When my eldest son, some years ago, volunteered about some escapade or another, “It was so fun,” I was astonished. I knew that people said, “It was a fun thing to do,” as though *fun* could be a nominal modifier. But “It was so fun?” Sounds like, “It was so water.” Ridiculous. However, as I was to learn, the word *fun* has in my lifetime adopted adjectival behavior (not yet recorded by Cambridge, or Merriam-Webster). The younger generation, therefore, did not learn their grammar lesson properly. They got it wrong. But is it wrong? After all, that generation merely extended the word *fun* from its use as an abstract mass noun, like *information*, to an adjective, presumably taking their cue from already prevalent nominal compounds such as *fun thing*, or *fun fur*. Anyway, who says *fun* is only a Noun?

We are all used to novel words. But my son and his peers had not just extended the vocabularies they were taught; rather, they had created something that, to my ears, perceptibly conflicted with what had been established. Unlike simple extensions of vocabulary, then, theirs was a deviant addition. Other examples abound, such as *paranoid* as a transitive adjective meaning *greatly afraid of* (“I’m paranoid of snakes”). The reader’s experience will surely provide still more. Besides additions, historical studies especially reveal many examples of deviant subtractions, linguistic departures that actually shrink linguistic resources, such as the loss of infinitives in Greek. Or consider the obligatoriness in contemporary English of subject-raising with *become*, replacing the expletive subject *it* with the subject of the non-finite complement clause.
The alternation with *seem*, as in (1) and (2), used to be permitted with *become*, as in (3) and (4); but (4) is ungrammatical in contemporary English:

(1) It sometimes seems that the accounts are illegible.

(2) The accounts sometimes seem to be illegible.

(3) The accounts sometimes become illegible.

(4) It sometimes becomes that the accounts are illegible.

To complete the circle of possibilities, there are examples of what may be called deviant replacements, where one form or construction alters its significance, to be replaced by another that acquires the significance that it used to have. The history of the tense systems of the Romance languages is a well-known example. In all of these cases of historical change (or, in the case of adjectival *fun*, of historical change in the making) learners project something other than the grammars to which they were exposed. My examples have involved semantics and syntax; but of course they are rife in phonology as well.

Historical phenomena apart, an elementary survey of the stratification of language by social class, geographical region, and other variables rapidly reveals cases where *x*’s speech is, from *y*’s point of view, deviant in one or another respect; i.e., neither merely extending or contracting *y*’s resources, but perceptibly at odds with *y*’s grammar. My son’s “It was so fun,” or the common use of *livid* to mean *flushed* rather than *pale*, are cases in point; likewise the vulgar use of *fish* to include lobsters. In all of these cases the same question arise: are the deviant mistaken, or are they merely different? The question is often symmetrical, as deviation can be, but need not be, a two-way street: if I don’t use *fun* as an adjective I am merely conservative; but if I use *livid* to mean exclusively *pale*, I
may deviate from my neighbor, as she, who uses it only to mean *flushed*, deviates from me.

Thus far I have spoken of developed languages. But languages are learned, and learned over substantial time. Hence the question arises how to think of what we apprehend in learners as merely partial grasp or understanding. Even mature speakers lack a comprehensive understanding of many terms that they themselves may use, and hear used: in my case of terms such as *carburetor, tort, enzyme*, and on and on. From this point of view, grammatical construction, meaning, and pronunciation confront both the individual speaker and her potential critics as objective matters, which they may or may not get right.

At the same time, criticism of the vulgar use of *livid, fun, or fish* seems out of place in a description of what goes on in the user of language; that is, the nature of her internalized grammar. The deviant speaker’s meaning can be as definite as anyone else’s; and where it is indefinite (as in, say, my hazy use of *tort*) I should be as resentful of being upbraided by the legally knowledgeable as they would be for my know-it-all correction of their philosophical sloppinesses.

