of written or spoken sentences. These structures include entities such as PRO that are not realized acoustically or orthographically in ordinary

sentences; and these structures also have a hierarchical organization that is unlike the apparent linear word-ordered organization of written or spoken sentences. I dub this the *structure argument*.

Neither of these arguments presents a challenge to commonsense linguistic realism as articulated here. To flag an issue I will discuss later, this may come as no surprise, because Rey explicitly states that his issue is not with language as it is construed in a common sense view of the word. For the purposes of this discussion, at this point take the issue not to be Rey's own arguments, but modified versions of Rey's arguments intended as a response to commonsense linguistic realism. To keep matters clear, I will call the modified arguments the *modified acoustic argument* and the *modified structure argument*.

With regard to the modified acoustic argument, as critics of Rey including Michael Devitt (2006), Alex Barber (2006, 2008), and Brian Epstein (2009) have pointed out, this argument only holds water if its target makes the assumption of what Alex Barber has dubbed "acoustic reductionism," the view that linguistic entities can be reduced to specific types of acoustic events. A linguistic realist who does not make this assumption would not be subject to this argument. As Barber has argued persuasively (Barber 2008, 237-238), holding that words and sentences exist while rejecting the assumption of acoustic reductionism renders Rey's argument unsound.

A commonsense linguistic realist clearly need not make the assumption of acoustic reductionism and so this view is not impugned by the modified acoustic argument. Tokens of the same word type, such as tokens of 'Aristotle,' may vary wildly in their acoustic properties while still being tokens of the same type. Each one of these words, as competent well-informed speakers of English can recognize, is a token of 'Aristotle.' This is not only the case for spoken tokens of 'Aristotle,' but for printed versions of the word as well. As
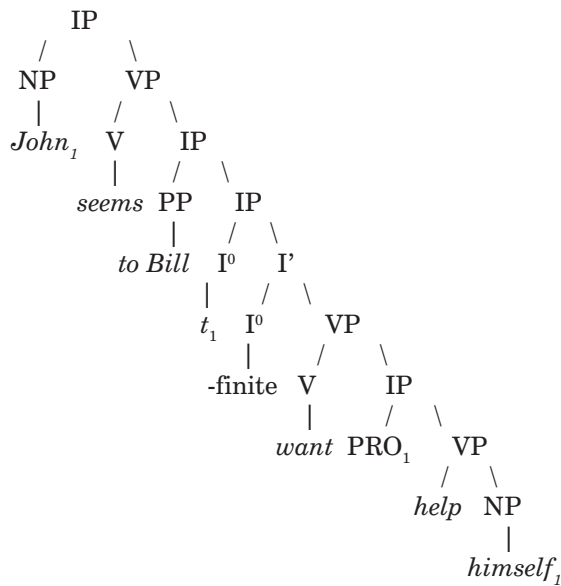
Michael Devitt has correctly pointed out (Devitt 2006, 186), the nihilist acoustic argument overlooks entirely the existence of written language, a phenomenon that should seem to make it obvious that acoustic reductionism is a nonstarter. In "Mind, Intentionality, and Inexistence," Rey writes "For simplicity, I shall also be concerned centrally with oral, not written language, although the issues are, I believe, quite similar." (Rey 2005, 404 n.9). To not consider the relation between these kinds of language is a significant lacuna in Rey's account.

In fact, one of the most extraordinary aspects of the linguistic abilities of human beings is the ability to recognize tokens that have *nothing* in common physically, spoken language, written language, sign language in the finger alphabet, as being tokens of the same type. There are even more radical physical differences between what is spoken and what is written than there are within the class of spoken tokens or written tokens of a given word type. Perhaps Rey has overlooked this phenomenon due to his avoidance of the issue of types throughout his discussion of these issues. Rey writes "Note I will not be concerned here with issues surrounding the existence of the *types* themselves, as abstractions, since this raises quite general issues in metaphysics, epistemology and the understanding of linguistics that there's neither need nor space to discuss adequately here" (Rey 2005, 403-404 n. 9)

Perhaps Rey might want to dig his heels in here and suggest that this rejection of acoustic reductionism renders commonsense linguistic realism implausible. This is not the case. Such a metaphysical standard could only be held at too great a cost. That there is no clear way of type-identifying words and sentences with macro-level physical entities such as acoustic events should not be seen as a reason to doubt the existence of such entities. Most of the types of object we deal with in our day-to-day life—tables, chairs, persons, artworks—cannot be type-identified with macro-level physical entities. Were this to be a demand that

an account of linguistic entities should be required to meet, it would be a demand that could

only hold if we swallowed an approach to metaphysics that left the world bereft of a great

deal.

