Language – The transparent tool: Reflections on reflexivity and instrumentality

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A B S T R A C T

'There are no first-order objects of any kind' in language, as Nigel Love puts it. And yet first-order linguistic communication is crowded with identifiable 'linguistic objects' of innumerable kinds – from names, labels, lists, and words of one syllable to requests, greetings, interviews, jokes and lies. Such metalinguistic reflexivity is fundamental to our linguistic experience and testimony to the 'transparency' of communicative acts and events in relation to the social practices to which they contribute. The paper sets out to explore a range of scholarly insights into this communicational 'transparency' in pursuit of answers to the following questions:

1. Is there value in extending Heidegger's notion of 'transparent technology' to linguistic and metalinguistic activity?
2. Is Love's distinction between 'first-order' and 'second-order' language better viewed as a relationship between different 'first-order' linguistic or communicative practices?
3. How does the vital communicational transparency on display in lay analytic linguistic reflection differ from the analytic discourse of the professional linguist?

In coming to a position on each question, the paper argues that an understanding of the 'socio-transparency' in evidence in language use warrants a distinction between the 'instrumental abstraction' of the ordinary language user and the 'formal abstraction' of the linguist.

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Preamble

'Linguistics is logically impossible', Nigel Love (2007: 705) has argued, on the grounds that its subject matter – the linguistic sign – is the product of the specialized *metalinguistic* procedures of the theoretician, rather than an entity identifiable independently of any form or type of communicative practice. Indeed, since '[t]here are no (first-order) linguistic objects of any kind' (2007: 705), then the linguist's 'analytic discourse about language' is not 'a matter of reporting on objectively given first-order realities' but involves the positing of a 'second-order' construct which 'requires decontextualization, abstraction and reification' (2007: 705) of 'first-order' language use.

At the same time, however, as Harris notes (1998: 20), 'everybody is a linguist. And necessarily so. Whether we are "educated" or not: whether we are "literate" or not'. He goes on: 'For all human beings engage in analytic reflection about their own linguistic experience: this is a sine qua non of engaging in language itself'.

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From the perspective of Harris's everybody, then, the first-order reality of linguistic communication is positively bursting with linguistic objects of innumerable kinds: from the common or garden communicational constructs relating to mundane housekeeping (*names, labels, shopping lists, recipes*), to those involved in mundane interaction (*request, greeting, lie, interview, joke*) to those involved in more specialised 'talk about talk' (*words of one syllable, accent, loan word*). Furthermore, such instances form merely the most obvious tip of an indefinably large iceberg of 'metalinguistic practice' which includes, but is not restricted to, linguistic acts as such (Agha, 2007: 17).[1]

This relentless analytic reflection, this effortless ability to immediately *hear* (*see* or *feel)* a communicational value in what someone does or has done, is clearly fundamental to linguistic experience as we all know it (Taylor, 2010, 2015) and testifies to what we might call the *transparency* of communicational behaviour to the 'first-order linguistic objects' in play in particular contexts. This paper is devoted to a tentative and informal exploration of some aspects of this communicational transparency.[2] In particular, I intend to explore the following three questions:

1. Is there value in extending the notion of 'transparent technology' (Clark, 2003, 2011) to linguistic (and metalinguistic) activity?
2. Is the distinction between 'orders of language' (specifically the distinction between 'first-order' and 'second-order' as per Love, 2007) better viewed as a relationship between different 'first-order' linguistic or communicative practices?
3. How does the vital communicational transparency involved in lay analytic linguistic reflection differ from the reifying and decontextualizing 'analytic discourse about language' which, in Love's view, is testimony only to the 'impossibility of linguistics'?

1. The 'Scrabble stance'

Which of these words is the odd one out: JIFFY, JUNKY, QUAKY, ZAPPY, ZAXES, ZINKY, ZIPPY, FURZY? And what does the word CHLORODYNE mean?

The answer to the first question is FURZY: it is a 20 point word at *Scrabble* with the others on 21 points. The answer to the second one is … Let me first introduce Nigel Richards (Illustration 1).

Nigel Richards is 'the highest-scoring Scrabble player of all time' (Wahlquist, 2015). In July 2015, 'Richards won the francophone world Scrabble championships despite not being able to speak more than a few words of French, having memorised the French Scrabble dictionary in nine weeks' (Wahlquist, 2015). And the word CHLORODYNE was produced by Richards during a match in 1998 and means 'Richards is the greatest Scrabble player to ever live' (Roeder, 2014).

Top flight Scrabble players, as the comment about Richards's competence in French implies, have a rather special acquaintance with language – a 'Scrabble stance' perhaps, if not quite a 'language stance' Cowley (2011). As Roeder (2014) explains:

> 'For living-room players, Scrabble is about language, a test of vocabularies. For world-class players, it's about cold memorization and mathematical probabilities. Think of the dictionary not as a compendium of the beauty and complexity of the English language, but rather as a giant rulebook. Words exist merely as valid strings with which to score points'.

Illustration 1. Nigel Richards (Wahlquist, 2015).

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[1] As Agha explains: 'metalinguistic acts necessarily typify aspects of language, though they need not themselves be linguistic utterances. An eyebrow raised in response to a remark implicitly evaluates the import of that remark and is, to this extent, a metalinguistic act. But it is not an instance of language use' (2007: 17).

[2] I'm grateful to Paul Thibault for alerting me to Kim Sterelny's existing notions of 'informational transparency' and 'translucency' (Sterelny, 2003) although I won't attempt to explore the relevance of these notions to the argument developed here.