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From the Selected Works of Robert J. Stainton

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**Hegel's Philosophy of Language, by
Jim Vernon**

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Jim Vernon *Hegel's Philosophy Language*. London: Continuum 2007. Pp. viii + 161. (Cloth: ISBN 978-0-8264-9438-2).

Jim Vernon seeks to articulate a schematic theory of language that is specifically Hegelian – that is, a philosophy of language that is consistent with a wide range of Hegel's texts, and remains true to his overall philosophical project.

I have little reason to question its success as such. However, frankly, I am in a comparatively poor position to judge: I work on contemporary philosophy of language, not history of philosophy; worse, my training therein was pretty narrowly Anglo-American. Thus the works Vernon focuses on – Hegel's *Logic*, *Philosophy of Mind*, and *Phenomenology of Spirit* – are by no means central to my canon.

My emphasis will thus lie elsewhere. For, in addition to straightforward exegesis, *Hegel's Philosophy Language* sets itself the task of uncovering a distinctively Hegelian contribution to philosophical theorizing about language. My question will be: Is such a contribution genuinely on offer?

Some background. With the very notable exception of the rich body of work on the Medieval period, the history of philosophy of language has been sorely neglected. I find this a pity. First, the topic is valuable per se – no less so than the history of ethics, or the history of epistemology. Second, even if he or she does not address our questions (e.g., whether complex demonstratives are quantifier phrases, whether 'know' contains a hidden indexical), almost any major historical figure stands to enrich and invigorate contemporary philosophy of language by (re)introducing debates. To anticipate, Vernon's Hegel is no exception.

Vernon highlights a great number of issues about language that preoccupied Hegel. For the sake of brevity, however, I will focus on those which pertain to the Hegelian quest for objectivity.

First, explains Vernon, language undergirds *individual* objectivity. Hegel's account of perception and mental content introduces the threat of subjective idealism. Vernon writes: 'Objective content is not really given to us from the outside, for without the attentive activity of mind there would be no determinate experience at all' (48). In particular, continues the story, agents actively deploy the formal 'I' – in order, for instance, to abstract particular objects from a continuous 'field' (50). The worry, of course, is that a given individual's forms of experience may not be valid and universal. This is where language comes in: the agent can externalize her internal forms, placing them in space and time for others to consider; she can, that is, synthesize something with the necessary dual aspect of 'internal' image/idea and 'external' intuited object. (An aside: though Vernon does not say so, given this solution, Hegel's concern cannot have been anything approaching Pyrrhonian skepticism.)

These externalized (proto-) linguistic signs provide the initial bulwark against subjective idealism. As Vernon sums it up: 'Language arises as an inter-subjective medium employed to demonstrate the objectivity of our (determining forms of) experience' (3). To my mind, this is already a very substantial contribution to philosophy of language: Hegel raises here, in a very novel way, the question of why we humans speak. And, if Vernon's reading is correct, he offers a bracingly novel answer: one speaks for broadly epistemic reasons.

But now, how can our seeker of objectivity trust that her words mean the same? This conundrum, familiar at least since Locke, 'reintroduces the problem of subjective idealism at the linguistic level' (13). The Hegelian response is elusive, especially to a non-specialist such as myself. But the main thrust is this. As a beginning, one encounters something 'out there' as

meaningful. This recognition of genuine signs succeeds because we humans can ‘express interiority corporally’ (e.g., by babbling and giggling) and because, qua activity, all speech arises from the spontaneous mind. So, already the seeker of objectivity can establish some connection between found ‘outer sounds’ and ‘inner ideas’. It is the next steps in Vernon’s ‘just so’ story that are the most intriguing. Vernon draws on Hegel’s lectures on classical studies, dated September 1809, interpreting them as urging that comparative study, especially of classical tongues, provides the necessary evidence that grammar does not vary. (See pp. 41ff.) Because human grammar is universal, the individual can take yet another step towards intersubjectivity. Finally, unlike ephemeral sounds, writing (in a suitably broad sense) allows for stable, ‘accent-less’, lasting signs, governed by official standardization – ‘particular to none, graspable by all’ (72).

Hegel’s circuitous route leads him, in the end, to a position that is strikingly contemporary: a cognitive/communitarian view, such that each individual internalizes a shared language. It is this which affords the public, communal safeguard of objectivity at the level of ordinary, individual experience.

In short, learning and reflecting upon language play an important role, at the level of the individual, in the Hegelian project of securing objectivity. But there is more. Philosophers such as Hamann, Maimon and Herder launched an important and underappreciated critique of Kant. These ‘Metacritics’ insisted, pace *The Critique of Pure Reason*, that philosophy cannot be undertaken a priori, in ‘pure thought’. Instead, thought is only determinate within a particular language. And, they continued, the contingency and historical specificity of human languages threatens *philosophy’s* objectivity and universal necessity.

Patently, this is a problem for Hegel as well. However, whereas Kant seems to have sidestepped it, Vernon finds in Hegel’s texts some insightful replies. As noted above, Vernon’s Hegel maintains that only lexical content varies. Grammar is universal. Already, then, Hegel can give a partial response to the Metacritical worry: language is not nearly as contingent as Hamann et al. make out. But Hegel goes further, urging that even this lexical source of variation can be tamed. On the one hand, grammar has a powerful impact upon the lexicon: words are by their very nature ordained to combine by means of formal rules. As a result, there is a ‘[d]ialectical relation between linguistic form and content, grammar and lexicon’ (16) which importantly reduces the variability of word meaning. Finally, in yet another move away from linguistic contingency, Hegel proposes that philosophy abstract from connections between ordinary language words, formulating atomistic ‘names as such’. Through these, it can develop something more universal.

My question was whether Vernon’s Hegel makes a novel contribution to philosophical theorizing about language. It should be clear, by now, that my answer is an emphatic ‘yes’. Contemporary philosophy of language stands to be tremendously enriched both by Hegel’s concerns, and by his manner of addressing them. We owe a substantial debt to Vernon for bringing these to our attention.

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