Turning to the modified structure argument, Rey presents us with an example of a

sentence, "John seems to Bill to want to help himself," and the analysis of the structure of

this sentence within a version of contemporary syntactic theory. Rey presents the following

example of a syntactic structure:

```
        IP
      /     \
    NP       VP
     |      /    \
  John₁   V       IP
           |     /   \
        seems  PP      IP
                |     /   \
            to Bill  I⁰      I'
                      |     /  \
                     t₁    I⁰      VP
                           |     /    \
                       -finite   V       IP
                                 |     /    \
                               want   PRO₁     VP
                                            /    \
                                         help   NP
                                                  |
                                               himself₁
```

Rey treats the existence of this structure as a basis for raising doubts regarding the existence

of the sentence:

> "Well, what is the thing I take myself to have just uttered? A token of an English
>
> sentence. This, I take us naively to think, is something in space/time. But does
>
> anything I actually produced in *space and time* have the above structure? I think not"
>
> (Rey 2005, 404).

It is puzzling why this argument should seem to be a reason to be dubious of the existence of words or sentences. On the assumption that contemporary linguistic theory is correct, there is something going on within the brain that produces the relevant kind of structure. For the sake of simplicity and focus on the issue at hand, I will ignore the highly contested issue of how to precisely to characterize these structures. If syntactic structures are real, nothing follows from this regarding the truth of commonsense linguistic realism. The existence of complex syntactic structures within the brain is perfectly consistent with commonsense linguistic realism. It would seem plausible to suggest that there is some kind of relationship between these structures and words and sentences. At the very least, on the assumption that contemporary linguistic theories are true, sentences in a language bear a relation as effects to entities with the relevant structure that are involved in the causation of utterances of these sentences. The existence of PRO or hierarchical structures is consistent with a world that contains words and sentences as well.

Alex Barber, in "Testimony and Illusion," presents an account on which words and sentences have syntactic structures in virtue of their relation to the mental states that produce these linguistic entities. As he writes, "acoustic events inherit their syntactic properties from imbuing mental states, which represent the events as having that syntax" (Barber 2006, 418). This is a view that, if correct, would be fully consistent with commonsense linguistic realism. Barber claims that the relationship between acoustic events and their syntactic properties is constituted by intentions on the part of speakers. Spelled out in this fashion, however, Barber's view is deeply implausible. Given the fact that our understanding of syntax is largely a matter of subconscious processing, it is unlikely that the intentions of speakers play any significant role in conferring syntactical structure onto linguistic expressions.

A view that similarly attempts to spell out the relationship between words, sentences, and syntactic structures is Michael Devitt's view that such a relationship is constituted by conventions. What these conventions are and how they are brought about is not entirely clear in Devitt's remarks on these matters. Given the essential role of subconscious processing in the psychology of language, it is not exactly clear how syntax could be settled by conventions. There is also no clear account on offer in Devitt's convention-based account of syntax of the way syntactic structures of sentences are composed from the elements of those sentences. Devitt offers the following explanation: "Consider the string 'Bob tried to swim'. The idea is, roughly, that each word in the string has a syntactic property by convention (e.g. 'Bob' is a noun). Put the words with those syntactic properties together in that order and the whole has certain further syntactic properties largely by convention; these further properties "emerge" by convention from the combination. The most familiar of these properties is that the string is a sentence. A more striking discovery is that it has a " "PRO" after the main verb even though PRO has no acoustic realization. There is no mystery here." (Devitt 2008, 217-218). This may, perhaps, be true. However, as a theory of syntax, this account is lacking in some significant detail. Note the use of the term "emerge" in scare quotes to explain a key relationship here.

