The Role of the "Private" in Inter-Gender Misunderstanding[1]

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ABSTRACT: In this paper, I use Wittgenstein's private language argument for reflecting on some folk-linguistic misconceptions. In Section 1, I show that elements of the private language semantics inform common ways of looking at some situations referred to as "misunderstandings". I suggest that it would be appropriate to conceive of the alleged misunderstandings as practical attitudes of mistreatment. This suggestion is explored in Section 2, which is devoted to a commonly assumed prominent example of the problem: the so-called inter-gender misunderstanding. It is believed that men and women use language in systematically different ways, as a result of which they do not understand each other properly, because they miss what their interlocutors "mean". The conceptual apparatus of mentalist semantics presumed here is abused in order to advocate morally reprehensible actions against women. In Section 3, I suggest that the Wittgensteinian accounts of language and mind offer arguments for denying private conceptions of understanding on the grounds of both philosophy of language and ethics.

KEYWORDS: Misunderstanding – private language – gendered languages – sexual violence.

The aim of this paper is to argue against certain folk-linguistic misconceptions. Namely, that what a person's utterance means has to do with how

she means her words, where "meaning something by one's words" refers to an internal, mental procedure. On this view, one misunderstands what another says because one has not established an access into the other's mind. In addition to that, as far as the mental is defined as an essentially hidden or secluded domain, there can be no such access apart from what the speaker manifests, willingly or not, by her words, gestures, actions etc. This kind of access into the other's mind is thus essentially indirect and open to uncertainty and to skeptical doubts. Since the behaviorist turn has begun (and ended), not many a philosopher professes his or her allegation to this theory, at least not in such a straightforward form that I sketched here. Various distinguished names from the *history* of philosophy were, however, its representatives, such as Augustine, Descartes, or Locke.

Not only is this a rather problematic philosophical theory about how language, its meaning and its relationship to what people are thinking (and may not be saying aloud) work. As far as it is inherent to some popular ideas of what *understanding* (or misunderstanding) of another looks like, it is worth challenging with respect to potentially *harmful* practice following or expressing this view. It is in this sense that I focus on it in the text. Specifically, I am interested in popular self-help guidelines as well as more scholarly theories about inter-gender (mis)understanding. If the ways men and women think differ essentially (be it due to different structures of their brains, or due to upbringing), their mutual understanding inevitably faces serious problems: they cannot have access to what the others' words "truly" mean and at best they are only guessing. The assumption that unhindered understanding between speakers of opposite genders is in fact impossible can be easily abused. The best-selling author John Gray can be used as a representative of the theory of separate gendered languages, but I will focus principally on the works by Deborah Tannen that strive at presenting this view in a more scholarly and systematic shape (see Tannen 1996; 2009).

A powerful attack on the above philosophical conception of language has been launched by Wittgenstein in his private language argument. Further elaborations of the later Wittgenstein's philosophy of language can provide certain remedy for the related misrepresentation of inter-gender linguistic relationships as well. I will thus depart from Wittgenstein's argument as my initial point.

Section 1 recapitulates the private language argument and its reach and shows that elements of the private language semantics, criticized by Wittgenstein, inform common ways of looking at situations referred to as "misunderstandings". I suggest that it would be appropriate to conceive of the alleged misunderstandings as practical attitudes of mistreatment. This suggestion is explored in Section 2, which discusses the prominent example of the so-called inter-gender misunderstanding. I argue that the conceptual apparatus of mentalist semantics presumed here is easily abused in order to advocate morally reprehensible actions against women. In Section 3, I suggest that the Wittgensteinian accounts of language and mind offer arguments for denying private conceptions of understanding on the grounds of both philosophy of language and ethics.

1. The private language argument

Wittgenstein's private language argument concerns an imagined language designed to record a person's inner experiences that only show themselves to her (her private sensations). This language thus cannot be understood by anyone else. Its signs cannot be given any public definition. Only the speaker herself can decide whether the experience E happened, hence whether she should use the sign "E" to refer to her experience. Nobody else can distinguish between correct and incorrect utterances "E!" (Wittgenstein 2009, §§ 243 ff).

However, playing a language game is a *rule-governed* activity; the normative distinction between correct and incorrect must hold independently of individual players. If there is no outside corrective authority – requiring a community – then whatever seems right to the lone player *is* right. But such a scenario contradicts the very concepts of "rule", "correct" or "mistake"; one cannot follow a rule privately (Wittgenstein 2009, §§ 201ff). The semantics of our language thus cannot be based on the foundation of naming private (mental) objects. Such is *a* plausible way of summarizing the argument in brief.[2]

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[2]   I stress here Baker & Hacker's (1984) "normativist" reading. Alternative readings are open too: most notably that of Kripke (1982), who links privacy with social deprivation and opposes the idea of private language on similar grounds as Hume's anti-

Wittgenstein's argument is sometimes interpreted in a narrow way (cf. Gert 1986; Sussman 1995): as an argument in favor of the thesis that, literally, private language is impossible. However, the thought experiment itself documents the possibility of diarizing one's inner experiences. Anyone can try it. The problematic point is to classify making such records as a full-fledged *language* activity: as a *game* with properly working *rules*. Private exercises *are* possible but paralinguistic. Language, on the other hand, is an essentially open space every speaker can enter.

