

“Me” as speech act: a performative based psychology

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But the real question for me is: How am *I* defined? Who is it that is favoured? But may I lift up my mind to indicate who it is? (Wittgenstein, 1989, p. 27)

The words used are to some extent to be ‘explained’ by the ‘context’ in which they are designed to be or have actually been spoken in a linguistic interchange. (Austin, 1962, p. 100)

ABSTRACT

We propose to define a *psychological hypothesis* for the word “me” that designates, for each human being, his or her personal interior Ego. Every human being is naturally an Ego – it is a question of learning the particular linguistic sound (or the particular sign gesture in a sign language) in which it is named in one’s mother tongue. In fact, it is not important, for our analysis, that the Ego be innate or developed gradually through experience. The important point in the psychological hypothesis is that the Ego is an entity (psychological and internal, to be exact) of one kind, while the word “me” is an entity of a different kind. The second hypothesis, which we will call the *externalist hypothesis*, responds affirmatively to question a), and maintains that “me” indicates a certain individual body, that of the person who is using the word “me”. A possible advantage of this last hypothesis is that in it one is not obliged to admit the existence of presumed and invisible psychological states. In this case also, however, the word “me” is separated from that which is referred to.

1. A little girl, for the first time in her life, says “me”. “Who is the prettiest little girl in this house?” her mother has asked the child while washing her. It was not exactly a question, but the child has understood it as such and has proudly answered “me”. In this essay, we shall attempt to confront the problem of the meaning of this word. We will begin from two of the senses in which the question can be understood: a) does “me” refer to something? b) is the child, when she says “me” thinking of something in particular? Let us try to be exact here about the question in hand. One could reply to the question b) affirmatively: “me” designates an internal psychological state, a sort of concept (innate, for example), that the little girl has learned at a certain point

to associate with the linguistic sound “me” in use in the community into which she was born. We propose to define this solution as the *psychological hypothesis*. In this setting, the word “me” designates, for each human being, his or her personal interior Ego. Every human being is naturally an Ego – it is a question of learning the particular linguistic sound (or the particular sign gesture in a sign language) in which it is named in one’s mother tongue. In fact, it is not important, for our analysis, that the Ego be innate or developed gradually through experience. The important point in the psychological hypothesis is that the Ego is an entity (psychological and internal, to be exact) of one kind, while the word “me” is an entity of a different kind. The second hypothesis, which we will call the *externalist hypothesis*, responds affirmatively to question a), and maintains that “me” indicates a certain individual body, that of the person who is using the word “me”. A possible advantage of this last hypothesis is that in it one is not obliged to admit the existence of presumed and invisible psychological states. In this case also, however, the word “me” is separated from that which is referred to.

Later in this work, we will seek to show that neither the psychological nor the externalist hypotheses are satisfactory, precisely because they consider the word “me”, which, moreover, is one of the few linguistic universals to be unanimously recognised (Beneveniste, 1966) as a *description* of something else, the Ego or the individual body.

2. Let us begin with the psychological hypothesis: the Ego exists independently of the word “me” which designates it, both in a logical sense (according to this hypothesis Ego and “me” are separate entities, and the latter presupposes the former) and a temporal one (first I notice that I am an Ego, and then the need can come to communicate this to the external world). Let us return to the example of the little girl, who for the first time in her life says distinctly “me” (it could be, in effect, that before this public use, the little girl had begun to use this word *sotto voce*). For example, it could happen that, during a game, she suddenly noticed that it is *precisely she* who is playing, and from this mature –for our analysis it is not of consequence that this occurs abruptly or gradually – the awareness of being an Ego. The little girl identifies in herself a certain psychological state, for example, state X, and subsequently understands that X = Ego. Here, there is a serious logical problem (cfr. Heal, 2002): could the little girl be making a mistake? Could it in effect be that X is not equal to Ego? This is the problem that Wittgenstein deals with in his *Philosophical Investigations* in the chapters dedicated to the possibility of a private language. A private language is one which only one person in the

world can use and understand, just as the little girl and no one else can accede to her Ego. If a private language can exist, a private awareness of one's internal states can do also: “Let us imagine the following case. I want to keep a diary about the recurrence of a certain sensation. To this end I associate it with the sign “S” and write this sign in a calendar for every day on which I have the sensation.— I first want to remark that a definition of the sign cannot be formulated. — But still I can give myself a kind of ostensive definition. — How? Can I point to the sensation? Not in the ordinary sense. But I speak, or write the sign down, and at the same time I concentrate my attention on the sensation — and so, as it were, point to it inwardly. — But what is this ceremony for? for that is all it seems to be! A definition surely serves to establish the meaning of a sign. — Well, that is done precisely by the concentrating of my attention; for in this way I impress on myself the connexion between the sign and the sensation. — But “I impress it on myself” can only mean: this procedure brings it about that I remember the connexion *right* in the future. But in the present case I have no criterion of correctness. One would like to say: whatever is going to seem right to me is right. And that only means that we can't talk about ‘right’.” (*Philosophical Investigations*, I, § 258)

