

Sellars on recognizing rules

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In various writings¹ Sellars distinguishes two stages of language learning, which serve not only as an account of how we acquire our first language, but also of how we learn to think. In the first stage the learner – not yet a rational subject – undergoes a thorough training, a process, in Wittgenstein's words, of "Abrichtung". This process enables the learner to behave in a certain well-structured way. At this first stage of language learning, the subject conforms to rules of behavior, but is not yet able to recognize the rules and act out of a consciousness of the rules. Thus, its behavior is not yet normative in the full-blown sense.

In the second stage we come to recognize the rules, and this recognition of the rules then guides our behavior, making it normative behavior and us rational subjects. But Sellars does not pause to give a full description of this second stage of language learning. Instead, he directly proceeds to spell out an account of a full-fledged competent speaker, a *master* of the language game. In his view, such language users would be able to criticize the linguistic behavior of others as well as their own, they would be able to teach their language to other subjects, and, finally, to change the rules of language in order to better harmonize different rational requirements.²

This account, however, is highly idealized. We shouldn't hold that failure to conform fully to this ideal precludes being a rational subject in every sense. Being a master of the language cannot be a prerequisite of being a speaker of the language. So at which point in the process of becoming rational subjects should we draw the line between the first and the second stage of language learning?

A necessary requirement of being a mature language user is that we have been taught to conform to many different rules, not just one single rule. We thus must exhibit behavior that reveals us to be at home in a whole network of rules. And not only must we conform to many rules, we must also conform to different types of rules, that is to language entry and exit transitions and to rules of inference (intralinguistic moves). For example, it would be wrong to classify someone as knowing a language if all he can do is utter observation statements.

The language user, having learned all these rules, has mastered quite a difficult task already. But he is not yet to count as a mature language user, and thus a rational

¹ Most prominently in Sellars (1951): „Some Reflections on Language Games“, in *Philosophy of*

² Sellars (1951); Sellars (1969): „Language as Thought and as Communication“, in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 29, 506-27.

subject. This becomes clear once one realizes that for Sellars the ability to infer, like the ability to make observation statements, is acquired through a training process involving two distinct steps. Our language learner is still at the first step: he exhibits linguistic behavior that only resembles inference, because he has not yet recognized the relevant rules and thus cannot be said to perform an inference properly so-called. Conforming to rules, even a whole network of rules, does not amount to recognition of the rules.

But what exactly does recognizing a rule entail? Sellars is not committed to the implausible view that a subject recognizing a rule always has to follow the rule consciously, to perform every act “with the rule in mind”. But Sellars indeed seems to think that it is necessary to know the rule-language in order to count as recognizing rules, and thus as a competent speaker. So he seems to hold that every competent speaker must at least be able to understand rules formulated by others, and maybe even to come up with a formulation of the rule himself. However, there are serious doubts that this condition still is much too strong.

In my paper I propose an alternative analysis of recognizing linguistic rules. According to my account recognizing linguistic rules does not require having the concept of a linguistic rule. Instead, the account focuses on an implicit self-conception as a rational, reasoning being. Conceiving of oneself in this way involves, first, taking oneself to be part of a community of rational subjects and interacting with members of that community in specific ways. Second, it requires the capacity not only to reason, but also to act on rational principles.

These alternative requirements are compatible with Sellars’s general approach. But whereas the claim that young children have meta-linguistic abilities is highly problematic, attributing these looser requirements to children is more plausible. The account has the further consequence that there is no understanding of meaning independent from attributions of beliefs, and, ultimately, knowledge, a result that should be welcome to Sellarsians. In philosophical reflection, then, semantics and epistemology are necessarily intertwined.