Certainly, there are language territories that are more opaque and more treacherous. Talking gently and with insight to someone with profound personal worries is *not* a language territory that the vast majority of speakers can navigate smoothly. It is difficult to grow familiar with it. But this difficulty does not amount to impossibility *by definition* (characteristic of private language attempts). The difficulty accompanying contexts like this is also connected to the utmost importance we assign to them. Other people are often opaque to us and we can cause them great harm if we are not perceptive of what goes on in their lives. They matter to us and their importance has to do with the desirability of a proper appreciation of what goes on in their lives. These dimensions are absent from the diarizing of private experience; according to Wittgenstein's description, it is crystal clear that such a hobby need not be of any interest to anybody else. Access to it by outsiders is also impossible, rather than merely difficult.

Apart from the refusal to label private enterprises as language, Wittgenstein's argument has a more important point: that no relevant philosophical analysis of language can be provided in private terms. The polemics are directed against semantics building upon inner ideas, intentions or intuitions, represented by Descartes or Locke, but also the early Husserl. However, the idea that the meaning of language terms is based on something

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skeptical arguments do. More recently, Mulhall (2008) offered an elaboration on Baker and Hacker: the possibility of private language should not be dismissed *a priori*, on the basis of its contradiction of the only reasonable conception of grammar. For the private linguist, this response would be unacceptably blunt, because the pitfalls of her proposal are *latent* to her. Instead, her proposal should be examined patiently "from inside": only by thinking the proposal and the private practice through does one enable the private linguist to see the absurdity. According to Mulhall, this is what Wittgenstein does in Wittgenstein (2009, §§ 258ff).

within speakers' minds and exclusive to them is typical of many *folk-lin-guistic* intuitions: what the words one utters *mean* is expected to be what one *means* by them. Even though this assumption proves unclear, when thought through, we often do adopt an *attitude* of caution and mistrust towards each other: if there is friction or misunderstanding, there is a strong sense that the speaker's intention should be given *priority* over the listener's interpretation. This priority is reflected in our practice: it is the *speaker* to whom the listeners direct the expectation of clarifying what an unclear utterance is supposed to mean. This assumption has serious implications.

Let us consider a familiar situation: the inability to express oneself in such a way that one is understood by others "as one intended". An artist may feel uncertain about the successful communication of her message (sometimes to the point of obsession, e.g., in Virginia Woolf's case). Or, more commonly, in an online debate one can find herself constantly repeating "That's not what I meant; let me put it in other words", but without reaching the desired end even after multiple attempts. Here, the "what I meant", i.e., the alleged true meaning of the utterance, is dissonant with how the others seem to understand it. We all sometimes reflect on debate situations so that "what I meant" has not been properly received, despite all efforts. In these cases, the misunderstood speaker may be tempted to allude to her neglected private domain: "I had my point in front of my inner eye, but nobody managed to see it, despite all my efforts."

Typically, my interlocutors have *an* understanding of my utterance, only this understanding seems "flawed" to me. As far as what I said offers the possibility of developing it further in the *course of talk* (cf. Rhees 2006), it is *there* that the meaning of my utterance shows itself (its possible, meaningful use is reflected here), not in the failed speech intention. Those who complain about being systematically misunderstood *cannot* distinguish between what they mean and what they only think they mean, because they themselves claim to be the only person capable of understanding their point. For a person who has the feeling of failing repeatedly in communicating something she perceives as highly important, there is no difference whether the others only *happened* to fail to understand her attempts or if her point is essentially impossible to understand. If (as it could have been in Woolf's case) one refers to an inner intention that *eventually* remained blocked from *any* outer interpretation, the

reference makes – from the viewpoint of the private language argument – no sense.[3]

The speaker's claim that this failure has never been overcome amounts to her (implicit) acknowledgement that she cannot be sure whether she does not only think she knows what her hidden intention means, if anything. Just as with private language. At *this* point, there is no difference between *has never been understood* and *cannot be understood*. The only difference lies in others' response: the situation of a speaker who could (and should) have been understood, but never was, calls for pity or sympathy, while someone who wastes her time on what cannot be understood (diarizing one's private experiences) is responded to with indifference or disappointment that she is not interested in something else.

This difference is reflected in Wittgenstein's conception of the foundational attitudes towards other humans (Wittgenstein 2009, II, §§ 19-26): they are "souls" and on the basis of this attitude of ours towards each other we can have conversational exchanges of the kind that it makes sense to have with other beings speaking and understanding the human kind of language. The exchange of factual information – which may sometimes fail – proceeds only on this ground. We do not *infer* that others are beings (capable of) wanting to say something from the scrutiny of their utterances (cf. Winch 1980/1981); we (sometimes) scrutinize their utterances because we *trust* that they are human beings' utterances supposed to convey a sense (see Cockburn 2014).[4]

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[3]   Insofar as individuals' inner worlds cannot be spoken of meaningfully, they are insignificant, as good as nothing (see Wittgenstein 2009, § 304). Mulhall's (2008) "resolute interpretation" suggests that such inner objects do not exist at all. This seems stronger than a more literal reading of Wittgenstein: that it makes no sense to postulate such things. But even though a speaker can only think she has access to something that others misunderstand, a certain degree of reality can be ascribed to this "something". It plays a role in motivating the speaker's frustrated and odd behavior that others *can* observe, though they cannot explain it.