The situation of the little girl is similar to that presented in Wittgenstein's mental experiment. At first, the little girl identifies the internal state X., and then she recognises it as her Ego. In the same fashion, the private sensation manifests itself first and it is then recognised and named with the sign “S”. Yet since both processes are private and hidden, “whatever is going to seem right to me is right”, with the disastrous consequence, “that only means that we can't talk about ‘right’”. The psychological hypothesis presupposes a fundamental asymmetry between the awareness the little girl may have of her Ego and that which everyone else may have. While she cannot be mistaken, the others can at most make hypotheses about her Ego. Wittgenstein, on the other hand, shows us that the little girl and the others are in the same situation. There is awareness if there is the possibility of distinguishing between a correct awareness and a mistaken one. In the case of the private awareness of one's Ego, it is not possible to distinguish between correct awareness and mistaken awareness. Therefore private awareness is not a form of awareness.

If private awareness is excluded, then the psychological hypothesis should be abandoned. When the little girl says “me” it is not at all certain that her Ego is being referred to, because not even she has a reliable way of acceding to her internal states. The child, compared to her presumed Ego, finds herself in

the same situation in which the people with whom she talks do. The psychological hypothesis presupposes the internal certainty of one's Ego and not of some other entity. Yet without this internal guarantee, the entire psychological hypothesis loses all interest. The psychological hypothesis does not respond, therefore, to our problem: who is the girl speaking of when she says "me" to her mother?

3. How can we describe our initial example from the point of view of the externalist hypothesis? The little girl says "me" because she has learned that when she wishes to refer to her own body, she has to use this word. There is an observation which must be made immediately, however. This usage of the word "me" is highly particular. It can be useful only when there is the possibility of confusion between two bodies contemporaneously present. In this case "me" would serve as a sort of distinguishing sign, while perhaps the little girl, when she says "me", intends something which is more complex. One could use "me", in effect, when one is alone, when there should be no risk of confusion: "One can talk to oneself. — If a person speaks when no one else is present, does that mean he is speaking to himself?" (*Philosophical Investigations*, I, § 260). Why should a person who is alone talk to him/herself? Let us put the case that this person uses the word "me". In this case there are no doubts regarding what bodies are present, and therefore why use the word "me". Perhaps there is a use of "me" which is different from that of a simple sign of differentiation. There is also an even greater difficulty. The little girl says "me" intending her own individual body, but the mother could also say "me", so which is the body that corresponds to "me"? Whoever has a body can, according to this hypothesis, say "me", just as every fork is called "fork". The externalist hypothesis is too radical, and in order to avoid the presupposition of any psychological entity, it becomes unrealistic, because it now becomes difficult even to imagine how the child could have learned to associate her own body with the word "me".

4. Neither the psychological nor the externalist hypotheses seem to be capable of identifying the problems that we have posed: what does the word "me" mean? "Me" does not seem to refer either to the body of the person speaking nor to the private and presumed interior state of the speaker. In, effect, as Benveniste notes, "me" together with other words like "here", "now" and others again: "se distinguent de toutes les désignations que la langue articule, en ceci: ils *ne renvoient ni à un concept ni à un individu*. Il n'y a pas de concept "je" englobant tous les *je* qui s'énoncent à tout instant dans le bouches de tous