We have, then, a genuine dialectic. Language, on the one hand, is a social phenomenon, showing changes over time and space, and reflecting the interlocking social concerns and expertise of a variety of human endeavors, a “division of linguistic labor,” in Hilary Putnam’s memorable phrase. On the other hand, there is the grammar of the individual speaker at a particular time, and in a particular setting, through which are expressed such
thoughts as we may possess and apprehend. How should one think of these factors in an
account of language and thought? This article is devoted to an investigation of that
foundational issue. The issue is foundational along at least three dimensions: (i) as it
concerns the factual or evidential background that goes into the explanation of linguistic
phenomena; (ii) as it bears upon some normative aspects of language, including deviant
speech in the sense illustrated above; and (iii) as it influences our view of the relations
between the thought a person expresses and the linguistic forms she uses.

Let us say that a conception of language, as bearing on the questions just mentioned, is
*idiolectal* to the extent that social phenomena---deviant speech, partial understanding,
historical change, and the like---are to be viewed as deriving from the interactions of the
several grammars of individuals, without any essentially social residue, and say that it is
*social* to the extent that it relies upon social variables. Even with these rough and ready
labels we may clarify some issues.

First of all, a social conception of language does not deny the existence of idiolects;
rather, idiolects would be construed as idiolects *of* a common language, and would for
example take this article as written in an idiolect of English, reflecting its author’s
particular style and background. Diversity in speech, as in much else, has its place within
community. When my English friends say that something costs “fifty quid,” I understand
them to mean it costs fifty pounds. *I* wouldn’t say “fifty quid,” and *I* wouldn’t expect
them to refer to an American ten dollar bill as a “sawbuck.” But we are, in our different
ways, speaking English.

Second, there are many aspects of social life for which a social conception of language
is essential. If we think of “languages” in the sense of languages recognized at the
United Nations, or languages in which it is possible to give expert testimony in court, take a written driving test in the state of California, or publish a daily newspaper, then broad sociopolitical divisions amongst languages come to the fore. These, however, are not of any obvious interest in the scientific project of describing the organization of human speech along the familiar dimensions of semantics (and pragmatics), syntax (including morphology), and phonology (including at least parts of phonetics). Moreover, and crucially for our dialectic, they come on the social scene only after the fundamentals of human first languages, the ordinary medium of communication, are in place. Thus, if we take native linguistic competence in Noam Chomsky’s sense as the target of linguistic explanation, then the sociopolitical dimension of language appears to drop out of the picture.

Third, it is commonplace to say that languages are conventional; that is, that a language belongs to a population because of the intertwining, and mutually agreeing and reinforcing, mental states and dispositions of its members. Conventions are essentially amongst several individuals; hence the social conception may inherit plausibility from the assumption of conventionality. Certainly, some relatively sophisticated aspects of language, many of them pragmatic, are conventional, as conventional as the use of “Please” and “Thank you.” In further support of the conventionalist view, we may observe that, just as the exchange of commodities for money requires agreement on value given and value received, so the successful exchange of thoughts in communication requires intent to line up with interpretation. The hearer must interpret the speaker as the speaker intends to be interpreted, and the speaker must intend something that the
interpreter is able to grasp as intended. From these points alone, however, it does not yet follow that language is conventional in a strong sense; i.e., that more than on-the-spot agreement is at stake in communication. And anyway, as I will suggest below, there is a distinct possibility that communicative success of the ordinary sort is brought about by other means.

Social dimensions of language, then, are not to be dismissed just because there is individual variation; but neither are they to be swallowed whole just because of the advanced human social organization that gives a point of sorts to the political demarcation of languages, or because of appeals to convention.

I have opposed the social conception of language to the idiolectal, one whose units, at a natural extreme, are the dialects of individuals at times, and perhaps relative to style of speech, and social occasion. Units intermediate between the individual-at-a-time and the wider society are possible as well, and find their place in Linguistics in the study of such phenomena as “code-switching,” or the intermingling of diverse forms, for instance from English and Spanish in casual speech in some urban settings in America. My exposition, however, will chiefly concern the extreme idiolectal view. That view, as well as the intermediate cases just envisaged, often draws force from examples such as those I have given, of livid, fish, and the like. It pronounces, with justification in many cases: nobody is “right,” and nobody is “wrong.” They have their language and we have ours; and that’s all.

