

Wittgenstein's Challenge: The Impossibility of a Private Language

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Abstract: *The feasibility of a private language, a concept previously entertained by philosophers like Locke and Russell, is rigorously disputed by Wittgenstein in his later works. This article critically examines Wittgenstein's standpoint on the notion of a private language, with a specific focus on its plausibility. It meticulously investigates the five arguments proffered by Wittgenstein against the concept of a private language and evaluates the counterarguments presented by his critics. These arguments encompass the future use argument, the interpretation argument, the stage-setting argument, the use argument, and the practice argument. Through a comprehensive analysis of these arguments, Wittgenstein substantiates the intrinsic unattainability of a private language. A privately defined word lacks the fundamental attributes of language, notably an established meaning, usability, prospective applicability, practical implications, interpretability, and a coherent framework governing the roles of its constituent elements. Ultimately, it is asserted that a private language cannot exist autonomously, separate from a public language.*

Keywords: *External world; Private language argument; Philosophy of language; Wittgenstein*

A. Introduction

Views on language are closely tied to views on thought and its relationship with the external world. Notions about thought and language are abundant in modern philosophy. For instance, Descartes believed that thoughts directly perceive only what exists within the mind (emotions, beliefs, perceptions). What exists within the mind is a representation of the external world, and it can only be grasped through internal awareness or personal experiences. When this perspective on thought is combined with a view of language that considers it a collection of words or descriptions of objects that we are familiar with, it leads to the idea that each language is a private language.¹

¹ C. D. Meyers dan Sara Waller, "Psychological Investigations: The Private Language Argument and Inferences in Contemporary Cognitive Science," *Synthese* 171, no. 1 (November 2009): 135–56, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11229-008-9382-y>.

Epistemologically, a private language is created when meaning refers to a subject's knowledge obtained through direct (first-hand) experiences of sensations. The words used by an individual to describe these sensory experiences become a private language if their meaning can only be understood by someone who has had the same direct experiences.²

The idea that words in everyday language, especially those describing personal experiences, have meanings that refer to the speaker's direct and subjective experiences is present in Locke's philosophy. Locke's theory of a private language is reflected in his view of speaker's ideas, wherein when ideas are expressed with words, the meaning of the words is subjective, located in the speaker's mind and hidden from others. Therefore, subjective meanings cannot be communicated.³ Apart from Locke, elements of the private language view can also be found in the works of Russell, Husserl, and Fodor.⁴

A prominent figure in analytic philosophy, Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951),⁵ argued against the existence of a private language. Wittgenstein rejected the common belief that language is a collection of words, the meanings of which are known only to the speaker, and he also refuted Russell's logical atomism and his own views in the *Tractatus*. In the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein stated that all propositions can be reduced to a series of words that directly refer to objects. The structure of language must be isomorphic to reality, and linguistic elements (words) must correspond to elements of the world (objects). This initial view of language requires a commitment to a semantic theory based on direct reference or a perfect and precise correspondence between linguistic symbols and the objects they represent. Words are like mirrors for objects. Similarly, Russell argued that we can logically assign proper names only to things we directly experience, such as sensory data. Ultimately, meaning is based on the direct naming of personal

² Chris Lawn, *Wittgenstein and Gadamer: Towards a Post-Analytic Philosophy of Language*, Continuum studies in German philosophy (London ; New York: Continuum, 2004), p.79.

³ Hannah Dawson, "Locke on Private Language," *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 11, no. 4 (November 2003): 609-37, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0960878032000160253>.

⁴ Meyers dan Waller, "Psychological Investigations."