In other remarks, Devitt seems open to an explanation of the syntactic structures of linguistic entities that goes beyond conventions. In *Ignorance of Language*, Devitt claims that the linguistic properties of expressions "are surely largely determined by the mind/brain" (Devitt 2006, 26). Presumably there are aspects of conventions that are covered by this claim, but Devitt's claim that linguistic properties are "largely determined by the mind/brain" is open-ended enough to allow mental and non-mental factors some role, although is not clear from this remark what that role would be. In any case, this more open-

minded stance of Devitt on what accounts for linguistic properties, including syntactic properties, seems more likely to be true than an account cast solely in terms of conventions.

Whatever exactly the relationship between words, sentences, and syntactic structures is, it is clear that there is some relationship, and the existence of such structures does not provide any reason to be a linguistic nihilist.

At this point, one might suspect that what is being argued here is entirely beside the point of the current debates. For, as Rey and defenders of similar views of language have contended, their concern is not with language in the ordinary sense of the term. Their only concern is with linguistics as a serious science. I will call this position "qualified linguistic nihilism." It might seem as if the points I am making are talking past the views and arguments of qualified linguistic nihilists.

The qualified linguistic nihilist holds that words and sentences do not exist, but only insofar as existence has to do with linguistics as a serious science. Rey demurs from addressing this issue within the context of ordinary language:

> "I should stress therefore that I am concerned only with the commitments of serious
> theory, not in either preserving or reforming ordinary talk." (Rey 2005, 399).

That metaphysics might not be Rey's main concern is indicated by his characterization of his point as raising a "purely theoretical issue":

> "Rather, I want to press the purely theoretical issue about the existence of SLEs as
> serious *explanatory posits*: do such entities play any essential explanatory role in any
> linguistic or psychological theory?" (Rey 2006, 244)

The claims Rey makes about existence are conditional claims regarding what exists if a given theory is true. Is this is the case, the view might be restated as the view that if contemporary

linguistic theory is correct, this implies the existence of certain psychological structures but does not imply the existence of words, sentences, and languages.

This claim itself is deeply implausible. Such a claim could only be correct if a fully articulated account of the science of linguistics, including syntax and semantics, contained no reference to words or sentences at all. The intuitions of speakers play a crucial role within linguistics, and reports of these intuitions would seem to involve metalinguistic statements[1]. As Devitt has pointed out, linguistics textbooks are written in such a way that makes it seem quite clear that the theory involves mention of sentences. (Devitt 2008b, 250). Turning to semantics, it is very difficult to see how there could be a theory of reference at all without the use of metalinguistic claims such as 'Aristotle' refers to Aristotle or Aristotle satisfies the predicate 'had a beard'. It is also difficult to see how the sciences, *in general*, could be purged of metalinguistic claims. While it is somewhat controversial, assume that some of the basic platitudes of folk psychology are correct. So, for example, one could say that *ceteris paribus*, what a person asserts has a tendency to indicate what she believes. It is hard to see how these kinds of principles could be stated without some reference to words or sentences. Also, as noted above, setting aside scientific concerns, there are a number of obvious facts that would seem to require the existence of words, sentences, and languages to make these claims true.

For the sake of argument, though, imagine that there is a linguistic theory fully purified of all reference to words and sentence. If the qualified linguistic nihilist is only putting forward the conditional claim that if the purified linguistic theory is true, that it does not imply the existence of words and sentences, then it is worth noting that this view is fully consistent with commonsense linguistic realism.

Methodology and Metaphysics

The real concern here may not be the question of the existence or nonexistence of words, sentences, and languages, but rather a question of the methodology of linguistics. In fact, one can see some of the remarks made by linguistic nihilists as a way of putting a metaphysical gloss on an essentially methodological point. Given that this paper is meant only as a philosophical defense of commonsense linguistic realism, and not as an attempt to settle the intra-linguistic issue of the proper method of linguistic theory, it is worth noting that even if the proper method of linguistic theory is to restrict oneself only to the study of internal psychological and/or neurological structures or events, that this being the proper methodological approach has no relationship to the truth or falsehood of commonsense linguistic realism[2].

