

Thomas Reid on Linguistics and Philosophy of Language

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Abstract

This entry covers the Scottish philosopher Thomas Reid's (1710–1796) contributions to linguistics and philosophy of language. These contributions include his argument that language is essentially social, his differentiation between our learned and our innate capacity of language, his views on semantics, and his theories on particular versus general terms. Much of what Reid had to say about language related to his views on epistemology, philosophy of mind, and his critique of what he called the 'theory of ideas' (i.e., the view that we directly perceive mental objects rather than external objects), and this entry briefly outlines those philosophical views insofar as they are relevant.

Key Points

- Thomas Reid believes that language includes all the various ways we express ourselves, including various types of verbal expressions but also gestures, tone of voice, and so on.
- Reid argues that language is an essentially communicative medium—while solitary operations often associated with language, such as conceiving a proposition, may or may not be expressed in language, social operations of the mind “necessarily suppose an intercourse with some other intelligent being” (Reid, 2002, p. 68).
- Reid differentiates between what he calls ‘artificial’ and ‘natural’ language. His definitions differ from contemporary use—on this view, artificial language is any use of language which must be learned, while natural language is innate.
- Reid claims that all artificial language must be built upon natural language—that we could never learn to associate certain artificial signs with certain conceptions unless we already possessed some primitive capacity to understand things like gestures, bodily expressions or tone of voice.
- Reid's semantics specifies that the meaning of a term is exhausted by its referent, which is always some external thing, rather than a mental thing, excluding those cases in which we are discussing mental things.
- Reid distinguishes between two fundamental classes of terms: proper names, which refer to particular objects, and general terms, which refer to attributes that may be shared between many objects.
- Reid promoted a nominalism in which the attributes referred to by general terms have no existence beyond the particular instantiations of those attributes in particular objects.
- Reid's view that meaning equated to reference, as well as his nominalism, is closely related to his critique of the ‘theory of ideas,’ wherein he claims that ‘ideas,’ insofar as they are construed as objects, are a fiction of philosophers.
- What Reid had to say about the nature of general terms has been a matter of debate, with some authors arguing, contrary to the claim of the previous sentence, that all general terms refer to conceptions (as in, mental entities) under Reid's semantics. This entry argues that this is a misunderstanding of Reid's semantics which arises from his ambiguous use of the term ‘conception.’

Introduction

Thomas Reid (1710–1796) was a Scottish philosopher best known for his critique of the ‘theory of ideas’—the view that ideas are the direct objects of our thoughts—as well as his common-sense views on epistemology, philosophy of mind, perception, and language. Highly critical of his most preeminent philosophical peers, namely Locke, Hume, Descartes, and Berkeley, Reid believed that many of the significant philosophical problems which preoccupied them, and which indeed still preoccupy us today, arose from the assumption, implicit or explicit, that we do not directly perceive external objects. The main consequences of this assumption, according to Reid, are idealism and skepticism. In contrast, Reid was a direct realist who proposed that our perceptions, and more broadly our thoughts in general, are about the external things ordinary folk naturally assume they are about.

A common theme in Reid's works, which stands in great contrast to the works of Locke, for instance, is his nativism. Reid argues that many conceptions are innate, a stance that applied to his views on epistemology, theory of mind, perception, and language. One of Reid's major critiques of his contemporaries was that they placed too much emphasis on propositions and reasoning; he contends that we are naturally constituted to understand many types of things and that reasoning could never arise if not for these natural capacities. This nativism extends to his theory of language, where he divided language into innate, what he called ‘natural,’ and learned, what he called ‘artificial.’

Reid claims that the primary purpose of language is to express the social operations of the mind, rather than to encode propositions. His work on this subject can be considered a precursor to the later-developed speech act theories of J. L. Austin and John Searle. Furthermore, Reid proposed a theory of meaning that parallels his views on perception and his critique of the theory of ideas. He argues that the meaning of a word is the object it picks out, with said objects being external to our minds in all cases except those in which we are speaking about our minds and/or its operations.

Language is Social

One of Thomas Reid's seminal contributions to linguistics and the philosophy of language was his development of what can be considered a precursor to speech act theory. Prior to Reid, language was primarily viewed as a vehicle for encoding propositions (Reid, 2002, p. 70). Reid, however, proposed that language is fundamentally social. This notion is integral to Reid's philosophy of mind. He categorized mental operations as either social or solitary, asserting that while language can express both types of mental operations, its primary function is to articulate social operations.