[4]   Cockburn's view of trust as foundational to communication is parallel to the more widely-known principle of charity discussed by Davidson (1973/1974). There are, however, differences. Davidson's principal focus is epistemological: the principle of charity ensures that we understand other's utterances as being coherent overall and expressing what the speaker believes to be *true*. Cockburn agrees, but he adds that, first of all, "relating through speech is central to the human way of *being with* others"

If the intention that failed to communicate was essentially private, then, whether one succeeded in communicating it or not, it would still mean what it was supposed to mean (it would still mean *something*). That is different if the "failure" means a disruption of the foundational interpersonal situation of intelligibility and trust. Then there is nothing beyond the pitiful rudiment: pitiful because of the intensive sense that something meaningful never came to be, though it could have. Failures in understanding must be recognizable as such on the background of the underpinning trust in mutual intelligibility. The presumption of a *preceding* meaning makes understanding and misunderstanding two alternative but *equal* scenarios of what can happen with the meaning. But misunderstandings are *not* routinely present as an equal alternative, depending on the result of the complicated procedure of interpreting signs (cf. Wittgenstein 2009, §§ 503f). To be mistaken is only possible if I am otherwise already in foundational agreement with others about the way we think (cf. Wittgenstein 1969, § 156).

Various elaborations on "what I meant" enter into conversation. For instance, the speaker can state that the public understanding differs significantly or slightly from her intention and she can explain the details of this difference. But she must convey her sense of being misunderstood in a way inviting others to see that there is something about her utterance that is clearly different from how they understood it previously. They are a *part* of the clarification process; a variety of meaningful steps must be open to them, differentiated according to whether they understand the speaker properly or not and how it matters. They must not be excluded from the process as incapable of seeing and appreciating the intention. Otherwise the reference to the intention couldn't enter meaningfully their conversation.

The responses given by others can have different forms; some of them accommodate even the persistent high opacity of the speaker's intention. Even if the speaker's feeling of being misunderstood persists for a long time and her references to her inner intention remain unspecified (open to

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(Cockburn 2014, 52, my italics). Language is expressive of our *engagement* with each other; some cases reported as failures in understanding are, as I will try to show, more properly understood as failures in engaging with each other as with one's human "neighbors". These failures involve dimensions that need not primarily have to do with what the other believes to be true.

doubt as to their meaningfulness), her worry and distress are real, with full-fledged outward criteria. That is a situation calling for patience, sympathy and attention. These responses require willingness on the recipients' part. But they need not be thus willing, out of idleness, ignorance or ill will. The surmises that communicating essentially involves the possibility of failure (because it starts "inside"), sometimes inevitable as a result of the attempted communication of something incommunicable – assuming that some genuine objects of communication are *essentially* incommunicable – these surmises are synergic with idleness rather than attention.

Language and understanding is, however, a matter of practice. To understand someone in a certain way includes attitudes, actions and interactions (Wittgenstein 2009, § 7). As Davidson (1973) notes in his account of interpretation, in understanding someone I ascribe to them feelings, beliefs, qualities and attitudes and *treat* them as persons who have such feelings, etc. Such *treatment* assigns to the person who is being interpreted a role in the shared practice, implied by the interpreter.

The frustration of the speaker who feels "regularly misunderstood" is often *expressed* in terms of understanding: "The others still don't *understand* what I wanted to say." As I tried to suggest, "what I wanted to say" is – in the cases where the reported misunderstanding persists – a problematic concept to make sense of. It can be fruitfully applied to cases in which the speaker is *subsequently able* to comprehensibly relate her intention, but it fails in cases where she is unable to do so or where nobody listens to her. The common description refers to the private domain: others do not understand me because they are not able to see what is in my mind.

If both success and failure were equal alternatives as results in the enterprise of establishing a connection with the inner, whence the feeling of frustration? The frustration indicates that understanding is, in an important sense, *due*. But understanding in the folk-psychological sense described above *cannot* be due: it is essentially unwarranted. If understanding is an insight into the inner, we could not justly feel frustrated by not being understood. The frustration can only be justified if we do not get what *is* due. We cannot be entitled to understanding in the sense of insight into our minds, but we are entitled to be understood if that means a particular kind of treatment – to be treated in a distinctly *human* manner. Unlike misunderstanding, mis*treatment* is easily shown to be something that makes one

feel *justly* uncomfortable. If the notion of humanity concerns the community of *trust* in mutual intelligibility among beings primitively interested in making themselves intelligible and acknowledging the importance of intelligibility, then the loss of intelligibility – an abandonment of interest, or an indifference to the endeavor – involves something of a loss of humanity. (This is a weak concept of mistreatment: addressing one's interlocutor in a way that neglects or frustrates her trust in being understood. I will endeavor to make it clearer in Sections 2 and 3.)