However, a point to be noted at the very beginning is that an idiolectal conception of language does not at all imply the absence of external, including social, features in the individuation of the forms and meanings attaching to a particular person’s idiolect. So
much, even if in the end it is but an empty reminder, is a matter of logic. It is granted that where a social conception sees idiolects as variations within a larger scheme, an idiolectal conception takes the scheme itself to be built up through such regularities as present themselves in common background and interaction amongst individual speakers. But the individual is not therefore to be considered as if in isolation. People can depend upon one another for their words and their grammars. To take a simple analogy: the properties of a pine forest, whether it grows or contracts, flourishes or withers, its density and fecundity, arise from the properties of its individual trees and saplings; it by no means follows that what goes on with an individual tree is independent of its neighbors.

A further disclaimer: to say that a conception of language is idiolectal is to say that generalizations over “the language” are summary accounts that are made true or false through the states and transitions between states of individuals. But that is not to say that the summary accounts are in any sense reducible to statements about individuals, in practice or in principle. Reducibility in practice of, say, the advent of obligatory pronominal subjects in French is out of the question, and would be so even if we possessed an exhaustive list of utterances in French from Roman times to the present. But reducibility in principle is also questionable, as learners and those from whom they learn are tied by relations of authority and love (among others) that are essentially social, and whose influence is substantial.

An idiolectal conception of language is compatible with a substantive role for external things---objects, including other people---in the characterization of idiolects. Illustrations of this role are not hard to come by. The point of looking outward from the individual is pretty evident for the case of reference to perceptually encountered objects: had the world
been significantly different, a person with the same molecular history would have
acquired, and called by the same familiar names, different physical and other concepts
(see Burge (1986) for careful elaborations). An idiolectal conception of language is by
no means committed, and has some reason to be opposed, to internalism, and to

*individualism* in Burge’s sense; that is, to the view that the organization of the body,
abstracting from external things, is constitutive of any linguistically significant aspect of
language (for discussion of various senses of internalism, see Bezuidenhout, this volume;
and see both Bezuidenhout and Farkas, this volume, for exposition and analysis of
individualism and anti-individualism in the sense of Burge). It remains to examine
several areas where, as I shall argue, internalism fails.

First of all, consider my son’s extension of *fun* to an adjective, presumably by some
internalized formula, or lexical entry, such as (5):

(5) *fun*: adj., true of an activity \(x\) iff for a person to engage in \(x\) is fun for that person.

I may have any number of reasons for “correcting” my son: perhaps he’ll miss a question
on an English achievement test. But these reasons for my action have no tendency to
show that he was somehow linguistically wrong in extending *fun* as in (5), or that I am
right in not doing so. Similar remarks go for the person whose *livid* means *flushed*, and
those who call lobsters fish.

On the other hand, there are active linguistic mistakes that are not so readily dismissed.
Thus, to deploy an example due to Burge (1982), many people believe, falsely, that two
parties have made a contract only if their agreement is supported in written form. In
learning otherwise, they stand, and conceive themselves to stand, corrected. The critical
point is that they change their views for *cognitive* reasons; i.e., because, in point of fact,
contractual obligation is created by open mutual understanding, to which written
documents bear only an evidentiary relation. Their semantic divergence, then, is not a
mere difference between them and others, but a real error, properly classified as such by
those who are corrected.

All of us have been, and presumably still are, in the following linguistic bind. We have
assigned a meaning to some word or expression that gets it wrong, in major or minor
ways. But we intend the meaning of those around us, from whom we derived the
expression in the first place. We are therefore incoherent, as there is no single meaning
we intend. Consider the plight of Adam, who is ready to say (2):

(2) Smith and Jones have an open oral agreement, but no contract.

If we evaluate Adam’s contract according to his internal lexical entry, he speaks truly, or
so we may suppose. But if we evaluate that word according to the public meaning, which
Adam also intends, he contradicts himself. How then do we evaluate Adam’s statement?

