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Sellars' Paradox and Language Games

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Abstract

In "Some Reflections on Language Games," Wilfrid Sellars contemplates whether there is a genuine paradox in learning a first language. It seems that we must know a metalanguage in order to learn a first language, and a meta-metalanguage in order to learn a metalanguage, and so on, because we cannot learn the linguistic expression of a thing without grasping its matching concept. The idea of language as a language game paves the way to a solution to this paradox by presenting an account of pre-conceptual base-level language acquisition.

Language, like games, is a rule-governed activity. In a game of chess, a piece of wood acquires the identity of a chess piece in virtue of the rules that govern the piece. Similarly, a linguistic expression acquires meaning in virtue of rules that govern its usage, such as the circumstances under which it is intelligible or appropriate to utter it. Linguistic rules are constitutive of language; meaning is inseparable from the appropriate use of expressions. It seems like learning a language, like learning to play a game, involves learning to follow certain rules.

A paradox arises if we take learning a language to involve learning to follow certain rules. *Prima facie*, in order to follow a rule, one needs to understand standards of acceptability for the application of said rule. To understand the rules that govern the correct usage of said rule requires understanding further rules. As a consequence, following any rule would require following a further rule, and so on, *ad infinitum*. Wilfrid Sellars frames the paradox as follows:

1) A rule which enjoins the doing of an action (A) is a sentence in a language which contains an expression for A.

2) A rule which enjoins the using of a linguistic expression (E) is a sentence in a language which contains an expression for E,—in other words a sentence in a *meta*language.
3) Learning to obey the rules for L presupposes the ability to use the metalanguage (ML) in which the rules for L are formulated.
4) Learning to use a language (L) presupposes having learned to use a language (ML). And by the same token, having learned to use ML presupposes having learned to use a *meta*-metalanguage (MML) and so on.
5) This is impossible (a vicious regress).
6) The thesis that learning a language involves learning to obey rules is absurd and should be rejected (Sellars, 204).

This paradox cannot possibly be genuine. Learning a first language surely is not impossible. Most human beings become competent language users. If we want to defend the thesis that language is a rule-governed activity, and that learning a language in some sense involves learning to follow rules, what is our way out of the paradox?

The parallel between language and games points to a solution to the paradox. We can think of language as a game—a language game, where thoughts and assertions are positions, inferences are moves from one position to another, and enhanced intelligibility, communication, and coordination are goals.

Sellars suggests that what we need is an account of how one learns to make moves in the language game *as* game moves, without having a grasp on what the rules render appropriate, thus avoiding presupposition of knowledge of a metalanguage in which the rules of the object language game are formulated. If we can make plausible the idea that one can "move from position to position in a system of moves and positions and to do it "because of the system" without having to *obey rules* and hence without having to play a *meta*language game (*and a meta-meta*language game, and so on)," we can avoid the paradox (Sellars, 209).

Sellars suggests that the key to such an account lies in the distinction between pattern-governed and rule-governed behavior. A competent language user, on the one hand, *intentionally* exhibits pattern-governed behavior. A beginner language user, on the other hand, exhibits pattern-governed behavior *without intention*. He is conditioned to make moves that accidentally contribute to the weaving of normative linguistic patterns. Through mimicry, trainers' correction, and reward at correct usage, his behavior in accordance with normative patterns is reinforced. Through trainers' correction, and penalty at incorrect usage, his behavior that falls outside the patterns is extinguished. As his behavioral patterns in accordance with the rules become solidified, he acquires the tendency to exhibit these patterns in his behavior, and subsequently the motivation to do so.

There is a worry that Sellars' account does not quite resolve the paradox. Sellars' account seems to suggest that the beginner language game player acquires linguistic competence in a piecemeal fashion. He at first only minimally notices rules that govern patterns in linguistic practice and then gradually acquires a clearer understanding of them as he becomes increasingly competent. But "noticing" employs the conceptualization of patterns, which requires that one somehow have the rules present to mind. This requirement leads us back to the vicious regress.

