

# How Subjective Fact Ties Language to Reality

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## ABSTRACT

In this note, I point out some implications of the experiential principle\* for the nature of the relationship between language and the world. I argue that this principle implies the existence of a certain relationship between linguistic tokens and facts, and that this relationship undermines most critiques of the referentiality of language.

\* Sharlow, M.F. *From Brain to Cosmos*. Parkland, FL: Universal Publishers, 2001.

The central metaphysical argument in *From Brain to Cosmos* [1] rests largely upon a thesis called the *experiential principle*. In the book, this principle is stated as follows [1, p. 286]:

Let P be a statement. Suppose that it is logically possible that some subject knows the truth value of P. Then the truth value of P can be determined, to the extent to which it can be known, from facts about what is the case for consciousness events.

In this note, I wish to point out some implications of the experiential principle (hereafter called EP) for the relationship between language and the world. In particular, I will argue that EP, though framed in terms of subjective fact, actually implies the existence of a firm tie between language and *objective* fact -- a tie whose existence makes the reality of an objective world, and the possibility of describing that world, immune to critiques of the referentiality of language. The argument presented here can be regarded as a further development of the informal argument about relativism presented in [1, pp. 309-313].

This essay makes heavy use of two technical notions developed in *From Brain to Cosmos*: the notions of *subjective fact* and *instance of seeming*. Readers who are not familiar with these notions should refer to the book itself [1] and also to reference [2].

Consider a scenario in which someone sees an object -- say, a cardboard box. In this situation, the following subjective fact obtains:

the fact that in some instance of seeming, it seems that there is a box

Call this subjective fact P.

Now suppose that this observer of the box, upon seeing the box, exclaims "There is a box." According to EP, the truth value of this utterance "can be determined, to the extent to which it can be known, from facts about what is the case for consciousness events." In other words, the truth value of this utterance of "There is a box" is determined by certain conditions involving subjective facts, provided that this truth value is knowable. We can

think of these conditions as truth conditions for this utterance of "There is a box." We will call them the subjective factual truth conditions for the utterance. (The existence of these conditions does not imply that these truth conditions are the most natural or useful truth conditions for the utterance. One might be able to write a different set of truth conditions that give the utterance the same truth values, but that are more useful for scientific or other purposes.)

The precise formulation of these subjective factual truth conditions is not necessary for our present purposes. What is important is that EP implies that such conditions exist. However, it is safe to assume that if someone actually perceives the box, then the subjective facts associated with that perception are among those which enter into the truth conditions for "There is a box." We must assume that the subjective factual truth conditions can be formulated in a way that involves these subjective facts. Otherwise, we get an unacceptable consequence: we find that the fact that the box is observed is irrelevant to our determining that the box exists. (Certainly, a cardboard box is the kind of a thing whose existence can be inferred from its being observed under suitable conditions.) Thus, the subjective fact P, described above, enters into the subjective factual truth conditions for the utterance of "There is a box."

This connection between P and the truth of the sentence "There is a box" is a connection of a surprisingly deep sort. It is not simply a matter of P playing a role in the observer's knowledge about the box. Instead, the subjective fact P is among the subjective facts that determine, via subjective factual truth conditions, the truth value of the utterance "There is a box." One even can think of P as contributing to the existence of the box -- not, of course, by being a cause of the existence of the box, but in a purely logical way, by playing a role in the subjective factual conditions for the box's existence (see [1], chap. 13).

Now let us modify this scenario. Suppose, as in the original scenario, that a person sees a box, and upon seeing the box, utters the sentence "There is a box." Suppose further that the person perceives the utterance to take place while the box is being seen, and that the person *feels subjectively* that the sentence he is uttering expresses a fact about what he

has seen.

This scenario is much like what usually happens when a speaker tries to use language to express facts about objects that the speaker currently is observing. For our present purposes, we won't ask whether the observer in our scenario really is trying to express a fact about the world. We won't try to guess what really goes on inside the observer. Also, we will not yet ask any philosophical questions about whether sentences really can express facts at all. For now, we will only assume that the person *feels* that the sentence expresses the fact that there is a box.