⁵ Other figures in analytic philosophy include Frege, Russell, and Moore. See Michael Beaney, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Analytic Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Tom Sorell dan G. A. J. Rogers, ed., *Analytic Philosophy and History of Philosophy*, Mind Association occasional series (Oxford : New York: Clarendon Press ; Oxford University Press, 2005).

sensory experiences and refers indirectly to public objects and events, for example, what causes or correlates with sensory data.⁶

Wittgenstein's attack was mainly directed at the philosophy of extreme empiricism, which emphasizes the primacy of internal representations. It views language as a representation of the internal states of consciousness and asserts that what we can perceive are sensory data within us, serving as copies of objects external to us. The existence of external objects is secondary and inferred from the sensory data within us. Wittgenstein's critique was not aimed at Idealism and Husserl's Platonic view of pure consciousness. The critique of private language in Husserl's philosophy, in continental philosophy, was carried out by Derrida.⁷

When we see the color "red," for example, the word "red" that we use refers to our personal experience of the color red. While the word "red" can be a publicly owned property already present in the Indonesian language, the experience of the color "red" is subjective and personal. If these two views, the idea of thoughts being subjective sensations within oneself and the words used to describe those sensations, are combined, it results in a private language, at least in terms of meaning. Meaning is personal, referring to the speaker's direct and personal experiences. However, according to Wittgenstein, can a private language truly exist?

This study essentially aims to undertake a comprehensive analysis of Wittgenstein's philosophical ideas and the compelling arguments he articulated in his rejection of the notion of a private language. Wittgenstein's profound insights and critiques surrounding this subject matter hold a pivotal place in the realm of philosophy of language and epistemology, challenging conventional beliefs and sparking extensive debates within the philosophical community. By delving into the intricacies of Wittgenstein's stance on the existence of private languages, this research seeks to shed light on the profound implications it has for our understanding of language, thought, and the limits of meaning within the domain of philosophy.

The investigation of Wittgenstein's philosophy regarding private language is of great significance for contemporary philosophy and linguistic studies. His critique has prompted reevaluation of the notion of private

⁶ Meyers dan Waller, "Psychological Investigations."

⁷ For more information on private language according to Wittgenstein and Derrida, please refer to: Barry Stocker, *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Derrida on Deconstruction* (Hoboken: Taylor & Francis Ltd, 2006); Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena, and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*, Northwestern University Studies in Phenomenology & Existential Philosophy (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973).

language and the limits of language itself, provoking discussions and inquiries into the nature of language, thought, and their interconnections. Wittgenstein's arguments against the concept of a private language have far-reaching implications not only for philosophy but also for psychology, linguistics, and the broader study of cognition and communication. By critically analyzing and presenting Wittgenstein's ideas in a systematic manner, this study contributes to the ongoing discourse on the nature of language, thought, and their intricate relationship with the external world.

B. Methods

This study employs a philosophical methodology rooted in the tradition of analytic philosophy and hermeneutics. It is primarily concerned with the analysis and interpretation of philosophical texts, with a particular focus on Ludwig Wittgenstein's writings related to the private language argument. The research methodology can be delineated as follows:

1. **Literature Review:** The research commences with an extensive literature review to comprehensively understand the historical and philosophical background of the private language argument. This phase involves studying the works of key philosophers who contributed to the debate, such as Descartes, Locke, Russell, and Wittgenstein. This literature review provides the necessary context and theoretical foundation for the subsequent analysis.
2. **Textual Analysis:** The core of the research involves a meticulous analysis of Wittgenstein's philosophical texts, primarily "Philosophical Investigations" and relevant passages from the "Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus." This analysis is focused on extracting Wittgenstein's arguments against the concept of a private language and identifying the key ideas and propositions related to this theme. The goal is to gain a deep understanding of Wittgenstein's thought process and the reasoning behind his rejection of a private language.
3. **Argument Reconstruction:** Once the relevant arguments and ideas are identified, the research proceeds to reconstruct Wittgenstein's arguments against a private language in a clear and systematic manner. This involves organizing and structuring the arguments, citing textual evidence, and providing explanations for Wittgenstein's key points.
4. **Critique and Counterarguments:** In the next phase, the research critically evaluates Wittgenstein's arguments. It examines objections

and counterarguments raised by other philosophers and scholars who have challenged Wittgenstein's views on private language. This critical analysis aims to provide a balanced perspective and explore the nuances of the debate.

5. **Synthesis and Conclusion:** The research synthesizes the findings from the textual analysis, argument reconstruction, and critical evaluation. It aims to offer a comprehensive understanding of Wittgenstein's position on private language, the strength of his arguments, and the areas where his views have been contested. The conclusion summarizes the key insights gained from the research and the implications for the broader field of philosophy, linguistics, and cognitive studies.