Reid did not exhaustively enumerate what constitutes solitary versus social operations, though he did offer illustrative examples. Solitary operations include activities such as judging and perceiving, while social operations include questioning, giving testimony, commanding, and promising. According to Reid, it is possible to perform solitary acts, like conceiving a proposition, without expressing them in language; the expression of solitary acts is *incidental*. Conversely, social operations of the mind are intrinsically linguistic; actions like questioning, testifying, or commanding necessitate expression:

A man may see, and hear, and remember, and judge, and reason; he may deliberate and form purposes, and execute them, without the intervention of any other intelligent being. They are solitary acts. But when he asks a question for information, when he testifies a fact, when he gives a command to his servant, when he makes a promise, or enters into a contract, these are social acts of mind, and can have no existence without the intervention of some other intelligent being, who acts a part in them. (Reid, 2010, p. 330, see also Reid, 2002, p. 68)

Furthermore, Reid argues that these social operations cannot be reduced to solitary operations: “they may be called intellectual, because they can only be in intellectual beings: but they are neither simple apprehension, nor judgment, nor reasoning, nor are they any combination of these operations” (Reid, 2002, p. 68). Reid was sympathetic to but critical of the attempts of his contemporaries to reduce conceptions to other conceptions—he believes that this tendency is what led Descartes to reduce everything to the cogito. He believes that this impulse, a product of the love of simplicity, had led his contemporaries to attempt to reduce social linguistic operations to solitary ones (Reid, 1997, VII, 2002, VIII, and 2010, V). In contrast to the view that all instances of language could ultimately be broken down into the outward expression of solitary acts of the mind, Reid believes that there are irreducibly social uses of language:

To ask a question, is as simple an operation as to judge or to reason; yet it is neither judgment, nor reasoning, nor simple apprehension, nor is it any composition of these. Testimony is neither simple apprehension, nor judgment, nor reasoning. The same may be said of a promise, or of a contract. (Reid, 2002, p. 68)

Reid claims that these social linguistic operations are not only irreducibly social, but that many of them are also innate. Furthermore, they work in conjunction with other innate linguistic capacities. Reid argues that our capacity to understand, for instance, facial expressions and gestures, appears very early in life:

When a child asks a question of his nurse, this act of his mind supposes not only a desire to know what he asks; it supposes likewise a conviction that the nurse is an intelligent being, to whom he can communicate his thoughts, and who can communicate her thoughts to him. (Reid, 2002, p. 69)

He believes that we have an innate capacity to understand these linguistic operations and that all linguistic operations are ultimately built upon these innate capacities. We will explore his reasons for this view in the next section.

Natural and Artificial Language

According to Reid, language encompasses not only spoken and written words but also the various other ways we communicate: “by language I understand all those signs which mankind use in order to communicate to others their thoughts and intentions, their purposes and desires” (Reid, 1997, pp. 51–52). Reid divides language into artificial language and natural language. By Reid's definition, natural language encompasses the forms of expression which we have an innate understanding of, and artificial languages are those which we come to learn:

And such signs may be conceived to be of two kinds: First, such as have no meaning, but what is affixed to them by compact or agreement among those who use them; these are artificial signs: Secondly, such as, previous to all compact or agreement, have a meaning which every man understands by the principles of his nature. Language, so far as it consists of artificial signs, may be called artificial; so far as it consists of natural signs, I call it natural. (Reid, 1997, p. 51)

Natural language includes “modulations of the voice, gestures, and features” (Reid, 1997, pp. 51–52). For instance, I might point to an object to pick it out; if I am angry, you can tell by the expression on my face, or by the tone of my voice. Artificial language involves signs which we employ to refer to objects, like ‘apple’ or ‘happy’. In most cases, excluding perhaps instances of onomatopoeia, the signs of artificial language are arbitrarily associated with the objects they refer to: “in artificial signs there is often neither similitude between the sign and thing signified, nor any connection that arises necessarily from the nature of things... the word *gold* has no similitude to the substance signified by it... yet, by habit and custom... [the term, ‘gold’] suggests this [substance] and no other” (Reid, 1997, p. 58).

There is no natural connection between the word, ‘apple,’ and the fruit it denotes, just as there is no such connection between the term, ‘happiness,’ and the state that it expresses.

