



On languaging and languages



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ABSTRACT

I consider the ontology of languages and the linguistic units said to constitute them, in the light of a speculative sketch of how languaging about language might give rise to the idea of a language. The focus is principally on the role of reflexivity and the development of writing in facilitating the decontextualisation, abstraction and reification of linguistic units and languages themselves. The main trend in modern linguistics has been to take the products of these processes as *realia*, and to retroject them on to languagers as the basis for their languaging activities: I touch on some of the deleterious effects of this on theorising about the acquisition, storage and production of language. Finally, I consider how in thinking about these matters the concept of different 'orders' of language has been and might be interpreted and deployed. Whether or not this concept has a useful role to play in formulating them, the ideas assembled here are offered in the hope that they might serve as a platform from which to debate the significance and implications of the stultifying effect our modes of metalanguaging have so far had on inquiry into our engagement with language.

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1. Introduction

Water in My Hand is the title of an album of songs by Shelly Rudolph,¹ a jazz and soul singer from Portland, Oregon. It is also the title of one of the songs on the album and part of a line or lyric from that song. Beyond that, it is a sequence of Roman letters, a sequence of English words, a phrase belonging to the English language about which one established brand of syntactic analysis tells us that it may or may not be a constituent of a sentence. It is a constituent in *the water in my hand is still fresh, unlike the stale stuff in my rucksack*, but in *how do you expect me to hold water in my hand?* the PP *in my hand* is an adjunct adverbial and there is no constituent *water in my hand*. Shelly's line ("you're like water in my hand") is syntactically ambiguous, perhaps by design: does the rewording *in my hand you're like water* preserve an intended reading? And of course the phrase, as such, is open to multiple interpretations on the semantic plane: water in my hand may or may not be contained in a vessel; if I suffer from fluid retention it may be *in my hand* as opposed to on its surface; and so on. So too are the words: the water in (i.e. inside) my hand, like the water referred to in *he made water behind the potting shed or her waters broke late on Monday evening*, is not or not only H₂O. Beyond all that, *Water in My Hand* is also a sequence of Afrikaans words as well as a phrase belonging to that language, pronounced [vətərənməihənt] and meaning 'water in my hand'. Last but not least, it is a figurative allusion to the difficulty of giving a satisfactory account of the nature of such linguistic entities.

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¹ <https://shellyrudolph.com/album/452682/water-in-my-hand>.

Attempting to grasp them is like trying to grasp water in one's hand. *Qua* figurative allusion, you may take it as Afrikaans or as English, as you please.

These statements, innocuous and unremarkable as they may seem, give rise to ontological puzzlement. What is this thing that is simultaneously the title of a collection of songs, the title of one of the songs in the collection, part of a line in that song, an English phrase that may or may not be a sentence constituent and which may bear a number of different meanings, and an Afrikaans phrase analysable by linguists along similar lines?

The presentation above suggests that the thing in question is: *Water in My Hand*. But what does that mean? Here I have replicated with typographical exactitude the first four words of the opening paragraph as printed, but it is clear enough that citing the entity under discussion doesn't depend on so doing – any of the following would do just as well (Fig. 1):



Fig. 1. Typographical fantasia.

As Harvey (2015 p. 109) says, “Printed words are materially stable, assembled out of recognizable and repeating sub-parts (although they vary across writing systems), and have explicit identity relations that obtain across different contexts and changes in physical characteristics like typeface and font, style, and size”.

In fact, cutting to the chase, the entity in question can be presented not only in the form of any graphic configuration recognisable as consisting of that sequence of Roman letters or their established transliteration in another alphabet, but also as any oral performance, not excluding Shelly's,² that would be recorded in writing (in Shelly's case, in respect of its verbal as distinct from its musical features) in such a configuration, or in a phonetic transcription such as

² You can listen to it at <https://shellyrudolph.com/track/1147921/water-in-my-hand>.

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