The research methodology is designed to provide a rigorous and systematic analysis of Wittgenstein's arguments against a private language, offering a comprehensive overview of the debate and its implications for philosophy and related disciplines.

C. Results and Discussions

Private Language Argument

The term "Private Language Argument" (PLA), or at times referred to as the "argument against the possibility of a private language," was not coined by Wittgenstein himself. He did not employ this specific phrase. Instead, it found its inception in the exponents of Wittgenstein's ideas as they engaged with and interpreted his magnum opus, "Philosophical Investigations" (hereafter referred to as PI).⁸ Various interpretations serve as the foundation for Wittgenstein's critique of a private language, including the principle of

⁸ Norman Malcolm, "Wittgenstein's Philosophical Investigations," *The Philosophical Review* 63, no. 4 (Oktober 1954): 530, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2182289>; P. F. Strawson, "Critical Notice of Wittgenstein's Philosophical Investigations," *Mind* LXIII, no. 249 (1 Januari 1954): 70-99, <https://doi.org/10.1093/mind/LXIII.249.70>; Gordon Baker, "The Private Language Argument," *Language & Communication* 18, no. 4 (Oktober 1998): 325-56, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0271-5309\(98\)00010-X](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0271-5309(98)00010-X).

verification, ostensive definition, rule-following,⁹ memory reliability,¹⁰ nominalism interpretation,¹¹ and adherence to personal rules.¹²

The author delves into Wittgenstein's stance on the concept of a private language. At its core, the central inquiry is whether a private language is conceivable. Here, the author meticulously dissects Wittgenstein's arguments against the feasibility of a private language, while also considering counterarguments put forth by critics. Prior to scrutinizing Wittgenstein's counterarguments against private language, the author provides a comprehensive elucidation of Wittgenstein's concept of a private language. A private language comprises words that exclusively pertain to what can be known by the speaker alone—specifically, an individual's immediate personal sensations. It is crucial to note that a private language is not a personal cipher, nor is it a language used in isolation, and it certainly is not a language spoken solely by a single individual.¹³ Wittgenstein, in PI §243, articulates this notion as follows:

“But can we also imagine a language in which a person could write or give vent to his inner experiences—his feelings, moods, and the rest—for his private use?—Well, can't we do so in our ordinary language?—But not in that way. For that language to be a means of communication, for it to function, there is a yardstick; but is a yardstick in a private language a possible and meaningful notion?”¹⁴

The meaningfulness of this private language hinges on the inner definition or the inner association of signs and concepts. An apt example of this internal process is our introspection regarding sensations. By

⁹ Charles E. Marks, “Verificationism, Scepticism, and the Private Language Argument,” *Philosophical Studies* 28, no. 3 (1 September 1975): 151–71, <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00375985>.

¹⁰ James D. Carney, “The Private Language Argument,” *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 9, no. 4 (Desember 1971): 353–59, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.2041-6962.1971.tb02148.x>.

¹¹ Michael Hodges, “Nominalism and the Private Language Argument,” *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 14, no. 3 (September 1976): 283–91, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.2041-6962.1976.tb01286.x>.

¹² Robert H. Kimball, “Private Criteria and the Private Language Argument,” *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 18, no. 4 (Desember 1980): 411–16, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.2041-6962.1980.tb01395.x>.

¹³ Hans-Johann Glock, *A Wittgenstein Dictionary*, The Blackwell philosopher dictionaries (Oxford, OX, UK ; Cambridge, Mass., USA: Blackwell Reference, 1996), p. 309.

¹⁴ Ludwig Wittgenstein dan G. E. M. Anscombe, *Philosophical Investigations: The German Text, with a Revised English Translation*, 3rd ed (Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub, 2001).

introspectively examining our inner sensations, we can apprehend what we feel and ascribe a name or word to them, with meanings known exclusively to us, eluding comprehension by others. Only the user of the private language comprehends the significance of the words employed; others remain entirely unacquainted with them.