Let us analyze this scenario in terms of subjective facts. To keep the argument to the point, we will temporarily play a Cartesian card and ignore the objective facts about what exists in the scenario: the fact that there is an observer, the fact that there are sentences, etc. Even if we remain noncommittal as to the existence of observers, sentences, etc., we still can assert that there *seems* to be a sentence. (Indeed, it would be logically possible for there to *seem* to be a language even if there were no real languages at all. Note that this last claim does not depend upon any ideas about nonexistent objects or about the possibility or impossibility of private languages.)

In this scenario, a particular subjective fact obtains: the fact that in a particular instance of seeming, it seems that there is a box. In this same instance of seeming, it also is the case that it seems that there is a sentence -- specifically, the sentence token "There is a box." What is more, in this very same instance of seeming, it *also* is the case that *it seems that the sentence expresses the fact that there is a box*. In this particular instance of seeming, it doesn't just seem that there is a box and also seem that there is a sentence. It also seems that the sentence expresses the fact that the box exists.

Thus, in our new scenario, the following seems to be the case in some instance of seeming:

There is a box, and there is a sentence which expresses that there is a box.

If we wanted to express the corresponding subjective fact in a partially formalized way, we could write:

the fact that in some instance of seeming, it seems to be the case that ((there is a box) and (there is a sentence which expresses that there is a box)).

Call this subjective fact Q.

Now recall our first scenario, in which someone saw a box. In that scenario, there was a subjective fact P. The subjective fact P entered into the subjective factual conditions for the existence of the box. However, one could make the same point about the subjective fact Q in our new scenario. If P can contribute to the existence of the box in the first scenario, then Q can contribute to the existence of the box in the second scenario -- and for the same reason. After all, Q is really just P with some additional content added in.

Note, however, that Q also is a subjective fact in which it seems that a *sentence token* exists -- namely, an utterance of the sentence "There is a box." Thus, Q enters into the conditions for the existence of the sentence token, just as it enters into the conditions for the existence of the box -- and for precisely the same reason. Therefore, *there is an ontological tie between the existence of the sentence and the existence of the box*. The subjective factual conditions for the existence of the sentence are in part the same as the subjective factual conditions for the existence of the box. These two sets of conditions have at least one subjective fact in common.

Let us say that a sentence S *subjectively expresses* a fact F if and only if there is an instance of seeming in which it seems that: (a) S exists, (b) the fact F is the case, and (c) S expresses F. (Note that for S to subjectively express F, it only has to *seem* to be the case, in a particular instance, that (a), (b) and (c) are true. The objective truth of (a), (b) and (c) is not required.) The preceding argument shows us that if a sentence token subjectively expresses a fact, then there is a connection, at a fundamental ontological level, between the sentence token and the fact. Therefore, *there is a real tie between language and reality*.

This tie between language and reality arises from experiences that involve *the felt expression of an actual fact that is being experienced*. The preceding argument cannot be made to work for sentences of most other kinds; the argument does not show that every sentence that seems to express a fact, really expresses that fact. The argument shows this only for sentences which are felt to express a fact that actually obtains and that seems to be true. Thus, the argument only shows that sentences of this particular kind have a link to reality. But I think this is much more than many deniers of the referentiality of language should be willing to admit.

A skeptic about the referentiality of language might try to undermine this argument by claiming that there are, strictly speaking, no facts. However, this claim is rebutted implicitly in [1]. According to EP, for any *purported* fact that we care to dream up, if it is logically possible for an observer to know whether that fact obtains, then there are subjective factual conditions such that the fact obtains if and only if those conditions obtain. Thus, given any *purported* fact of this kind, there are subjective factual conditions which, if they obtained, would guarantee that this fact obtains. (If the purported fact is one that does not obtain, then of course these subjective factual conditions do not obtain either.) Hence subjective facts alone can guarantee the reality of other kinds of facts besides subjective facts. (This "guarantee" should be read as logical sufficiency, not as causation.) Once we admit that there are facts which can seem to be the case and seem to be expressed, we must also admit that there can be real ties between language and reality.

In passing, I should mention that this conclusion, and the argument supporting it, have no real connection to Wittgenstein's concept of a private language. (See the discussion of private languages in [2].) The whole issue of private language has surprisingly little to do with the fact that sentences can seem to express facts -- and it is this latter fact that concerns us here.