les locuteurs, au sens où il y a un concept “arbre” auquel se ramènent tous les emplois individuels de *arbre*. Le “je” ne dénomme donc aucune entité lexicale. Peut-on dire alors que *je* se réfère à un individu particulier? Si cela était, ce serait une contradiction permanente admise dans le langage, et l’anarchie dans la pratique: comment la même terme pourrait-il se rapporter indifféremment à n’importe quel individu et en même temps l’identifier dans sa particularité? On est en présence d’une classe de mots, les “pronoms personnels”, qui échappent au statut de tous les autres signes du langage. A quoi donc *je* se réfère-t-il? A quelque chose de très singulier, qui est exclusivement linguistique: *je* se réfère à l’acte de discours individuel où il est prononcé, et il en désigne le locuteur. C’est un terme qui ne peut être identifié que dans [...] une instance de discours, et qui n’a de référence qu’actuelle. La réalité à laquelle il renvoie est la réalité du discours. C’est dans l’instance de discours où *je* désigne le locuteur que celui-ci s’énonce comme “sujet”. Il est donc vrai à la lettre que le fondement de la subjectivité est dans l’exercice de la langue. Si l’on veut bien y réfléchir, on verra qu’il n’y a pas d’autre témoignage objectif de l’identité du sujet que celui qu’il donne ainsi lui-même sur lui-même.” (Benveniste, 1966, pp. 261-262).

Benveniste proposes a solution which is alternative to both the psychological and externalist hypotheses. When the little girl in our example says “me”, she is referring neither to a private internal state of her own nor to her body to distinguish it from that of her mother: “me” “se réfère à l’acte de discours individuel où il est prononcé”. Saying “me” attests that a) the position of speaker has been assumed, b) that one is capable of doing so. Initially, the reality of “me” is therefore a completely linguistic one. The psychological validity of “me” is secondary compared to its linguistic validity. “Me” refers to the fact that, in the situation in which “me” appears, a body *is saying* “me”: “la “subjectivité” [...] est la capacité du locuteur à se poser comme “sujet”. Elle se définit, non par le sentiment que chacune éprouve d’être lui-même (ce sentiment, dans la mesure où l’on peut en faire état, n’est qu’un reflet), mais comme l’unité psychique qui transcende la totalité des expériences vécues qu’elle assemble, et qui assure la permanence de la conscience. Or [...] cette “subjectivité” [...] n’est que l’émergence dans l’être d’une propriété fondamentale du langage. Est “ego” qui *dit* “ego”. Nous trouvons là le fondement de la “subjectivité”” (Ivi, pp. 259-260).

With regard to the externalist hypothesis, it should be noted that for Benveniste, “me” does not designate the body of the speaker, but rather the fact that that body is speaking, and in particular it is saying “me”. “‘Me’ is therefore a linguistic entity ‘*sui-référentiel*’.” (Ivi, p. 263)

There are three principal characteristics to Benveniste's hypothesis: a) it does not presuppose any private psychological entity, thus avoiding Wittgenstein's criticism of private language; b) it starts from a fundamental public fact, someone who says "me"; c) from the outset, it underlines the social character of *me* because "la conscience de soi n'est possible que si elle s'éprouve par contraste. Je n'emploie *je* qu'en m'adressant à quelqu'un, qui sera dans mon allocution un *tu*. C'est cette condition de dialogue qui est constitutive de la *personne*, car elle implique en réciprocité que je deviens *tu* dans l'allocution de celui qui à son tour se désigne par *je*" (*Ivi*, p. 260. In effect, the little girl says "me" responding to the mother: at first she is the "you" to whom the "me" of the mother speaks. When the child then responds, she becomes a "me" and the mother a "you". Before being a psychological entity "me" is an enunciative function which always presupposes a "you" as addressee: "le langage n'est possible que parce que chaque locuteur se pose comme *sujet*, en renvoyant à lui-même comme *je* dans son discours. De ce fait, *je* pose une autre personne, celle qui, tout extérieure qu'elle est à "moi", devient mon écho auquel je dis *tu* et qui me dit *tu*." (*Ibidem*).

Let us return once more to the little girl who says "me". According to Benveniste, in this case "me" signifies that, for the first time, the child gathers a link between her mother's word and the words that she could pronounce. The mother's words are not just orders, prohibitions, permissions or verbal caresses, but can also be questions, to which response can be made. While with an order there is only someone who speaks and someone who must obey, and therefore in effect only an enunciative function which is not reversible, in a question there are *two* enunciative functions which are exchangeable. In saying "me", the child recognizes that she also can be a "me", and therefore that also the mother can become a "you": "cette polarité ne signifie pas égalité ni symétrie: "ego" a toujours une position de transcendance à l'égard de *tu*; néanmoins, aucun des deux termes ne se conçoit sans l'autre; ils sont complémentaires, mais selon une opposition "intérieur/extérieur", et en même temps il sont réversibles" (*Ibidem*).

