

Before entering into the question of language and problems of knowledge, it may be useful to clarify some terminological and conceptual issues concerning the concepts “language” and “knowledge” which, I think, have tended to obscure understanding and to engender pointless controversy.

To begin with, what do we mean by “language”? There is an intuitive common-sense concept that serves well enough for ordinary life, but it is a familiar observation that every serious approach to the study of language departs from it quite sharply. It is doubtful that the common-sense concept is even coherent, nor would it matter for ordinary purposes if it were not. It is, in the first place, an obscure sociopolitical concept, having to do with colors on maps and the like, and a concept with equally obscure normative and teleological elements, a fact that becomes clear when we ask what language a child of five, or a foreigner learning English, is speaking—surely not my language, nor any other language, in ordinary usage. Rather we say that the child and foreigner are “on their way” to learning English, and the child will “get there,” though the foreigner probably will not, except partially. But if all adults were to die from some sudden disease, and children of five or under were to survive, whatever it is

that they were speaking would become a typical human language, though one that we say does not now exist. Ordinary usage breaks down at this point, not surprisingly: its concepts are not designed for inquiry into the nature of language.

Or consider the question of what are called “errors.” Many, perhaps most speakers of what we call “English” believe that the word “livid,” which they have learned from the phrase “livid with rage,” means “red” or “flushed.” The dictionary tells us that it means “pale.” In ordinary usage, we say that the speakers are wrong about the meaning of this word of their language, and we would say this even if 95%, or perhaps 100% of them made this “error.” On the other hand, if dictionaries and other normative documents were destroyed with all memory of them, “livid” would then mean “flushed” in the new language. Whatever all this might mean, it plainly has nothing to do with an eventual science of language, but involves other notions having to do with authority, class structure, and the like. Unless the concept of “community norms” or “conventions” is clarified in some manner yet to be addressed—if this is possible at all in a coherent way—one should be cautious about accepting arguments concerning meaning that make free use of such ideas, taking them to be clear enough;

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