These issues of metaphysics and methodology often get conflated in discussions that are cast in Chomsky's technical terms "E-Language" and "I-Language." In these sense that Chomsky spells out the notion, the commonsense linguistic realist does not have to be committed to the existence of an "E-Language." The "E-Language," as Chomsky explains the notion, is in some way independent of human minds: E-language is an "'externalized language'…'understood independently of the properties of the mind/brain'" (Chomsky 1986, 20) Rey follows Chomsky when he writes regarding E-languages that "In the face of current research, the E-conception expresses a mere lack of interest in the biological foundations of language." (Rey 2003, 185.)

This characterization of "E-Language" is, in the present context, beside the point. It is fully consistent with commonsense linguistic realism to hold that linguistic entities are products of the mind, a view that not only accords with contemporary linguistics but also seems obvious on the face of it to anyone who has observed the relationship between

humans and language. Whatever characteristic languages have, as a human artifact, are due to the properties of the human mind.

Word and Elf

Rey addresses the kind of argument I am making here in putting forward his view that words and sentences are, in his term, "intentional inexistents." Rey writes:

"But what of the way we and linguists all the time talk of SLEs? How are we to understand such claims as that, for example, a certain sentence is ambiguous, is pronounced differently by different people, that `rhyme' rhymes with `slime', or that a pronoun is co-indexed with a certain NP? I recognize the temptation to provide for them a kind of non-physical "psychological reality," of the sort that, for example, Jackendoff […] proposes. However, this temptation--and the problems and paradoxes it invites--can easily be resisted simply by not treating SLEs as having any kind of being at all--not in the actual world, nor any possible world, nor in any sort of "experiential," "phenomenal," or "perceptual" world either. Like Kanizsa figures, they are mere perceptual inexistents." (Rey 2005, 405).

This sort of account would hardly seem to address the main worry raised here. The concern is that linguists and all right-thinking people tend to make true metalinguistic statements all of the time. To claim that there are no such entities as words, sentences, and languages would, *prima facie*, render the obvious truths that we state regarding language as false.

As in the case of existence, Rey introduces a sort of ambiguity to address this concern. On Rey's account, there are *intentional* and *existential* uses of language. When we are using language in the intentional sense, Rey thinks that we can state truths that are *about* in some sense nonexistent entities. This is a point that Rey introduces in his discussion of the notion of representation:

On the surface 'represent' would appear to be simply a two place relation, as in:

(1) The word 'cats' represents cats.

But this can't be quite right, since

(2) The word 'elf' represents elves would then be false, for lack of elves: you can't bear a real relation to something that doesn't exist. But there's surely a reading of (2) that makes it true, since, again, 'elf' is not *meaningless* (Rey 2005, 395).

Rey's claim of "but surely" is dubious. What exactly is the relatum of the representation relation in this case? There are no elves. It would be best to avoid this kind of duality in how we read terms like representation. This is done easily by putting the claims made by Rey in *intensional contexts*. In the case of perceptual illusions, it looks as if there is a triangle. When we are making claims purportedly about Zeus or other nonexistent things, we can make a number of true claims if these true claims are made within the context of belief attributions that carry with them no existential commitments. Furthermore, for the reasons put forward above, the grounds for considering words, sentences, and languages nonexistent in the fashion of elves are weak.

Language as Metaphysically Puzzling

Still, a defender of linguistic nihilism might think that there remains an ontological concern to be addressed here. Barry C. Smith has put the concern as follows in a critique of Michael Devitt: "But it is precisely the nature of that reality which is at issue. We cannot assume linguistic reality as a given any more than we can assume mathematical or moral reality as a given in a world of matter and causes" (Smith 2006, 434). According to Smith, there is a parallel between metaethical concerns about moral properties and the concern we ought to have regarding the question of the existence of language:

"The nature of ethical and aesthetical properties is a highly contentious issue, and an important topic in philosophy. And a similar set of issues arises for the nature of language and language properties. Questions about the status of these properties cannot be evaded by an uninformative platitude" (Smith 2006, 436).

These points, as stated, are incomplete and a bit obscure. It is not clear what the puzzle regarding the existence of linguistic entities is supposed to be. There seems to be a clear lack of a parallel with the examples that Smith puts forward, examples in which metaphysical puzzles that may or may not be truly problematic for the existence of a certain realm of property or object have been raised.