Wittgenstein meticulously elucidates in PI §243-55 that a private language should—not be a language accessible to others.¹⁵ For instance, when the signs generated by a proficient in a private language are decrypted, it ceases to be private. Signs can transition into a language if the private language fundamentally eludes comprehension by others. Wittgenstein generally characterizes a private language by delineating three distinctive traits: (a) *words within the language pertain exclusively to the knowledge of the speaker*; (b) *words within the language pertain to the immediate personal sensations of the speaker*; (c) *the language remains unintelligible to others*. Notably, (c) is presented as a logical consequence of (a) and (b) and should not be considered the principal characteristic of a private language.¹⁶

The primary characteristic of a private language resides in its treatment of sensations. These sensations are intrinsically mental in nature. The conceptualization of a wholly private language becomes conceivable when meaning and understanding are inherently mental. However, Wittgenstein contends that meaning and understanding are not fundamentally mental, rendering a wholly private language, in his view, an unattainable proposition, unfit to serve as the foundation for language. Several categorizations of private language arguments have been proposed previously.¹⁷ Several categorizations of private language arguments have been proposed previously. This study systematically examines five arguments articulated by Wittgenstein that negate the possibility of a private language, specifically, the future use argument, the interpretation argument, the stage-setting argument, the use argument, and the practice argument.

¹⁵ Peter Michael Stephan Hacker, *Insight and Illusion: Themes in the Philosophy of Wittgenstein*, Repr. of the rev. and corr. 1989 ed, Wittgenstein Studies (Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 1997), p.3.

¹⁶ Peter Michael Stephan Hacker, *Insight and Illusion: Themes in the Philosophy of Wittgenstein*, Rev. ed (Oxford [Oxfordshire] : New York: Clarendon Press ; Oxford University Press, 1986), p.222.

¹⁷ Stephen Law, "Five Private Language Arguments," *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 12, no. 2 (Juni 2004): 159-76, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09672550410001679837>; Francis Y. Lin, "Wittgenstein's Private Language Investigation," *Philosophical Investigations* 40, no. 3 (Juli 2017): 257-81, <https://doi.org/10.1111/ph.in.12148>.

The Future Use Argument

According to Wittgenstein, an individual can create words for personal use, such as employing a specific sign for their immediate personal sensations in a diary. However, Wittgenstein argues that the definitions of words created in this manner lack established meaning. In PI §258, Wittgenstein provides an illustrative example involving a ritual connecting a particular sensation with the sign “S.” He envisions introducing “S” by speaking or writing the sign in his diary to preserve the repetition of the sensation, all the while directing his attention inward to the sensation itself. The purpose of this ritual is to impart meaning to “S,” but Wittgenstein questions whether he succeeds in conferring meaning upon “S.” He states:

“Well, that was done precisely by concentrating my attention; for by doing so, I produced in myself the right kind of impression of the connection between the sign and the sensation. But ‘I produced it in myself’ can only mean: this process produced in me the correct impression of it in the future. But in this case, I have no criterion of correctness. One might say: whatever seems right to me is right. And that merely means that here we can’t talk about ‘right.’”

This paragraph is widely regarded as the cornerstone of the private language argument.¹⁸ Wittgenstein’s argument can be summarized as follows:

1. The definition of a word, the relation between the sign and the sensation, can possess established meaning if the definer can remember the correct relation in the future.
2. The private definer of a word cannot remember the relation correctly in the future.
3. Therefore, a private definition of a word lacks established meaning.

What does Wittgenstein mean by a “criterion of correctness”? Here, he refers to “consistency.” The success of an individual’s private definition of a word depends on their ability to use it correctly or consistently in the future.¹⁹ However, there might be uncertainty regarding whether they are using it consistently or not. Why might someone be unsure about remembering the definition of the sign “S” correctly in the future? Wittgenstein argues that when someone uses the sign “S” in the future, their original sensation is no longer accessible. Thus, there is no notion of remembering it correctly or

¹⁸ Marie McGinn, *The Routledge Guidebook to Wittgenstein’s Philosophical Investigations*, The Routledge guides to the great books (Abingdon, Oxon ; New York: Routledge, 2013), p. 155.

