

Thomas Reid*

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Reid studied human language in order to learn important facts about the human mind. ‘Language is the express image and picture of human thoughts,’ wrote Reid, and ‘from the picture, we may often draw very certain conclusions with regard to the original.’ He developed views on speech acts, language learning, natural and conventional meaning, linguistic phenomenology, the relation between language and sense perception, reference, kind terms, metaphor, and vagueness.

Anticipating themes in speech act theory from the mid-twentieth century, including J.L. Austin, Reid argued that the primary function of language was not to make assertions (what Reid called ‘expressing a judgment’, a ‘solitary act’), but rather to perform the ‘social acts’ of *questioning*, *commanding*, and *promising*. Human language’s ‘primary and direct’ purpose is to ‘express’ these ‘social operations of the mind.’ Reid lamented philosophers’ narrow focus on judgment and its content, the ‘proposition,’ at the considerable cost of neglecting the social acts.

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Reid defines human language as ‘all those signs’ which humans ‘use in order to communicate to others their thoughts and intentions, their purposes and desires.’ Reid divides these signs, and by extension language, into two categories: natural and artificial. Artificial signs are defined as those signs which have no meaning except for ‘what is affixed to them by compact or agreement among those who use them.’ For example, the English word ‘star’ refers to stars because we agree that it will. Natural signs are defined as those signs which, prior to any ‘compact or agreement, have a meaning which every man understands by the principles of his nature.’ Reid divides natural signs into three basic types: ‘modulations of the voice, gestures, and features.’ Pointing is a gesture naturally understood as calling our attention to the thing ostended. Reid’s natural signs closely resemble what Paul Grice later called ‘natural meaning.’ To illustrate natural meaning, Grice used the example, ‘those spots mean measles’; to illustrate natural signs, Reid used examples such as ‘smoke is a natural sign of fire’ and a certain countenance on a human face is ‘a natural sign of anger.’

Reid argued that natural language has priority over artificial language, because we must have a system of natural signs in order to learn or develop a system of artificial signs. Artificial signs must be invented and their meaning agreed among those who effectively use them to communicate. But in order to agree on an artificial sign’s meaning, we must have some a prior way to achieve agreement, which requires communication, which requires signs. We might use already-existing artificial signs to do this, but this can’t

continue indefinitely in the case of humans. Natural signs must have been the ultimate basis of the invention of artificial signs.

Reid made important observations about the phenomenology of fluent linguistic communication, which bear important similarities to his views on the phenomenology of ordinary perceptual cognition. Upon undergoing a sensation of hardness, we pay no attention to the sensation itself, and instead immediately conceive of and believe in the existence of a hard external body, which in no way resembles the sensation. The body, not the sensation, commands our attention. The sensation is a sign of the body; by a 'principle of our nature,' we interpret the sensation as a sign of the body. Similarly, when someone speaks to us in a language we well understand, 'we hear certain sounds' but we ignore the sounds and instead 'fix our attention' on the thing the sound signifies. For example, when I hear someone say 'stars', I immediately think of stars, the heavenly bodies, which bear no resemblance to the word that signifies them. This is why Reid describes *sensations* as a 'visual language.' In this respect, Reid is a faithful student of Berkeley, who thought of visual sensations as a language by which God communicated to us for our benefit.

Reid divided all artificial words into 'proper names' and 'general words.' Proper names simply designate individuals in the world — they are mere signs or tags — and have no meaning beyond reference. Here Reid anticipates the Millian view of proper names and disagreed with Locke, who thought that all words signified ideas. All other words are general, according to Reid, including terms for gen-

era and species, predicates, adjectives, articles, prepositions, and conjunctions. Reid accepts that general words do have a meaning, which can be properly defined, which suggests that they differ importantly from proper names. However, there is some tension in Reid's thought on this point because he also claims that a general word's meaning is nothing more than its referent: 'to conceive the meaning of a general word, and to conceive that which it signifies, is the same thing.' Although the meaning of a general term is exhausted by its referent — its sense = its referent — the referent turns out to be a mental entity. General terms refer either to our conception of the attributes of individual things, as adjectives do, or to our conception of attribute agreement among individuals, as terms for genera and species do. A general term 'expresses' and 'is the sign of a general conception.'

Everything that actually exists is a specific individual, Reid claims, and generality emerges initially only at the level of thought. General words owe their generality to the general thoughts they signify. General thoughts, and in turn general words, can be either precise or vague. Vagueness derives not from generality *per se*, since there can be perfectly precise general terms, such as 'triangle'. Rather, vagueness derives from sloppiness or indecision on our part, either individually in our intentions, or collectively in our habits of common usage. By locating the source of vagueness in indecision or convention, Reid anticipates modern linguistic theories of vagueness. Reid also observed that vagueness can be beneficial. For example, precisely defining 'human' might have 'unforeseen

consequences' when enforcing laws. It might be better to leave the task of precisification to the discretion 'of a judge or of a jury.'

Further Readings

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