Reid believes that we could never come to understand artificial language if we did not already possess a capacity for “natural language” in his sense. For instance, we learn that the term ‘apple’ comes to refer to apples because someone points to apples while saying ‘apple’. We associate the terms ‘happy’ or ‘angry’ with the mental states they pick out because someone states those terms while using correspondent tones of voice and displaying happy or angry facial and bodily expressions. Reid points, in particular, to the fact that infants are innately capable of understanding certain facial expressions and contrasts this with learned associations. The latter come in two sub-kinds: those which are wholly arbitrary, like the written symbols corresponding to the sounds of an artificial language, but also so-called ‘natural’ associations. Reid supposed, for instance, that humans must learn the connection between the look of a flame and the pain we experience if we touch it:

Those who give attention to the operations of children, can easily discover the time when they have their earliest notices from experience, such as that flame will burn, or that knives will cut. But no man is able to recollect in himself, or to observe in others, the time when the expression of the face, voice, and gesture, were learned. (Reid, 2010, p. 485)

Reid claims that our capacity to understand natural language must be innate because it would be impossible to learn such associations. We can learn that the appearance of fire is associated with pain, but this is because our senses can pick out an association between the two—we learn this association by perceiving the constant conjunction between the appearance of the flame and the sensation of pain. In contrast, the emotional states which, for instance, facial expressions convey are *not* accessible to observers—we cannot see anger, smell happiness, and so on:

When we see the sign, and see the thing signified always conjoined with it, experience may be the instructor, and teach us how that sign is to be interpreted. But how shall experience instruct us when we see the sign only, when the thing signified is invisible? Now this is the case here; the thoughts and passions of the mind, as well as the mind itself, are invisible, and therefore their connection with any sensible sign cannot be first discovered by experience; there must be some earlier source of this knowledge. Nature seems to have given to men a faculty or sense, by which this connection is perceived. And the operation of this sense is very analogous to that of the external senses. (Reid, 2010, p. 485–486)

Since we cannot observe these mental states, we could never *learn* the associations between the signs of these states and the states they signify. We see here that Reid's views on the natural linguistic signs are closely connected with his views on perception.

Here is an example that illustrates the arbitrary nature of signification, as well as the innateness of our basic capacity to use signs. Reid points to the fact that there is rarely any resemblance between our sensations and the objects they signify. For instance, when we hold a billiard ball, we perceive that it is round, hard, and smooth, that it is corporeal and has extension. However, there is nothing in our sensations of touch that resemble these properties. Furthermore, we do not infer these properties from our sensations; we immediately proceed from those sensations to our conceptions of the ball, and we typically do not even think about the sensations. Reid argues that we are naturally constituted to move from the appearance of these signs to the things they signify:

When I grasp an ivory ball in my hand, I feel a certain sensation of touch. In the sensation, there is nothing external, nothing corporeal. The sensation is neither round nor hard; it is an act of feeling of the mind, from which I cannot, by reasoning, infer the existence of any body. But, by the constitution of my nature, the sensation carries along with it the conception and belief of a round hard body really existing in my hand. (Reid, 2010, p. 485–486)

In short, given Reid's terminology, the signs of ‘artificial language’ are learned, not innate. And yet, once we learn an artificial sign, it functions in a similar manner as natural ones. When we hear the word ‘apple’, for example, we do not think about the word—the sound of someone speaking the word, the way the letters look on our screens. Our thoughts immediately move to the external object being denoted. We will expand on this in the next section.

Meaning of Words and the Theory of Ideas

This relates to the most central element of Thomas Reid's philosophical work, his critique of what he calls the ‘theory of ideas.’ This is the view that ideas are the direct objects of our thoughts, and it was the majority view of the time, most notably espoused (or at least implicitly assumed) by Early Modern philosophers like David Hume, John Locke, George Berkeley, and René Descartes.¹ On this view, we do not directly see apples; rather, we directly see red sensations, round sensations, etc. We do not directly taste apples; we directly taste sweet sensations, sour sensations, etc. Authors like Locke applied a similar view to language, claiming that “words, in their primary or immediate signification, stand for nothing but the ideas in the mind of him that uses them” (Locke, 1959, Essay III.2.2; ii.9). On this view, the meaning of the term ‘apple’ would not be an external object, but rather the ideas we have of it.

In sharp contrast, Reid pointed out that when we talk about objects, excluding of course those instances in which we are discussing mental states, we are not focused on ideas of said objects but instead on the external objects themselves. When I say, “this apple is round,”

¹Though there is some debate about whether Reid's interpretations of these authors are correct. See Yolton (1984).