¹⁹ Norman Malcolm, *Knowledge and Certainty: Essays and Lectures* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J: Prentice-Hall, 1963), p. 98.

incorrectly in terms of the relation between “S” and the initial sample sensation, not because of a faulty memory (hence potential misremembering) but because there is no concept of “correctness.”²⁰

So, what defines correctness? To ascertain whether someone’s future use is correct or incorrect, they must perform an independent check on the usage of “S” by connecting it to public criteria. Through these public criteria, users of private language can verify the correctness of applying “S” in new cases.²¹

Furthermore, Wittgenstein asserts that a private definition cannot truly be considered a definition. With a private definition of a word, it implies that when someone utters the word to themselves while simultaneously directing their attention to the sensation (PI 268). Here, Wittgenstein draws an analogy between the act of transferring a gift from his right hand to his left hand and the definition he provides for his private sensation. He argues that this action lacks practical consequences. Wilson refers to this argument as the “Consequence Argument.”²² Wittgenstein’s argument in PI §268-270 can be presented as follows:

1. A definition of a word can have practical consequences if the definer can recognize it correctly in future usage.
2. A private definer of a word cannot recognize it correctly in future usage.
3. Therefore, a private definition of a word lacks practical consequences.

In PI §270, Wittgenstein delves into the utilization of the symbol “S” within his diary to represent a specific sensation associated with changes in his blood pressure as measured by a manometer. He contemplates the utility of being able to identify this sensation consistently, without relying on any external tools, each time his blood pressure surges. However, in the absence of such tools, the certainty of correctly recognizing the sensation becomes uncertain. What if he regularly misidentifies it? This uncertainty alone calls into question the hypothesis that he is in error, as it lacks substantial evidence. Similarly to PI §258, some scholars interpret Wittgenstein’s intent in PI §270 as suggesting that one’s recollection should be substantiated by

²⁰ Peter Michael Stephan Hacker dan Gordon P. Baker, ed., *Wittgenstein: Meaning and Mind; Part II: Exegesis § 243 - 427*, Reprinted, *An Analytical Commentary on the “Philosophical Investigations,”* Vol. 3,2 (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), p. 120.

²¹ Hacker dan Baker, 118-23; McGinn, *The Routledge Guidebook to Wittgenstein’s Philosophical Investigations*, p. 155.

²² Brendan Wilson, *Wittgenstein’s Philosophical Investigations: A Guide* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), p. 14-16.

public validation.²³ This public validation serves as the yardstick for determining the accuracy of an individual's use of the term "sensation."

Critiques of the future use argument emerge on several fronts. First and foremost is the challenge of translating Wittgenstein's text from German to English. Hintikka argues that interpreting Wittgenstein as necessitating external criteria for assessing the truth of statements regarding sensations is a misconception. This misunderstanding arises from a poor translation by GEM Anscombe of PI §265. Miss Anscombe's translation reads as follows: "No; for this process has got to produce a memory which is actually correct." This translation, emphasizing the need for "a memory which is actually correct," amplifies Wittgenstein's requirement for independent verification, rendering it stronger and less ambiguous than intended. This additional requirement becomes unnecessary if, as Hintikka suggests, the passage is translated as follows: "No, for this method has to call to mind the right memory."²⁴

Secondly, the issue of relying on public criteria comes into play.²⁵ Why should a user of a private language be beholden to independent public checks in assessing the accuracy of a private ostensive definition, which connects the sensation with the symbol "S"? Are there alternative methods or means for an individual to verify the usage of the symbol "S"? For instance, one might use a manometer in the future to accurately recall the correlation between the sensation and blood pressure. From this correlation, they could recollect the connection between the sensation and the symbol accurately. However, one's blood pressure is a publicly observable phenomenon. They lack any unique authority over this fact. It is reasonable to assume that others can measure an individual's blood pressure using a manometer. But do they comprehend the meaning assigned by the private language user to the symbol "S"? Are they aware that the user employs the symbol to reference their sensation whenever their blood pressure rises? No, such awareness is absent unless the private language user explicitly conveys it.