The preceding arguments can be adapted to supplement the notion of subjective expression with a notion of *subjective reference*. In our second scenario, there was a tie between the existence of the sentence and the existence of the box. Suppose that instead of just saying "There is a box," the observer gives the box a name: "I'll call that box

Henry." To make things more precise and more general, suppose that there is an instance of seeming in which it seems that (a) there is a box, and (b) there is a word, and (c) the word is a name of the box. Then there is a subjective fact in which a word seems to denote an object. This subjective fact contributes to the existence of the object (box) and to the existence of the word as well. It establishes an ontological tie between the object and the word that is supposed to denote the object.

Let us say that a sign of kind S *subjectively denotes* an object of kind F if and only if there is an instance of seeming in which it seems that: (a) a sign of kind S exists, (b) an object of kind F exists, and (c) a sign of kind S denotes an object of kind F. If a word subjectively denotes an object, then there is a connection, at a fundamental ontological level, between the word and the object. The argument for this is similar to our earlier argument about sentences and facts. Again, there is a real tie between language and reality. In case any skeptic tries to get around this by denying that there are objects to be denoted, EP allows us to posit a purported object provided that the subjective factual conditions for the existence of such an object obtain [1, chap. 13]. (Recall our earlier argument about purported facts.)

One can define *subjective reference* in a way analogous to the definition of subjective denotation. Just replace "denotes" with "refers to" in the definiens. Subjective reference and subjective denotation are not the same.

Note that the nature of the chain of events through which an object gets named is irrelevant to this argument. This observation is important because it forestalls certain possible attacks on the argument. Someone might try to undermine the argument given here by claiming that language cannot exist without a social basis; that ostensive definition is not possible without lots of background knowledge; or that private languages are impossible. (All of these three claims have been made by various philosophers of language, though not in connection with our present topic.) But none of this has any bearing on the fact that a word can *seem* to be used to name an object. And this is sufficient for our purposes. It does not matter how the word came into use, or how things came to seem that way.

Someone might try to rebut our argument by claiming that subjective expression (or denotation, or reference) really is not a kind of expression (or denotation, or reference) at all. However, this claim, even if it were right, is irrelevant to the final outcome of the argument. For example, if one thinks that subjective reference isn't really reference, one is free to call subjective reference by another name, like "subreference." (Then subreference would be the kind of referring that non-philosophical language actually does!) Our argument for a deep link between language and reality still will go through. The point is that there is a real link between language and reality -- call the components of that link whatever you will.

Subjective fact is able to underpin certain relationships between language and reality. However, these relationships are not the same as those postulated by traditional correspondence accounts of truth. The links between language and world established by subjective fact are not as "external" and incidental as the relationship between a Cartesian observer and that observer's external world. Instead, these links emerge from the substratum of subjective fact that logically conditions the existence of language and external world alike. It is likely that no critique of the referentiality of language can successfully undermine these relationships, since in a world based on subjective fact, language and reality are not entirely separate to begin with.

One final rebuttal to this argument arises from its apparent circularity. To show that there is a connection between language and reality, we used an argument that speaks of words, sentences, and extralinguistic objects as though we could talk about such things. How can such an argument be used to establish a link between language and world, when the argument apparently presupposes this link? The definitive reply to this criticism makes use of the following observation: the fact that there *seems* to be a language does not imply that there really is a language. If there seems to be a language, then expression, denotation and reference (including denotation of and reference to signs) can seem to occur, whether or not they actually occur. The arguments for EP given in [1] could in principle be formulated even by an observer in a Cartesian dream world. One does not need to presuppose real reference to formulate these arguments; one only needs to

presuppose *apparent* reference, and the *appearance* that there is a language. Thus, one can, in principle, formulate in a purely apparent language the argument for the existence of subjective factual conditions for the existence of objects. Using that argument, one can argue (as I have done here) that there is a real tie between language and reality.

Thus, it is possible, given only the ways things seem, to reason to the conclusion that language refers to the world and expresses truths about the world. In this way, subjective fact transcends itself.

## References

- [1] Sharlow, Mark F. *From Brain to Cosmos*. Parkland, FL: Universal Publishers, 2001.
- [2] Sharlow, Mark F. "Notes on *From Brain to Cosmos*: Questions and Answers on Subjective Fact," <http://www.eskimo.com/~msharlow/fbtcnote.pdf>.