Take the example of ethics. Ethical properties are taken to be mysterious in some way, as J.L. Mackie (1977) and others have emphasized, because such properties play a role unlike any other property in the world. It seems that, if there are moral properties, such as *rightness*, that an individual might be motivated to act in favor of what is right in virtue of its having this property. That no other property plays a similar motivational role renders moral properties, in Mackie's somewhat unfortunate term, "queer." What reason is there to think that the existence of linguistic objects such as words, sentences, and languages would have a similarly vexed metaphysical standing? The parallel would seem to fail here.

Mackie, and others, most prominently Friedrich Nietzsche (2002), have raised the concern that diversity of moral points of view among individuals is a sign that there really is no fixed, external realm of moral properties. The code by which a Roman Senator lived is different from the one that was followed by certain devout Christians. The opinions of the rights of women in Saudi Arabia differ from those opinions held in certain areas of the United States. That there is such a range of different views suggests that all there are in these cases are moral opinions, not moral facts. Perhaps Smith has a concern along these lines in

mind when he discusses parallels between languages and ethical properties. Language, like beauty, may be in the eye of the beholder.

Is this a genuine concern regarding words, sentences, and languages? This is not at all clear. Speakers of the same language have a robust tendency to recognize a word as the word it is, and a sentence as the sentence it is. This is so despite the acoustic diversity in word and sentence tokens pointed out by Rey and others. One might think that languages, and judgments about languages, present the most serious concern for commonsense linguistic realism as I have spelled it out. For there are, as Chomsky and others have noted, no clear ways of drawing lines between idiolects, dialects, and languages.

That this is so should not force us to accept the nihilist view of languages. To do so would give us no way of explaining the truth of sentences such as 5-7:

5. 'Achtung' is not a word in English.

6. The German word 'Achtung' means attention.

7. The vocabulary of English contains a significant number of French terms due to the Norman Conquest of 1066.

That there are no principles of individuation for languages should not lead us to follow Chomsky and others in throwing the baby out with the bathwater. It is perfectly possible for languages to exist without there being precise ways of individuating languages. Most of what is interesting in the world exists without there being such precise ways. Consider the example of persons. Since at least the publication of Locke's *Essay*, philosophers have attempted to present a criterion of the identity of persons that is not subject to counterexamples and other problems. There are reasons, reasons well spelled out in the word of Derek Parfit on personal identity, to think that we cannot settle this matter in a way that presents a criterion of identity for person.

If this is the case, so what? Consider the parallel position to Chomsky's with respect to persons. This position would claim, given the lack of a clear criterion of identity, that there are no *persons*. If this were the case, there would be no way for it to be true that one person is different from another, for there is no such thing as a person. The sentences 'Michael Devitt is not Kent Bach' and 'Michael Devitt is Kent Bach' would both be equally acceptable. This is, despite our inability to define a person, not the case. It is clear that Michael Devitt and Kent Bach are two different people. It is equally clear that English is not German, and German is not French, to anyone who knows these languages. That there is no clear dividing line between languages does not by itself give us a reason to doubt the existence of languages. Belief in languages accords with the obvious facts.

To conclude and sum up the points made in the paper, despite arguments to the contrary, there is no reason to deny that words, sentences, and languages exist[3].

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[1] In discussion of this paper at the Mental Phenomena: Philosophy of Linguistics conference in Dubrovnik in 2011, John Collins suggested that such intuitions are merely evidence for the theory and as such should not be considered part of that to which the theory is committed. In response, I think this example still shows how linguistic nihilism, in an unrestricted sense, does not fit well with the practice of linguistics. Further, as I argue later, the position that the theory does not itself imply the existence of words and sentences is consistent with commonsense linguistic realism. David Braun suggested in the Dubrovnik discussion that the claims within linguistic theory connecting intuitions and syntactic theory could be considered auxiliary hypotheses of the theory, and as such could suggest a kind of ontological commitment to words and sentences. I am grateful to John Collins and David Braun for discussion of this point.

[2] I argue for the independence of ontological and methodological concerns in "Linguistics, Psychology, and the Ontology of Language" (McDonald 2009).

[3] I am grateful to the participants in the Mental Phenomena: Philosophy of Linguistics conference in 2011 for discussion of these issues and good company. I am grateful to David