Furthermore, the argument from analogy poses its own set of challenges. This argument presupposes that the sensation is equivalent to blood pressure. It holds true if the sensation and blood pressure are synonymous. For instance, whenever an individual's blood pressure registers at level x on the manometer reading, they experience sensation y, and they

²³ Wilson, *Wittgenstein's Philosophical Investigations: A Guide*, p. 14.

²⁴ Jaakko Hintikka, "Wittgenstein on Private Language: Some Sources of Misunderstanding," *Mind* 78, no. 311 (1969): 423-25.

²⁵ Wilson, *Wittgenstein's Philosophical Investigations*, p. 15-16.

record the symbol “S.” However, what if the two are not necessarily identical? Or what if there is doubt regarding the accuracy of the manometer reading? Although an individual is confident that they are experiencing the same sensation as before (sensation y), the blood pressure reading may not correspond to the previous level (x). This discrepancy raises questions about the accuracy of recalling the sensation. Does one require public criteria to recollect it accurately? Moreover, if one entertains doubts about the public criteria, the belief in their ability to recognize their private sensation correctly can extend to questioning the accuracy of the manometer reading and the utility of independent public validation.

The Interpretation Argument

Wittgenstein posits that in general, we interpret an unfamiliar language through a system of reference. He states, “The common behavior of mankind is the system of reference by means of which we interpret an unknown language” (PI §206). He invites us to envision a scenario where we visit an unfamiliar country with a language we have never encountered before. In this foreign land, we are unaware of how people issue commands, comprehend them, comply with them, rebel, resist, and so forth. We lack knowledge of what they are saying or what their words mean. All we perceive are unfamiliar sounds.

We may attempt to grasp their language by observing the common activities in which they engage when using their language. However, despite our observations of their behavior, we remain incapable of comprehending their language. Why does their language elude our understanding despite our attentive observation of their conduct? Wittgenstein elucidates that a critical element is the presence of regularity among words, sounds, and actions. In the absence of a systematic connection between speech, the sounds produced, and corresponding actions, these sounds remain devoid of meaning. Silencing someone only underscores this point, as their actions become inscrutable—precisely the conundrum we seek to convey. A language can be legitimately termed as such only when there is a substantial degree of regularity and a systematic correlation between spoken words, actions, and the contextual backdrop in which language is employed.

Thus, we can reasonably infer that the existence of a language among these people hinges on the presence of two pivotal attributes: (1) a sufficiently robust correlation between utterances and the corresponding behaviors, and (2) the behaviors in question must bear a distinctly human quality. Do these two essential characteristics apply to a private language? No, they do not.

These attributes can solely manifest within a linguistic community, whereas users of a private language function in isolation. Nevertheless, an issue arises with the Interpretation Argument.²⁶ Specifically, if a private language were to exist, we would be unable to recognize or interpret it in the same manner as we do with public languages. In the presence of a private language, recognition and interpretation would prove elusive.

The Stage-Setting Argument

The stage-setting argument posits that a word plays a pivotal role within the overall framework of language. A word can transform into language as it transcends the mere connection to encompass naming, explaining, and representing. Each member of a linguistic community contributes to the collective language game. Behind the scenes of any word, there lies the implicit involvement of language users in the establishment of linguistic practices for interpersonal communication. In PI §257, Wittgenstein contends that when an individual purports to name their sensations, they inadvertently disregard the myriad assumptions inherent in language that must be in place for the act of naming to acquire significance. This process is referred to as the “stage-setting requirement” by scholars such as McGinn, Stern, Canfield, and Wrisley.²⁷ The stage-setting requirement constitutes an integral component of Wittgenstein’s critique of private language. The stage-setting argument against private language can be lucidly comprehended by referencing PI §30, where Wittgenstein asserts, “So ostensive definition explains the use—meaning—of a word when the role of the whole word in language is clear.”

A user of private language has been immersed in the public language of their environment since birth. Whenever they experience a sensation, they utilize words that already exist and are in common usage within their linguistic community. Consequently, they partake in the perpetuation and consolidation of established word usage. If they devise a new sign for their private utilization, this sign merely functions as a form of translation from

²⁶ Wilson, Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations: A Guide*, p. 25.