One answer would be: go for the personal lexical entry. But that answer overlooks the
point that Adam doesn’t intend to deploy just his own personal understanding of the
expression ‘contract’; and of course it omits that Adam, once appraised by the lawyers,
takes himself to have been corrected, and changes his views for good reason. Just as
lopsided would be: go for the public word. For that would omit that Adam in saying (2)
gave voice to a definite belief of his, namely that Smith and Jones’s agreement had not
been written down. It is not that there is just one thing that Adam said and intended to
say in saying (2), and we have a dilemma about which it is. Adam is just in a bind.

If the above is correct, then besides the cases where linguistic differences are merely
differences, one side or another of which may be “correct” for one or another extraneous
purpose, there are cases where one’s internalized assignment of meaning goes astray; and in those cases the speaker’s intentions actually conflict with their internal assignments of meaning. The difference between the cases, it is to be stressed, is itself owing to differences in the thoughts of individual speakers. If I don’t care how ichthyologists use the word *fish*, I shall not change my ways just because of some pedant’s alleged correction, and if I don’t mind being etymologically challenged I shall not refrain from saying that someone red with anger was “livid with rage.” But for those cases that I care about for good reason, my intentions in speaking, and the form of my lexical entries, will reflect my position as one user among many of an expression we have in common. I am not bowing to authority, but recognizing, in language as elsewhere, substantial differences in knowledge.

In support of internalism, it is sometimes presupposed that the individual speaker is an infallible authority on what her words mean. Of course, individual speakers are in an important sense authorities on the meanings of their words. So the presupposition to be questioned is not that people, or those of appropriate maturity anyway, have first-person authority over their meanings, as they do over their beliefs, desires, and intentions, but rather that, if language is idiolectally based, then a speaker’s words must mean *whatever* she thinks they mean; i.e., that it is her conception of what they mean that endows them with such meaning as they have. On a non-internalist view, however, the speaker’s contribution is only part of the story. In language as elsewhere, one’s conception of things may deviate from a norm to which one is already committed (for further discussion of the normativity of meaning, see Wilson, this volume).
In illustrating the non-internalist view I have been speaking of an extreme case, namely of an actual mistake in the interpretation of an expression. More common is the case of merely partial understanding. Suppose the car won’t go properly. I take it to the mechanic, and am told there is “a leak in the gasket.” I can convey this information to others even though I don’t know what a gasket is. In so doing, I am no mere parrot, as I would be if in Iceland I should repeat to an Icelander something said to me in Icelandic, without the least comprehension of what it was. Rather, so the example suggests, I am using, and intending to use, a word *with its meaning*, even if I myself have only a slender understanding of what that meaning is. And so it would be for me, and no doubt the reader, with many other words. No amount of internal investigation of us will determine what we meant.

I have remarked that, as a matter of logic, internalism is not implied by an idiolectal conception of language, and have subsequently argued by example that it fails in general anyway, on account of a variety of cases of errors and incomplete understanding on the part of the mature speaker. These phenomena apart, there are serious questions about the acquisition of a first language, whose answers, insofar as they can be discerned, are critical for understanding the role of social phenomena in the speech of individuals. I shall put some of these questions very abstractly, illustrating below with reference to a particular representative example.