This may be a reason for seeing mis*treatment* as explanatorily more foundational than misunderstanding. It also helps us to see how serious cases of misunderstanding are ethical issue as well. Clearly, a lack of full attention to each other, accompanying most of our everyday misunderstandings – including innocuous cases – need not be downright immoral or wrong.[5] However, the situation is different if one *constantly* overlooks the other's frustration (because it may suit one's interests) and is in a superior position of power over the person striving to be understood. Here, to explain the feeling of being regularly misunderstood in terms of the opposition between private intentions and public interpretation is not only philosophically misplaced, it overlooks vitally important dimensions of the interplay between the two. Adherence to the idea of understanding as establishing the link with the private, secluded inner only exacerbates the harms related to the inequality of power. The next section will discuss and exemplify potentially serious implications of the interpretation of a particular kind of "persistent misunderstanding" based on the private idea of language.

2. Inter-gender misunderstanding

I have argued that to see misunderstanding as missing what the speaker meant is misplaced and it is better replaced by focusing on mistreatment. The common talk of misunderstanding includes the variety of two mutually misunderstanding partners. A widely suggested case of a mutual persistent

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5   Although Murdoch (1970) argues, the roots of an *unrealistic* vision of the other, failing to appreciate her full humanity as being equal to mine (and thus failing to give her what she is morally due), are located right here.

misunderstanding, intensively discussed in both scholarly and popular literature, is the gender opposition between men and women.

There is a claim of underlying *systematic differences* in their language practices. It is a widely held belief that men and women use language in different ways. This claim has been made by many authors; it has also been variously interpreted.[6] Only in the 'seventies did a more systematic exploration of gender differences in language use begin with the publication of Lakoff's groundbreaking *Language and Woman's Place* (see Lakoff 1975/2004). According to her, the characteristics of "women's language" include indirect techniques, a higher number of polite, correct and excusatory forms, tag questions, diminutives or intensifiers. These speech forms preserve and reproduce the inferior social position of women by articulating and codifying their weakness.

Lakoff uses this linguistic analysis for a feminist critique of the *artifact* which she claims "women's language" to be. And she concludes that if we are able to analyze the forms of language preserving women's subjection to men, it will enable us to change it (see Lakoff 1975/2004, 102). However, these observations – criticized and revised by many scholars, including Lakoff herself – have grown into the widespread and popular picture of the *natural state of affairs* being that there being two distinct gendered languages, which are hardly alterable.

As far as I can see, there is no clear agreement whether the roots of this state are biological or rather cultural.[7] But it is not up to a philosopher to decide the status of a scientific theory. I will confine myself to a discussion of certain elements shared by both views. According to the biological interpretation, the difference in speech styles is clearly considered irreversible. However, culturally acquired grammatical conventions are equally difficult for us to alter as natural and inborn traits, as Wittgenstein (1977, 76) points out. According to the cultural interpretation, children of opposite sexes are nurtured in different ways from the beginning, spending time in different environments and involved in different activities. They are

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[6]   It was mostly men who were considered to create or preserve language quality and women to neglect or even corrupt it. For a detailed expository survey see Coates (2004, 10ff); and also Cameron (2008, 24ff).

[7]   See the arguments pro in Baron-Cohen (2003, Chapters 7 and 8) and contra in Cameron (2010).

thereby guided to different behavioral standards and they grow into adults behaving like people of different cultures who understand each other only with difficulty or only think they understand each other (cf. Maltz & Borker 1982).

Maltz and Borker's thesis was elaborated by Tannen (2009), with an emphasis on language theorizing. According to her, the languages of men and women represent disconnected systems. Their misunderstanding does not concern the literal meaning of words; they use different interpretive frameworks, ascribe motivations their interlocutors would deny, adopt misguided stances, and infer "meta-messages" incompatible with what the speaker really wanted to express. That results in unexpected, unintelligible and undesired reactions.[8]

Although Tannen does not use the label "private", her thesis of two mutually unintelligible languages is reminiscent of the private accounts of semantics, including their unfortunate consequences described by Wittgenstein. Tannen presupposes that 1) each group speaks differently, because the speakers from one group have only poor (if any) access to the speech intentions of speakers from the other group, which are essentially exclusive to them and accessed by introspection. It means that 2) one is not oriented competently in the discourse of the interlocutor from the other group and its rules, and 3) whenever she attempts to move on such poorly understood grounds, she relies upon what *seems* correct to her, without any instrument for distinguishing between the correct and the seemingly correct. (As Wittgenstein showed, "language" based on foundations of this kind could not work in practice in the way our language does.)

Tannen's claim of mutual misunderstanding is based on her hypothesis that what utterances mean is based on how the speakers "meant" these utterances and that their meaning procedures reflect different *mental conditions* resulting from the different life situations and experiences of the groups, which are incomprehensible to one another. *Within* each group, its members understand each other thanks to the shared mental background of their speech. The agreement is thus not based on an *external* foundation such as following shared rules, but follows from an internal prerequisite, a

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8   Even before Tannen's popular book, similar results were presented by more scholarly authors, e.g. Treichler & Kramarae (1983) or Eckert (1990).

kind of "pre-established harmony". The reason for the supposed communication problems between groups is the same: the clash of mutually inaccessible semantic constitutions in the *absence* of this harmony.

Women's language thus prevents its being understood by male speakers in the same way Wittgenstein's private language prevents its being understood by any outsider. There is more than one speaker of the female language; it is thus not private in the exact Wittgensteinian sense. But since the source of the *intra*-group agreement does not lie outside, in the speakers' interactions, they too may only think they understand each other. A man supposes that another man's words mean what he takes them to mean not because they are both governed by the same independent standard, but because he is counting on the agreement of their inner backgrounds, which he can never guarantee.