I do not mean that my sensation of that apple is round—indeed, it would be absurd to say that my sensation is even the sort of thing that could be round. What I mean is that there is an object, ostensibly outside of my mind, which occupies space and possesses a certain shape. Reid's theory of meaning, therefore, parallels his views on perception and his critique of the theory of ideas, maintaining that the meaning of a word is the object it picks out (see Reid, 2002, p. 303, 354), with said objects being external to our minds in all cases except when we are speaking about our minds.

General Terms

Thomas Reid's philosophy of language divides linguistic terms into two main categories: proper names and general terms. Proper names, according to Reid, are used to refer to individual objects, while general terms denote attributes that can be shared among different objects. This distinction forms the foundation of his nominalist approach to language and meaning. However, there is considerable debate and potential misinterpretation surrounding Reid's treatment of general terms, particularly regarding whether they refer to mental conceptions or external attributes.

Reid's view that proper names signify individual entities is relatively straightforward. Each proper name corresponds to one unique object or person: e.g., 'Thomas Reid' refers to the philosopher we have been discussing. General terms refer to attributes or properties that can be instantiated in multiple individuals. "Proper names are intended to signify one individual only" and general terms are "equally related to many [individuals]" (Reid, 2002, p. 354). For instance, the term 'red' refers not to a single red object but to the quality of redness that can be found in many objects. On this view, there is no abstract entity or form of redness existing independently of these instances.

The confusion about Reid's stance on general terms partly stems from his occasionally ambiguous use of the terms 'conceptions' and 'thoughts,' which he uses interchangeably. Some interpretations suggest that Reid might be attributing to general terms a referent in the form of mental entities. John Turri has argued that Reid's general terms refer to our *conceptions*, as in *ideas*, of attributes. Turri suggests that general terms express and signify general conceptions, in this sense, implying a mentalistic interpretation of Reid's theory (in Cameron et al., 2017). This interpretation is likely a result of passages like "every attribute, common to several individuals, may be expressed by a general term, which is the sign of the general conception" (Reid, 2002, p. 368) and "words are the signs of our thoughts; and the sign is so associated with the thing signified, that the last can hardly present itself to the imagination, without drawing the other along with it" (Reid, 2002, p. 538).

However, others have argued that this interpretation misrepresents Reid's actual view, and that Reid is speaking figuratively in such passages. In "Thomas Reid on Language", Patrick Rysiew (2015) clarifies that Reid distinguishes between the mental act of conception and the objects of those conceptions/thoughts. Reid himself articulates this distinction: "we must here beware of the ambiguity of the word conception, which sometimes signifies the act of the mind in conceiving, sometimes the thing conceived, which is the object of that act" (Reid, 2002, p. 364). According to Rysiew, when Reid refers to general conceptions, in this context, he is not speaking about mental acts—rather, he is speaking about the attributes or properties which are being conceived of. These *attributes* are the objects of our conceptions. General terms, for Reid, signify these shared attributes, not mental ideas or conceptions.

Reid acknowledges that all objects we perceive, remember, or are conscious of are individuals, each with specific attributes that make them relevant to us; however, "in every language, rude or polished, general words make the greatest part, and proper names the least" (Reid, 2002, p. 354). He points out the peculiar nature of this situation since, in our immediate experience, we only encounter individual objects: "At the same time it must be acknowledged, that all the objects we perceive are individuals. Every object of sense, of memory, or of consciousness, is an individual object" (Reid, 2002, p. 354–355). Reid explains that general terms are necessary because they enable us to communicate about attributes that are common among various individuals. Thus, the pre-eminence of general terms in our language transcends the local nature of our direct experiences and makes communication more effective and broadly applicable (see Reid, 2002, p. 355).

Conclusion

Thomas Reid made invaluable contributions to linguistics and the philosophy of language, from defining language as essentially social to categorizing its various forms, while connecting these insights to broader implications in epistemology and philosophy of mind. Reid's definition of language includes all the ways we express ourselves, including but not limited to verbal expression. He proposed that language is essentially and, in many instances, irreducibly social. Reid distinguished between the natural and artificial uses of language, differentiating between language that is innately understood and language that is learned. Furthermore, he argued that artificial language is built upon natural language and that the signs of natural language cannot be learned. Reid's semantics proposes that the meaning of a term is exhausted by its referent. His nominalism claims that while proper names refer to specific objects and individuals, general terms refer to attributes shared between multiple objects. According to Reid, the referents of general terms have no existence beyond their instantiations in particular objects. We ended by explaining Reid's account of the prevalence of general terms in language, and defended the view that, by Reid's semantics, general terms do not refer to mental entities – except when we are specifically discussing them.

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