There is one last point, however, which needs to be clarified, so as to be able to abandon definitively the psychological hypothesis regarding the meaning of "me". According to Benveniste, "me" is first an enunciative function which presupposes a "you" to be addressed which then in its turn may become a new "me" and vice versa. The strong element in the psychological hypothesis is that in some fashion it satisfies the requirement of explaining how it is that we believe that every time we say "me" it is always *the same me* that says it. To satisfy this requirement, which has evident ethical consequences, the psychological hypothesis presumes the existence of a primal

Ego, which would be the base for all linguistic acts in which “me” appears. Is there a way to safeguard this requirement of continuity in time of “me” (Glock, Hacker, 1996, p. 105) without having the obligation of admitting the existence of an entity which is mysterious and radically private like the psychological Ego?

5. There is a point which brings together both the psychological and externalist hypotheses: both consider the word “me” as a description of something else. For the first it is the Ego and for the second the body of the speaker. The original aspect of Benveniste’s hypothesis, on the other hand, is that the word “me” is not a description. When the little girl says “me” to her mother, she is not describing something. In reality “me” signifies that the person speaking is a *me*: the little girl is a *me* because *she* says “me”. “Me” does not describe a fact distinct from the word that indicates it. The fact – being a *me* – here coincides with *saying* “me”. In this case, “the uttering of the sentence is [...] the doing of an action” (Austin, 1962, p. 5): “me” is a *performative*. The word “me” used in appropriate circumstances, does not describe a pre-existent Ego, nor does it indicate the body of the speaker. It constitutes the subjectivity of the speaker. It is the living body of me. The child discovers that she is a *me* because she learns to use the word “me”. To use Austin’s terminology, the locutional act “me” has, as a self-referential perlocutionary effect, the constitution of “me” for the person who materially utters that same “me”. That is, the use of the performative “me” is a *happy* one if by this means the “me” is constructed. There are at least two conditions which confer a “‘happy’ functioning” (Ivi, p. 14) of the performative “me” (cfr. Glock, Hacker, 1996): a) a body which effectively says “me”; b) furthermore, “it is always necessary that the *circumstances* in which the words are uttered should be in some way, or ways, *appropriate*, and it is very commonly necessary that either the speaker himself or other persons should *also* perform certain *other* actions, whether ‘physical’ or ‘mental’ actions or even acts of uttering further words” (Austin, 1962, p. 8). Let us consider the first condition: there can be a *me* if there is a material body capable of uttering “me”. The eventual existence of an *Ego* as a private mental state is subordinate to the capacity to say “me”. Benveniste’s hypothesis is strongly materialist and admits the possibility of mental states only as a consequence of the capacity to realise linguistic acts. Yet a material body which says “me” is not sufficient. Even an automatic food distributor with an incorporated loudspeaker can say “me”, for example, but that is not sufficient for it to be considered a real *me*. The condition of there being a body capable of using the

word “me” in a competent manner is necessary, but it is not sufficient for there to be a *me*. Let us return to the little girl. The mother is speaking to her. She asks her something, the little girl responds “me” and the mother smiles in contentment. In this case the use of “me” becomes part of a “conventional procedure” (*Ivi*, p. 14) which is quite structured, in an exchange of enunciative roles between mother and daughter, that is, between “me” and “you”. The smile of the mother in coincidence with the word “me” from the daughter is the answer that confirms and fully realizes the performative “me”: in effect, “the procedure must be executed by all participants both correctly and completely” (*Ivi*, p. 15). The peculiar characteristic of the performative “me” is that it presupposes the performative “you”, and vice versa: “ainsi tombent les vieilles antinomies du “moi” et de l’ “autre”, de l’individu et de la société. Dualité qu’il est illégitime et erroné de réduire à un seul terme originel, que ce terme unique soit le “moi”, qui devrait être installé dans sa propre conscience pour s’ouvrir alors à celle du “prochain”, ou qu’il soit au contraire la société, qui préexisterait comme totalité à l’individu et d’où celui-ci ne se serait dégagé qu’à mesure qu’il acquérait la conscience de soi. C’est dans une réalité dialectique englobant les deux termes et les définissant par relation mutuelle qu’on découvre le fondement linguistique de la subjectivité.” (Benveniste, 1966, p. 260)