²⁷ J.V. Canfield, “Private Language: The Diary Case,” *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 79, no. 3 (September 2001): p. 377–94, <https://doi.org/10.1080/713659266>; McGinn, *The Routledge Guidebook to Wittgenstein’s Philosophical Investigations*, p. 158; David G. Stern, *Wittgenstein’s Philosophical Investigations: An Introduction*, Cambridge introductions to key philosophical texts (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 178, 181, 185; George Wrisley, “Wherefore the Failure of Private Ostension?,” *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, p. 89, no. 3 (September 2011): 483–98, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00048402.2010.495131>.

the shared vocabulary. Consequently, privately constructed correlations cannot serve as the bedrock for a language since they might be construed as definitions for an individual who already possesses a language. Users of private language indeed possess a language, yet this language is inherently public. Consequently, they are precluded from defining “S” or employing it as a name due to the absence of a well-defined role for the sign “S” within their private usage.

The Usage Argument

In *Philosophical Investigations* §43, Wittgenstein asserts: “For a large class of cases – though not for all – in which we employ the word ‘meaning,’ the meaning of a word is its use in the language. And the meaning of a name is sometimes explained by pointing to its bearer.”

The proposition that meaning is intimately connected with usage is regarded by certain commentators as an argument opposing the notion of a private language.²⁸ Wittgenstein’s argument in *Philosophical Investigations* §43 can be summarized as follows:

1. The meaning of a word is its use in the language.
2. The meaning of a private language serves no purpose within the language.
3. Hence, and
4. A private language lacks meaning.

In this context, Wittgenstein contends that the meaning of a word is not contingent on its reference to an object but rather relies on its function within the language, as practiced in the everyday lives of its users. He emphasizes that understanding a word is unequivocal in the absence of doubt, and its meaning is rooted in its practical application, in the daily enactment of employing it (*Philosophical Investigations* §197). “Imagining a language entails imagining a way of life” (*Philosophical Investigations* §19). The word truly acquires meaning through its real-world usage within the language community.

The concept of meaning as usage is intrinsically linked to the ideas of comprehension and explication.²⁹ The meaning of a word can be elucidated by its meaningful usage in specific contexts, which is governed by grammatical rules encompassing the conditions and situational contexts for employing the word in various ways. These conditions are considered as the standards for accurate usage of expressions. “Following rules, making reports, giving orders,

²⁸ Wilson, *Wittgenstein’s Philosophical Investigations*, p. 49.

²⁹ Glock, *A Wittgenstein Dictionary*, p. 377-78.

playing chess, are customs, uses, institutions. To understand a sentence means to understand a language. To understand a language means to be proficient in a technique” (Philosophical Investigations §199). “Understanding a word” entails grasping how the word is put into use and being capable of its application.³⁰ Wittgenstein discourages reducing understanding solely to a “mental process,” as it is not merely a mental process (Philosophical Investigations §154). Instead, understanding is closely related to an activity, which represents the competence to correctly employ words.

Why does the perspective of a private language on meaning lack authentic significance? A private language is characterized by words that derive their meanings from private mental definitions or associations formed between signs and concepts. A pertinent example is our language for sensations. Wittgenstein argues that genuine word understanding does not involve an introspective ceremony but relies on the ability to employ these words in accordance with the everyday language practices. Defining words does not entail self-contemplation; instead, it involves establishing definitions based on particular properties acquired through the techniques learned in mastering them. Personal ostensive definitions, which reveal what we genuinely mean by a word such as ‘red,’ do not arise in our ordinary language games. They only acquire importance when we delve into philosophical inquiries. “Of course, asserting that the word ‘red’ ‘refers to’ something private, rather than ‘means’ it, does not aid in understanding its function. Nevertheless, this is a more psychologically suitable expression for certain philosophical experiences” (Philosophical Investigations §275).³¹

The true meaning of a word lies in its usage within its native linguistic context, particularly within the ordinary language game. Wittgenstein astutely observes that when philosophers employ terms such as ‘knowledge,’ ‘creature,’ ‘object,’ ‘I,’ ‘proposition,’ or ‘name’ and strive to apprehend the essence of a concept, a pivotal question arises: has the word ever been deployed in such a manner within its original linguistic habitat? This scrutiny, as posited in PI §116, underscores the importance of a word’s inherent usage within a community’s language.