However, outsiders cannot even count on this presupposed, if unwarranted, shared background. The mechanism of the constitution of the meaning of utterances by speakers of one gender group leaves, *pace* Tannen, the other group's speakers inevitably in total dependence on uncertain guesswork. A woman's words mean what *she means* by them, and that is determined by her particular female mental patterns of thought. A man cannot have any access to that; whenever he thinks he understands what her words mean (what she means), he cannot be sure whether he does not only think he understands.

Various objections can be raised, both conceptual (meaning conceived as being separated from pragmatics and from how recipients understand the utterances, etc.) and empirical. That does not mean that the situations presented as inter-gender misunderstandings are not real. Only the explanation is debatable. Tannen offers something similar to the "private" view of the regularly misunderstood speaker: her intention is constantly misinterpreted, partly because there is an interpretation offering itself outside, which is easier than fighting one's way through to "what she meant". Similarly, Tannen argues that men have available a substitutive interpretation of what women say and *vice versa*. These interpretations satisfy the needs of each interpreting community, so nothing motivates its members to undertake the labor of insight.

Tannen clearly ignores the real workings of language. Language is a space constituted by confrontations and interactions. It is not just what we *say* but a rule-governed complex of what we *do* (including what we say),

rooted in a richness of practical contexts (Wittgenstein 2009, §§ 241f). To surmise that all speakers' collisions are in essence only dissonant translations of (declarative) sentences is to remain on the surface (Wittgenstein 2009, §§ 65f). An adequate understanding of the alleged male-female miscommunication must reach further than to making "dictionaries" that translate between "male-ish" and "female-ish."

Tannen's strategy is widely anecdotal, as Cameron (2008, 87f) documents in her critique of John Gray and Tannen herself: if a man "understands" a woman's question "Could you empty the trash?" as an information query to which the appropriate answer is "Yes, I am capable of doing that" and not as a request, this is not "misunderstanding", a failure to gain an insight into her speech intention that he cannot understand, until she asks him directly: "Please, empty the trash." (It is disorders on the autistic spectrum that might cause troubles with understanding more than the "literal" content of an utterance.)

If someone reacts thus, it is usually not a case of mistranslation, but of a clash of interests: it suits the man's interest to wear the mask of stupidity so as to avoid the bothersome work. Generally, dissenting "male" or "female" language forms may turn out to be expressions of dissenting positions of interest (Wittgenstein calls the complex standpoints from which language games are played "forms of life").[9] These positions can differ considerably, up to open opposition, but this conflict is *not* (just) a matter of translation.

Though the interpretation of male-female relationships in terms of private "meaning" is problematic, it is pervasive. It is thus not inappropriate to ask about its purpose. The hypothesis of the "misunderstanding" based on the membership of the gender group has a significant impact on interpersonal relationships. If there are only two groups and each human being belongs to one of them, then as a member of the one group to which I inevitably belong, I am confronted with a long-term established set of normative standards, encouraging me in certain expected courses, frameworks and styles of practice (rewarding me for engagement in them) and

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[9]   These standpoints are established through practice-oriented activity (linguistic activities are mostly practice-oriented) and as such they can also be understood as forms of *power* (Lee-Lampshire 1999).

discouraging me from others (employing various sanctions). This division of labor need not serve my personal interests.

Though "women's language" allegedly displays more finely tuned techniques of maintaining the conversation, it does not thus follow that all female speakers favor this activity more than male speakers, or that they have naturally superior skills in this area. This menial job ("conversational shitwork"; see Fishman 1979 or Coates 2004, 87ff) may simply have been imposed on them as those who were not allowed to decide for themselves. Even if the distribution of skills between the groups is real and described correctly, the inference that "women are better at conversation – women should keep the conversation" incorrectly infers *normative* conclusions from *descriptive* premises. A tacit premise would be needed: e.g., if a task is easier for somebody, that person is obliged to take care of it. But this principle of labor division is far from self-evident; for instance, it would be at odds with learning new skills.

The myths of Mars and Venus prove "remarkably patronizing towards men" (Cameron 2008, 11). On the face of it, they only consider men to be less skilled speakers. But unlike other observations of lower skills, lower skills of this kind are not reflected in a practical disadvantage. The "less skilled" speakers end up with a more advantageous position than their female interlocutors because: being less able, they are *absolved* of the duty to keep the communication going and to take care of understanding each other. A "naïve" view of those who fail to talk to others and claim their right not to bother suggests a *moral* vice: indolence, insensitivity or disregard for others. A "scientific" or "objective" view hastens to correct the "naivety": this is a *natural* consequence of the deep sediment of different skill sets. It may be inferiority, but *intellectual* rather than moral.

Although theorists of gendered languages describe and discuss various structural differences, the example of conversation and communication skills is of special interest to us. It is directly connected to the presumption of the constitution of mental (private) meaning. When the recipients are men, the suggestion of privacy is made: they easily fail to understand women properly, because they do not see what was meant (the implicit assumption being: because it is inside the female speakers' heads). But not even the most enthusiastic advocates of this view can deny that some understanding in practice *has to* be and *is* established. Here the supposed higher communication skills of women enter the stage: the responsibility

lies on them. It would be difficult to explain how – if meaning has to do with private mental meaning intentions – one group can exculpate themselves of blunders, claiming their inability to look inside the others' heads, while the other group is expected to take care of efficient communication, *regardless of that*. But such *is* the expectation: while there is the assumption of a private barrier blocking the from-women-to-men direction, it is less so the other way round.