It is not sufficient for a material body to produce the word “me” for this performative to be a happy one. It is necessary that “me” be recognised as *me* by a “you”. More than other performatives, “me” realizes and presupposes a social relationship regarding more than one speaker. The peculiar characteristic of performatives, moreover, is that they imply consequences that extend beyond the moment of the enunciation. It is just this that we were seeking, to explain the *temporal continuity* of “me”: “where, as often, the procedure is designed for use by persons having certain thoughts or feelings, or for the inauguration of certain consequential conduct on the part of any participant, then a person participating in and so invoking the procedure must in fact have those thoughts or feelings, and the participants must intend so to conduct themselves, and further must actually so conduct subsequently” (Austin, 1962, p. 15). The fact that today the performative “me” has been used happily – in effect, the mother greeted it with a smile of pleasure and encouragement, implies that the little girl will probably use it tomorrow also. Correlatively, the next day, the mother also will expect the child to say “me” again. Every performative “me” used felicitously creates the conditions for this use to be repeated in the future. This means, as Benvensite states, that “me” is “*sui-référentiel*”. The temporal continuity of *me* coincides with the history of happy uses, that is, uses in which “me” is recognised by a “you”.

Each “me” proffered *now* makes a new appearance of “me” easier tomorrow. Naturally, this means also that when a performative “me” is not used felicitously, for example when there is no “you” to greet the first timid appearance of “me”, the continuity in time of “me” will be affected by this. (Cimatti, 2007). In this case also, Benveniste’s hypothesis requires a minimal recourse to psychological entities. The “me” of the little girl is not, properly speaking, a mental entity – it is not the mysterious *Ego*. We can compare the construction of *me* to the process of formation of a riverbed. When the first rivulet of water flows from its source and begins to descend, it does not yet have a path to follow. The course is created together with the flow of water. The fact that yesterday the water followed a certain course makes it easier, tomorrow, for it to follow the same path. Thus, simple successful use creates the conditions for its repetition.

6. If “me” is the perlocutionary effect of repeated, and felicitous use of the performative “me”, then it is a question of a construct which forms itself over time. We can imagine a developing history of awareness where every single “me” is part of an overall “me” which encompasses the single cases of “me”, as if every felicitous use of “me” left a residue, which taken together constitutes “me”. To begin with, there is only a series of utterances of “me” which are disconnected one from the other, and which are repeated in different situations, as in the example of the mother and daughter. Progressively, “me” comes to the realization of being “me”: this, properly, is “me”. Thus one moves implicitly from an *implicit use* of the performative “me”, in which “there is something which is *at the moment of uttering being done by the person uttering*” (*Ivi*, p. 60) to a situation in which “the ‘I’ who is doing the action does thus come essentially into the picture” (*Ivi*, p. 61). There is a passage from a situation in which, in the foreground, it is explicitly the action realized by means of the performative to one in which it is explicitly the “me” that carries out the action that is in the foreground. That which is at first implicit and compact in linguistic use is the historic-cognitive process which Austin calls “*making explicit*” (*Ibidem*). Austin and Benveniste offer us the essential elements for the development of a non psychological theory of “me”: “historically, from the point of view of the evolution of language, the explicit performative [ad esempio “io”] must be a later development than certain more primary utterances, many of which at least are already implicit performatives, which are included in most or many explicit performatives as parts of a whole. For example, ‘I will ...’ is earlier than ‘I promise that I will ...’. The plausible view [...] would be that in primitive languages it would not yet be clear, it

would not yet be possible to distinguish, which of various things that (using later distinctions) we might be doing we were in fact doing. For example ‘Bull’ or ‘Thunder’ in a primitive language of one-word utterances could be a warning, information, a prediction, &c. It is also a plausible view that explicitly distinguishing the different *forces* that this utterance might have is a later achievement of language, and a considerable one; primitive or primary forms of utterance will preserve the ‘ambiguity’ or ‘equivocation’ or ‘vagueness’ of primitive language in this respect; they will not make explicit the precise force of the utterance. This may have its uses: but sophistication and development of social forms and procedures necessitate clarification. But note that this clarification is as much a creative act as a discovery or description! It is as much a matter of making clear distinctions as of making already existent distinctions clear.” (*Ivi*, pp. 71-72)

The little girl’s explicit and aware “me” is formed starting from the felicitous use of the performative “me”. The semantic problem posed by the meaning of the word “me” is in reality a pragmatic problem: “Worte sind auch Taten” (*Philosophical Investigations*, I, § 546).

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