Private ostensive definitions, which lack grounding in communal language practices, encounter a fundamental shortcoming. Understanding a word and its usage necessitate a connection with its customary linguistic

³⁰ Ludwig Wittgenstein dan Anthony Kenny, *The Wittgenstein Reader*, Blackwell readers (Oxford, UK ; Cambridge, Mass., USA: B. Blackwell, 1994), p. 63.

³¹ McGinn, *The Routledge Guidebook to Wittgenstein’s Philosophical Investigations*, p. 168.

home. When a user of a private language employs a word, it becomes imperative to ascertain whether they employ the word congruent with its customary usage. Failure to do so results in the word losing its genuine meaning. Thus, the vitality of a word's meaning hinges on its practical application.

*For a word to possess meaning or to be comprehended in a specific sense, it must be employed in a prescribed manner, serving a distinct function. Sounds or symbols do not intrinsically embody meaning. Rather, the meaning an individual ascribes to a word in a given context derives from their active participation in a specific language game and their adherence to the customary use of the word. Devoid of such practice, the word would remain bereft of meaning. This underscores that an individual's interpretation or grasp of a word's meaning within a specific context aligns with the standard practices that convey or imply what the word signifies within the relevant community.*³²

Nevertheless, dissenting perspectives raise pertinent issues with the usage argument. The crux of their criticism is that everyday language usage should conform to the conventions observed by the broader language community. The meaning of a word is ascertained through its daily usage within the larger public discourse, rather than relying on private ostensive definitions. However, this viewpoint confronts a limitation in explaining how a word that lacks a conventional usage or application can be imbued with meaning.

The Practice Argument

The understanding of language can be elucidated by scrutinizing its usage and practices. Wittgenstein's statement in PI §202, "And hence 'obeying a rule' is a practice. And thinking one is obeying a rule is not obeying a rule. Hence it is not possible to obey a rule 'privately': otherwise, thinking one was obeying a rule would be the same as obeying it," introduces the concept of "practice."

Interpretations of what Wittgenstein means by "practice" vary among commentators. Is this practice of a social nature or a private one? Colin McGinn suggests that Wittgenstein's use of "practice" and "habit" implies a "dual application," indicating that our conception of understanding a rule at any given time fundamentally entails the notion of intermittently applying a rule. The repetitive usage essential for the existence of meaning is something that spans across time; one might argue that meaning is a fundamentally

³² Barry Stroud, *Meaning, Understanding, and Practice: Philosophical Essays*, 1. publ. in paperback (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2002), p. viii-ix.

diachronic concept. Colin McGinn posits that Wittgenstein implies that following a rule as a practice does not necessarily require a community of individuals to communicate or share a language.³³

Conversely, other commentators like Kripke argue that when Wittgenstein refers to “practice,” he means social practice. This interpretation aligns better with Wittgenstein’s treatment of language as a whole. It relates to the concept of usage, language communities, and language games, making it a more plausible understanding than the notion of private practice.³⁴

D. Conclusions

From the five arguments articulated by Wittgenstein against the concept of a private language, it can be inferred that the existence of such a language is implausible. The private interpretation of a word is inadequate to constitute a fully functional language. Private language lacks the stability of meanings, the potential for ongoing use, and consequently, the necessary regularity for comprehension. It also lacks an inherent system that assigns distinct roles to its constituent words, making it incapable of functioning independently from public language.

By challenging the viability of private language, Wittgenstein effectively relocates the wellspring of meaning from the realm of individual consciousness to the public sphere, which is governed by conventions and shared agreements on the nature of meaning. In this public domain, words acquire their meanings through social construction, rooted in the practices of their usage within a community of language users.

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³³ Colin McGinn, *Wittgenstein on Meaning: An Interpretation and Evaluation*, Aristotelian Society series, v. 1 (Oxford, England ; Cambridge, Mass: Basil Blackwell, 1984), 37–53.

³⁴ Saul A. Kripke, *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language: An Elementary Exposition* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1982).

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