The asymmetric private language perspective has striking practical consequences, drastically documented in Ehrlich's (2001) extensive survey of sexual assault cases. It is not unusual for accused men to defend themselves with the argument that they didn't understand the woman's refusal to have sex. Although the argument that "No" means "Yes" or "Keep trying" sounds absurd in any other context, here, some defendants have successfully re-interpreted their immoral actions as a case of misunderstanding (*morally neutral*, if regrettable). What is more, the blame falls on the other side: it is the *woman* who has failed because she did not express herself clearly enough (Henley & Kramarae 1991; Cameron 2008, 89ff). The proposed asymmetry in communication skills in favor of women enables a shift in *responsibility* (*women* are primarily responsible for avoiding "misunderstandings") stemming from and again resulting in a real power asymmetry in favor of men.

The problem is not about different *views* of a situation. Each rival position is directly connected to each of the parties' *interests*. The complainant's claim that she has been morally wronged is the more transparent one, for it acknowledges that a certain reading of a situation (stressing that it has a moral bearing) calls for *differentiated* attitudes towards its participants. It recognizes that in some situations one party's interests legitimately deserve to be supported, while the other party should be rejected (or even punished). A part of the sense of this reading is that it is *not* depreciated just because the party claiming it is the one whose interests should be supported.

The alternative tends, on the other hand, to obscure the relationships of interest. It disregards the moral dimension and instead proposes the perspective of morally neutral epistemology (the inquiry into the private) and of the description of the state of affairs (the difference in linguistic skills). This reading is advocated as *unbiased* and in favor of *truth*; that it may also be in favor of one rival party is suppressed, as that could shed doubt on its

claim of impartiality. Despite the professed focus on the factual and epistemic dimension of the case, responsibility *is* assigned, in a way that suits the party advocating this view. Attention towards who is in the position of choosing the interpretive perspective and who profits from the choice is thus appropriate, even when the perspective that is offered claims neutrality.

From the defendants' perspective, understanding is an *unwarranted* result following the attempts to grasp "what the other meant", a result that may, or also may not come, especially in such a "difficult situation".[10] Additionally, whether mistreating the other is morally reprehensible allegedly depends on preceding proper mutual understanding: only then does the assailant have any chance of noticing his mistreatment at all – to see that he is violating the other's wishes.

The chain of logic of this argument is rather complicated, with several weak points: 1) men and women use language in systematically different ways (arguable at best); 2) this difference is inborn, therefore unchangeable (this is not, and perhaps cannot be, proven); 3) this difference is accompanied by different "meaning" procedures of gendered minds, mutually inaccessible as a result of different inborn mental equipment (possibly true, but practically irrelevant); 4) understanding people of the opposite gender is unwarranted, depending on a guess as to "what they meant" (refuted by Wittgenstein's argument); 5) understanding is a matter of decoding the language output (too narrow, at best); 6) understanding the other does not mean acting towards the other (treating her anyhow); 7) (some) cases of mistreating the other can be interpreted thus only if there was preceding

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[10]   In her critique of feminist epistemology, Diamond (1991, 1008) discusses an observation concerning situated knowledge: it cannot be assumed that one's understanding of another is prevented or inhibited by one's *emotions* towards the other. (In her example, it is animal trainers' *love* for their trainees: dogs, horses, etc.) An extrapolation into our example is possible: though the situation is heavily charged with emotions, the assailant's understanding of what his victim thinks or wants is not ruled out by his *emotional* state (be it rage, arousal or hatred). The parallel is not perfect: love may open a space for a deeper understanding that is unavailable for an impartial scientist, but the rage/arousal complex does not seem to mediate this capacity. But it suffices to point out that an emotional state cannot be an automatic excuse for a claimed "misunderstanding".

understanding which was deliberately neglected. Points 6 and 7 deserve some attention.

As I tried to show, understanding another cannot be separated from acting towards her. It can hardly be said that understanding in communication does not affect one's communication partner. First, the view equipping women and men with systematically different language repertoires allocates them to specified positions of practice, implicitly expecting each group to display its own skills and tend to occupations that allow them to make use of their talent. The expectation that men and women have different "beetles in their boxes" (Wittgenstein 2009, § 293) – "what they mean" – on which both how they understand others and how others understand them depend involves adopting different attitudes towards them, treating them differently. But, as Lakoff already pointed out, "women's language" is an artifact. Claiming an artifact to be natural – with the variety of further responses, such as indignant surprise when someone is not behaving "naturally" – produces pressure. It is supposed that women *should speak* a language articulating them as agents of a powerless and dependent nature,[11] whereas the language exclusive to men is, in contrast, apt for solving important problems "in the world". It is not a source of satisfaction that the female role is as impossible for men to occupy as the male role is for women. In effect, the references to the inner and the natural allow some agents to be denied competence.