To solidify one's behavior into normative patterns involves only conforming to rules without consciously obeying them. Conforming to rules requires no conceptualization of the rules. One needs only to be conditioned to act in certain ways without being able to extract and formulate the commands that shape appropriate patterns of conduct. Pattern-conforming behavior can be seen as a truncated version of rule-governed behavior. Following rules entails conforming to patterns; both exhibit patterns, but rule-governed behavior involves more. Unlike pattern-governed behavior, it involves rules of inference (that can be seen as positions in the corresponding metagame) that carry the agent from one position to another. In Sellars' words, "rule obeying behavior contains, in some sense, both a game and a metagame, the latter being the game in which belong the rules obeyed in playing the former game as a piece of rule obeying behavior" (Sellars, 209). For example, a pattern-governed creature would move from "it is raining" to "the ground is wet" directly, whereas a rule-governed creature would bridge the two linguistic positions with the inferential rule, "whenever and wherever it rains, the ground is wet." To consistently move from one position to another in accordance with rules of the language game, without being able to give reasons, is sufficient qualification for the agent as a player of the language game. A chess player's inability to formulate the rules of chess, so long as he consistently makes correct moves, is no reason to disqualify him as a player of the game.

Another worry about Sellars' paradox-resolving account is that exhibiting regularity in one's behavior seems to lower the qualification for rule-following to a dangerous point. A closer look at the analogy between language and games reveals that constitutive rules are not so "externally related" to the language game that unconsciously going through the motions of a game makes one a player of the game (Sellars, 205). Back to the chess player to who consistently makes correct moves yet cannot formulate the rules of chess—if he shuffles around pieces on the chessboard in a way that only accidentally avoids violations of any rule of the game, then surely we do not want to say that he is playing chess.

Sellars differentiates between two senses of "accidental." In one sense of the word, "accidental" means unintentional. In another sense of the word, "accidental" means contingent, the opposite of necessary (Sellars, 207). To adopt the first interpretation would land us in trouble; merely exhibiting regularity in one's behavior, merely going

through the motions of the game, is insufficient qualification for one's induction as a player in the language game. Adopting the second interpretation would give us a satisfactory account of how one can behave in a certain way in a game because of the rules without intending to follow the rules. Sellars uses an analogy to make his point. What are we to make of the turnings and wigglings of a bee returning from the clover field? On the one hand, it is wrong to attribute intention to the bees; surely individual bees do not envisage the complex pattern that they help weave. To "draw upon the mentalistic language of intention and purpose" in this case would be to "attribute causal force to an abstraction," which is a mistake (Sellars, 208). On the other hand, it is inappropriate to judge the bees' dance merely accidental. Certain turnings and wigglings constitute patterns with survival value, which come to stay through heredity and natural selection. Thus, we can say that "each step in their [the bees'] dance behavior occurs because of its role in the dance as a whole," without being committed to the fact that the bees bring about this dance with intention (Sellars, 208). There is a *telos* directing the cementing of one's linguistic patterns—language games have goals. Back to the beginner chess player—we can say that due to his training, he consistently makes correct moves *because of the rules*, and thus he is a player of the game. A beginner language game player may not have an explicit understanding of what he means when he says things, but we can discriminatorily ascribe meaning to his utterances.

A third worry about Sellars' solution to the paradox is that taking pattern conforming as sufficient qualification for game-playing has the potential to extinguish inferential rules all together. Sellars anticipates this objection:

> "According to your account," the challenge begins, "our consciousness of the ways of things is a matter of the 'material moves' of the language game in which we speak about the world… On the other hand, when you describe the process whereby we come to adopt the language of which this move is a part, you give an *anthropological*, a (very schematic) *causal* account of how languages come to be used, and, presumably changed, in which you stress evolutionary analogies and cite the language of the bee hive. Do you not imply that there is no such thing as *giving a reason* for (or against) the decision to include a certain material move in the syntactical structure of ones language?" (Sellars, 223).

Surely rules of inference are not dispensable for any language.