Linguistic theory, as I am considering it here, aims to describe and to explain the genesis under normal conditions of the internalized grammars of human beings, their linguistic competence in Chomsky’s sense. The objects of explanation are widely various, and all but a few of them arise in the context of ongoing theory. We would view
aspects of linguistic competence as social, in one good sense, to the degree that the notion of success, together with motivational factors, intending to speak as others do, for instance, come into the picture; indeed, we have appealed to these notions in advancing a non-internalist idiolectal conception of language, supported by examples such as those given. However, it cannot be decided a priori what role, if any, these notions play in the growth of language in normal human children, or in the basic structures and interpretations of expressions that come in the fullness of time. For it is perfectly conceivable that assignments of structure and meaning, even as made in rational response to external speech and perceptual situations, proceed blindly; i.e., without motivation, or any recognizable striving for success. Success indeed is achieved (emphatically not “success in communication,” as communication may succeed or fail for adventitious reasons, but rather success in grasping the levels of linguistic structure and their interactions, which are revealed only through a theoretical construction on the basis of the perceptual and linguistic evidence), but it would be the kind of “success” associated with, say, the maturation of small motor control, rather than self-conscious learning. In much of the contemporary literature, the picture of language is not that of the learner’s passing through stages of partial learning, or of learning only part of the language to be acquired, but rather as passing through a triggered sequence of individual competences, tending toward a steady state, thereafter elaborated only little. To this extent an internalist idiolectal view of acquisition and competence would be strengthened.2

To choose one case for the purposes of illustration, consider the English resultative construction, illustrated by (6) and (7):

(6) John wiped the table clean.
(7) Mary called the waiter over.

It’s evident that if (6) is true then the table comes to be clean as a result of John’s wiping it; likewise that (7) means that the waiter comes to be “over (to her)” as a result of Mary’s calling him; hence the name of the construction. Two notable points: (i) the resultative construction is very common in some languages (English, Chinese, Dutch), absent or very nearly absent in others (Italian, Japanese); (ii) it is *lexically particular*, in the sense that not every construction that fits the kind of meaning attaching to (6) and (7) is acceptable. For point (i), we need to explain how the speaker of English comes to know about the construction and its meaning, and why speakers of Italian, say, don’t have it, or bother to make it up. For (ii), as noted in various work, including especially Bowerman (1982), we need to explain the unacceptability of (8) and (9) (the latter actually volunteered by a child speaking English):

(8) John wiped the table dirty.

(9) I pulled [the papers] unstapled.

Obviously, a table can become dirty as a result of wiping it; and papers can come unstapled as a result of pulling on them. But (8) and (9) are odd, to put it mildly.

The resultative construction is not universally attested, and therefore must be acquired. The child learning English, or Chinese, hears *instances* of it, and must somehow recognize them as such. The instances must be generalized, through some procedure. Once these matters are in place, this particular aspect of ordinary competence is set. The intellectual process, guided by some prior conception of the nature of human language, may or may not, for all that as been said, be guided also by social factors. But even if it is not so guided; that is, even if it represents only the flowering of a native capacity under
appropriate conditions, it will support communication: for, all that is required is that the learner wind up in the right place; that is, the same place more or less as everyone else. No appeal to convention in any serious sense is wanted, or so it would appear.

Further questions, if anything more difficult than those just considered, arise in connection with linguistic differences, and the child’s volunteering e.g. of the unacceptable (9). From the fact that the child learning Italian hears only sparse instances of the resultative, it by no means follows that the construction is generally excluded; but such is the case. Likewise, the child learning English has to tailor the generalization of the resultative, so as to exclude (8) and (9) among others. But how is this feat accomplished? In the Italian case, the system that would generate the resultative construction has to be put out of commission. In the English case, it’s a matter of tailoring usage. Whether social features play a role in either remains open.

In this article I have reviewed several prominent considerations in favor of an idiolectal, but non-internalist, conception of language, insofar as linguistic investigation is concerned with the nature and genesis of the grammars of speakers, acquired under normal conditions, and the relations between the thoughts they express and the meanings they conceive expressions to have. That is not to deny that essentially social conceptions are wanted for other purposes. However, if I am right, appeals to language as convention, or to success in communication, do not of themselves carry much force against the idiolectal conception. Conversely, that conception does not support internalism as much as may at first appear. The complexity of the relations between language and thought, exemplified by the phenomena of linguistic error and partial
understanding, makes work for the theory of meaning and the acquisition of meaning, in the individual and in interpersonal communication.
Notes


1. Lewis (1975) is an important exposition of this view.

2. I take this point from (my understanding of) Davidson (1986).

3. For a recent survey, see Guasti (2004).
References