The second, more specific worry is highlighted by the example I introduced: if morally reprehensible actions can be interpreted as depending on preceding understanding, then one's denial of having understood (with implicit reference to the gender-specific labor division) is an efficient way of exculpating oneself. But the rapist did *not* mis*understand* his victim. He mis*treated* (harmed) her, and by pretending to misunderstand he only aggravates the wrongdoing, because he blames the victim. Public campaigns fighting the culture of victim-blaming (rightly) point out that it makes the victims defend themselves when it is *they* who have been harmed. This is a special case of the same phenomenon: the victim carries an unjustified

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[11] That women's language is an artifact is somewhat quaintly documented by the research of fantasy line workers, which showed that they had to learn the ideal "women's language" as a role with which they did not personally identify, but that was demanded by their male customers (Hall 2005).

expressive burden – the duty to establish a link between "what she meant" and how she manifests it in a way transparent enough for the assailant to be able to follow it into her mind.

The picture of the boundary between "meaning" and understanding, partly permeable in one direction only, is useful for the current power asymmetry and is thus sustained by it. The denial of practical competences argued for in the "misunderstanding" line bears marks of ill will. Women urged to defend their behavior in rape trials do not fight philosophers (Locke or Husserl) presenting flawed arguments; they did not get stuck in a scholarly discussion. They face a broad, everyday practice that claims the support of favorable scholarly arguments and ignores adverse ones. The dirty trick lies in presenting situations of inequality in *factual* terms, whereby the ready accusation is avoided that what is going on here is just *morally* wrong.

3. Against the immorality of the "private" claims

I tried to demonstrate, on an example, the possible consequences of linking understanding to the ability to capture what the other "meant". If moral assessment of an action requires proper (preceding) understanding of the other in terms of reaching "what she meant", some actions avoid moral evaluation altogether because acquiring such understanding is by no means guaranteed. It may or may not succeed. If one *can* argue that one has not met this requisite for moral evaluation of an action in question, the results may be horrific.

If men and women do not understand each other because they cannot access what the others "mean", they act as if they were not bound by the same rules, since no rules can be guaranteed as being shared. To follow the same rule governing the meaning of an expression would mean to be able to follow the link between the expression and the mental meaning act. Elaborating further on Wittgenstein's example, since speakers of opposite genders do not participate in the "pre-established harmony" of shared mental backgrounds, they – unlike the private linguist who always thinks she gets it right – must always assume they do *not* get right what the others say. On the grounds of a Mars/Venus theory, they have no tool for distinguishing between grasping the others' utterances incorrectly and only thinking so.

Without access to the semantic standards established inside the others' minds, whatever seems wrong to them is such.

Therefore, wherever understanding the meaning of what the others say plays a role (i.e., practically everywhere), I cannot be properly bound by rules towards my interlocutor of the opposite gender because we only seem to talk to each other. I could only be her genuine dialogue partner if I could with certainty link her private meaning intentions to her language use. In our example, the assailant claims "I didn't understand what she meant, so you cannot blame me for doing anything wrong, such as forcing her into *unwanted* sex". If the moral evaluation of his action depended on proving his ability to grasp what she "meant", he would be quite right.

Certainly, advocates of the misunderstanding view want to maintain the links of mutual moral responsibility. It is said that no "fundamental difference" found by science can be an obstacle to the necessary mutual tolerance (Baron-Cohen 2003, Chap. 1). The slogan "different but equal" is supposed to convey the same message. Unfortunately, only rarely do they seriously attempt to put forward arguments for tolerance that are equally detailed as their arguments for the difference and content themselves with a declaration.

An elaboration of these suggestions can draw on Lévinas' (1991) completely independent notion of "ethics". Lévinas endorses that the Other is not fully intelligible to me. To "translate properly" what the Other thinks into my own language means only to reduce the Other to an abstract, systematic idea of her that I am able to create. I would thus treat the Other in a way that assigns her a "suitable" position within *my* worldview. On the other hand, the ethical stance means not to treat the Other in a way that suits my ideas about her, but to let her be in and for herself (see Lévinas 1991, 43). In Lévinasian terms, one's gender counterpart is considered *inexhaustible* by the interpretive tools one has available: as a private individual over whom one has no power. Consequently, I should respect the Other not *despite* my lack of understanding of her as a person, but *because of* this lack.

Unfortunately, the Lévinasian concept of ethics proves similarly problematic as the rapist's defense was. Indeed, it enables us to grant a person we do not understand the status of a moral subject and to make her thereby protected from *our* abuse. However, such a status only includes *her* right to be treated as a person with certain rights, but I have no leverage that the

other will treat me responsibly in turn – that I have the corresponding status in her eyes. Either way, one side is always left unbound by moral responsibility towards the other.

It seems to me that examples where issues of understanding overlap with issues of morality highlight that there are *multiple* reasons for dismissing private language semantics. The private language argument alone would be enough to show that the semantics of our language cannot be grounded in private intentions. Before I am able to think privacy, I am already in *public*: the source of the conceptual equipment necessary for conceiving skeptical worries (cf. Wittgenstein 2009, §§ 125ff). Wittgenstein's reflections on our foundational attitudes towards one other illuminate the problem from another side. The concept of "soul" – the role fulfilled by those towards whom my *interpersonal* attitudes are directed – implies that a soul is a fellow-being for whom it makes sense to feel sympathy, compassion, solidarity, etc. (cf. Cockburn 1990, Chap. 1)

The original German word for "soul" used by Wittgenstein (*Seele*) is ambiguous: it covers both the English "mind" and "soul". *Seele* is thus both a thinking entity and a *person*: a being of value, towards whom we adopt distinctly personal attitudes we do not adopt towards animals (though there is overlap) or things. The recognition of others as people – with whom I am in a relationship of mutual foundational intelligibility, involving a sense of the other's vulnerability – thus does not have to wait for determination of whether or what they think. On the contrary, if it appears uncertain what the other is thinking, this is parasitic upon the primitive recognition and can only make sense if there is such a primitive recognition (even then only rarely). Otherwise, we would not know what it means that the other hides something from us, etc.; we would not have such concepts as "hiding".