Sellars agrees that inferential rules, the extraction of normative claims from descriptive claims about the state of affairs, is a necessary part of any language (Sellars, 225). A language with only habits but no rules is a "chimera" (Sellars, 225). "The problem is not 'is it reasonable to include material moves in our language?' but rather 'which material moves is it reasonable to include?'" (Sellars, 225).

Which patterns ascend to the status of inferential rules? What is the process via which certain rules of language games acquire normative force? And moreover, how does a player make the transition from conforming to patterns to intentionally following rules? How does one (perhaps more plausibly, a linguistic community) *decide* which patterns ought to be followed? Sellars makes plausible the transition of a language learner from a *tabula rasa* to a pattern-governed creature, but his account of the transition of a pattern-governed creature to a rule-governed creature is less clear. This second transition seems every bit as "magical" as the overall transition of a language learner from being a *tabula rasa* to a competent language user (before we are presented with Sellars' account).

Sellars may answer that there is no difference in kind between the transition from a *tabula rasa* to a pattern-governed creature, and the transition from a pattern-governed creature to a rule-governed creature. Learning to play a language game involves non-accidental pattern acquisition all the way down to the base level.[1] Rules, i.e. positions in the rule-metalanguage, become incorporated into one's object language as new moves via an empirical process. Sellars describes this process as follows: Suppose that the move "all As are Bs" does not yet exist in one's object language. Over time, one discovers that many As are Bs, and there are no exceptions. At this point, "all As are Bs" becomes a "hypothesis," and if circumstances are felicitous, one will decide to incorporate "all As are Bs" as an "unconditionally assertable sentence," a rule, into one's object language (Sellars, 228). Incorporating such rules into one's semantic competence helps make explicit the appropriate relations between different linguistic positions, which gives one the expressive power to further solidify selective patterns of behavior. Passing rules onto subsequent generations amounts to endorsing the rules. Retrospectively, cemented patterns of behavior acquire normative force.

A final worry about Sellars' account is that it fails to explain the phenomenon of rule-breaking yet immediately meaningful uses of language. Some moves violate conventional rules of language yet count as correct play. To use David Lewis' example, imagine a cat, Bruce, in the room, where there are no other cats. Now, suppose I say,

> The cat is in the carton. The cat will never meet our other cat, because our other cat lives in New Zealand. Our New Zealand cat lives with the Cresswells. And there he'll stay, because Miriam would be sad if the cat (Albert) went away… (Lewis, 348).

Then I say,

> Watch out for the cat!

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[1] I owe this idea to a conversation with Mike Ridge.

Even though conventional inferential rules dictate that the last "cat" ought to refer to Albert, given that the immediately preceding sentences discuss Albert, the last "cat" refers to Bruce. And we have no trouble making out that the last "cat" refers to Bruce.

Lewis suggests that in addition to conventional rules, we have "rules of accommodation" that govern linguistic discourse (Lewis, 346). In the above case, the rule can be formulated as:

> If at time t something is said that requires, if it is to be acceptable, that x be more salient than y; and if, just before t, x is no more salient than y; then— *ceteris paribus* and within certain limits—at t, x becomes more salient than y (Lewis, 349).

Rules of accommodation ease the tension in Sellars' account between language as a rational, rule-governed activity, and language as an abstraction from evolutionary history. Given the goals of the language game—to improve communication and coordination—we try to make maximal sense of other language users, using rules of inference as crutches but not hesitating to disregard them when doing so clearly helps us to the goals. Sellars agrees: "the boundary between 'empirical constructs' and 'theoretical constructs' is no iron curtain fixed for all time" (Sellars, 227). Rules of accommodation explain the compatibility between the rule-governed constitution and the immensely dynamic nature of our language games.

Sellars' account provides a satisfactory solution to the paradox of learning a first language. His idea of pattern-governed behavior steers a middle path between behavior that just happen to contribute to normative, and intentional behavior that requires envisaging complex patterns and rules governing their generation. This middle path delicately avoids regularity of behavior, which sets the bar for game-playing too low, and understanding rules in order to follow a rule, which generates a vicious regress.

References

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