Of course, to recognize another in practice as a human being need not mean acting towards her with particular consideration. Phillips (1992) points out that there are *many* "attitudes towards a soul"; but they all differ in quality from the attitudes of different kinds. To pass un-Samaritanly by an injured man lying by the road means to be callous; there is something wicked about it. With passing by a broken machine, or by a piece of rock, it is not so. Callousness is an attitude towards another soul; we are not callous towards rocks even when we kick them thoughtlessly.

This is where the reason lies for seeing the defendants in rape trials as someone acting in a particularly horrendous way, rather than just seeing

the whole situation as an unfortunate incident. Rhees (2006, 148ff) points out that human communities are distinguished from animals by their members' understanding the lives they lead in terms induced by culture and morality. First of all, in terms of good and evil. Obviously, animals, too, display social complexity, companionship, etc. But it is distinctly human that people *endeavor* and *fail* in the respects of morality, or that they are sometimes altogether "dead" to the dimension of good and evil in their interpersonal relationships. The sense of something horrendous accompanying cases of human cruelty differs from aggression among animals. A crocodile does not kill a deer (or another crocodile) in the spirit of callous negligence of its personal preciousness that it (the crocodile) would or should normally recognize. There is no sense in talking about such recognition here, so there is none in talking about negligence. The rapist's self-defense, on the other hand, bears the meaning of something horrendous just because it is an expression of callous negligence, or, in Rhees' words, of being dead to the sense of good and evil, and to the evil spirit of his actions. He fails to recognize his victim's humanity.

It is a long way from the philosophical accounts of language and meaning in private terms to endings of this kind, but there is a connection. To think of meaning and understanding in private terms is not simply incorrect. This theory can also be exploited in many sorts of idleness, negligence or ill will. The suggestions of a systematic possibility of misunderstanding based on the different mental equipment of interacting agents should be dismissed, rather than seriously discussed in court. The rapist tries to present himself as Descartes' philosopher setting off on a long, difficult journey, and it is only at the end of it that he can say whether the others are not automata. But by shifting the burden of defense and blame onto the victim, he only shows himself as being dead to the sense of good and evil. (Anyway, he could hardly claim to be a philosopher: philosopher would not spare his or her own work, expecting that others should do the job.)

I suggested in the first section that addressing each other as human beings involves engaging with each other in mutual trust in each other's intelligibility, and that detriment to the trusted intelligibility amounts to a certain detriment to humanity. My point was not the Cartesian worry about other minds. It rather concerned the cases of weakened recognition of full humanity in someone who is not quite like me (a natural part of life situations where distinct groups – such as "men" and "women" – get stuck in

the clinch of competing interests). I may then be reluctant to address the other as someone with an equally rich inner life, as someone to whom the difference between the genuine and the seeming matters, as someone with the same depth of understanding and self-understanding as my own, as someone with truly deep or authentic emotions. This can be called a failure of understanding what the other is saying, but deep down, it amounts to detracting from the other's humanity.[12] Sexual violence, too, is an expression of a lack of interest in whether (an implicit distrust that) the victim is a human being with full depths of emotion and understanding.

I have tried to show that Wittgensteinian thinking offers tools for dismantling the potentially abusive attempts to interpret male-female miscommunication in private terms. There is no such thing as "misunderstanding" someone systematically; the arguments offered for the hypothesis of inter-gender misunderstanding would render *intra*-gender understanding equally insecure. Additionally, understanding each other (as persons) is intertwined with a variety of foundational emotional and practical attitudes. It is never only a theoretical task. To postulate the opposition of two mutually private domains and to claim one's natural misunderstanding thus amounts to avoiding one's responsibility to the other as a person. A moral issue is thereby mistaken for an epistemic one. We already understand each other somehow and that understanding involves a sense of personhood in others. The real problem is not how we can understand each other *at all*, but what can be improved between us and how. This is what the true cases of our opacity to each other call for: not for skeptical resignation, but for an effort to increase our mutual understanding. Arguably, this is also one point in feminist politics: *to the extent* that it is a *genuine* lack of understanding what is (partly) responsible for oppression, one should try to make others understand better rather than to sit with one's hands in one's lap, because by claiming the lack of understanding the matter is settled.

The naive notion of language based on private meaning intuition is incorrect not only in the context of semantic analysis, but also as an analytical tool for explaining the relationships between men and women. It facilitates sanctioning the actual inequality, but more so, it can also be abused to excuse blunt or intentionally immoral actions.

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[12] The suggestion in this paragraph derives from Gaita's analysis of racism (see Gaita 2002, Chap. 4).

Acknowledgments

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