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What can psychological terms actually do?
(Or: if Sigmund calls, tell him it didn’t work)

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Abstract

In this paper we describe some counter-psychological approaches to psychological terms such as ‘thinking’, ‘understanding’, ‘intending’ and so on. We draw on the work of Coulter, Ryle, Sacks and Wittgenstein in order to do this and, initially, to sketch out some general convergences between pragmatics, conversation analysis and discursive psychology. From here we go on to rehearse two analyses by Harvey Sacks; the first focusing on a single utterance (“I just had a thought”) and the second on a more extensive case of “inference making”. Because this leads us to doubt the often-assumed view that psychological terms have meaning by referring to mental states, we end with the question of ordinary, everyday practices of ‘referring to mental states’ — an issue marking a potential difference between some Wittgensteinian scholars and discursive psychology.

*Keywords:* Discourse and mind, Mental predicates, Intensional expressions, Thinking, Inference, Psychology.
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There’s a place in Freud where he says, “with regard to matters of chemistry or physics or things like that, laymen would not venture an opinion. With regard to psychology it’s quite different; anybody feels free to make psychological remarks”. And part of the business he thought he was engaged in was changing that around, i.e., to both develop psychology and educate laymen, co-jointly. So that laymen would know that they don’t know anything about it and that there are people who do, so that they would eventually stop making psychological remarks as they stopped making chemical and physical remarks.

Harvey Sacks (1992b: 217)

Whereas the general public may or may not have given up physical and chemical remarks as a bad job, sadly enough perhaps for professional psychology, laypersons have continued to use supposedly proprietary terms such as ‘think’, ‘understand’, ‘intend’, and the rest. And little wonder, given that intensional expressions of this kind have been perfectly ordinary and useful ways of talking about ourselves since long before the advent of the “psy-complex” (Rose, 1990). But what pragmatic status do these psychological terms have? Harvey Sacks gives us a further clue as to how to go about answering this question when he says:

People have the conception that psychological terms are properly used by virtue of special knowledge of the persons you’re dealing with. (And by “psychological terms” I mean conventional, lay sets of terms like ‘thinking’, ‘having a reason for doing something’, etc.) Now that’s a kind of thing that people who have had some university training are
specially wont to insist on, i.e., “You don’t really know about somebody until you ... etc”. But our language is not built in such a way. Persons use psychological terms with the same freedom and ‘lack of knowledge of other persons’ as they do any other terms (1992a: 558; our emphasis).

So where we might begin is by suspecting that (pace most of mainstream psychology) psychological terms, lay or indeed professional, may have no special status from a pragmatic point of view. That is, they may offer no special insight into the internal workings of the psyche, let alone the brain or CNS. Rather they could be argued to be doing something quite different and distinct from this. What could this be? Jeff Coulter’s work on this question takes us a step further.

Coulter (1979) has argued, following Ryle (1949), that there must be a logical grammar — a consistent and repeatably discoverable pragmatic analysis — of mental predicate ascriptions and avowals, particularly with respect to such terms as ‘understand’, ‘think’, ‘intend’, ‘believe’, ‘feel’, etc. Without such a logical grammar, the main alternative would be to assume that these terms have meaning by mapping directly on to internal states or processes. But, deeply embedded as it may be in certain versions of psychology and ‘educated’ common sense, that assumption has at least one troublesome consequence. Coulter describes this via a Wittgensteinian parable:

Imagine a community in which each member had a box with something inside it. Everyone calls the object in the box a ‘beetle’, but no one can look in anyone else’s box and can only determine the nature of ‘beetle’ by looking into his own box. Wittgenstein proposes that, if ‘beetle’ has a use in the public language, then the object in the box must be irrelevant to its meaning. If this private object does play a part in the understanding of ‘beetle’, then intersubjective communication would be impossible (1979: 78).
As Wittgenstein puts it, “The thing in the box has no place in the language-game at all”; so the grammar of psychological terms cannot be construed “on the model of ‘object and designation’” (1958: §293). The argument is not, then, that there are no mental states, for that would buy us into a radical behaviourism (see Button, et al., 1995: 58-75). Rather, the actual use of psychological terms (again, lay or professional) cannot, after Wittgenstein, Ryle, Sacks and Coulter, be taken to be merely referential (cf. O’Brien-Malone and Antaki, 2002). For example, Coulter argues that ‘understand’ can be (and perhaps most often is) used as a “terminus verb” (1979: 37) — ‘I understand (period)’ routinely being used to close specific topics, as opposed, for example, to standing as a mere verbal (external) proxy for (internal) ‘cognitive closure’.

In line with such arguments, discursive psychologists have begun to show that — as and where psychology may be interested in such things as memory (Edwards, 1997; Edwards and Potter, 1992), identity (Antaki, et al., 1996) or attitudes (Wetherell and Potter, 1992) — it makes no sense to take these terms merely as substantives mapping referentially (and sometimes universally) on to internal cognitive phenomena. As we have seen, such a bedrock assumption is not only mistaken, it may also contradict the very possibility of public communication. Even if the “thing in the box” exists in some form or other, it can play no part in the language-game. Instead, then, working with a much less problematic assumption — that public communication is possible — discursive psychologists have begun to examine (as the analysis of memory, identity and attitudes, inter alia, as such) how these matters arise pragmatically in everyday talk and texts.

Take for example what might be construed as an instance of a claim to an absence of knowledge, a claim not to have a thought, examined by discursive psychologists Edwards and Potter (in press). In the extract below, Jimmy is describing, in a couple-counselling session, a difficult evening in the pub with
his wife, Connie, and another man, Dave.

1 J: And uh:: (1.0) Connie had a short skirt on

→ 2 I don‘ know

3 (1.0)

4 And I knew this– (0.6) uh ah– maybe I had

5 met him.

6 (1.0)

7 Ye:h. (.) I musta met Da:ve before.

Here Jimmy frames his upcoming account of Connie’s “flirtatious” behaviour during the evening with the detail that she was wearing a “short” skirt. This specific aspect of Connie’s clothing is immediately followed by what is, on the face of it, apparently a claim to a particular psychological state: “I don‘ know”.

Edwards and Potter point out that:

It would be a mistake to hear this as simply an assertion of ignorance or uncertainty, or even as an ‘assertion’ at all (it is said parenthetically, with no explicit object). What it does, like the rest of the sequence in which it occurs, is attend to Jimmy’s own character, as a purportedly jealous and suspicious husband who may be prone (in this case) to some kind of obsessive monitoring of the details of his wife’s clothing and behaviour. The use here, and just here, of “I don‘ know” counters that. It implies that he wasn’t paying particular attention, and does not have a lot hanging on it. In fact this kind of interpersonal use of “I don‘ know” or “I dunno” (used in this parenthetical, framing kind of way, rather than as a bald answer to a factual question), recurs across a range of discourse materials as a way of handling, or playing down, the speaker’s stake or interest in the content of a description (Edwards and Potter, in press: np).

Our initial question, then, is clearly on the current and convergent agendas of...
pragmatics, conversation analysis and discursive psychology: so, again, what can psychological terms actually do?

To be sure, Wittgenstein (1958; 1974), with his emphasis on actual use as opposed to referential meaning, gives us an initial philosophical impetus against assuming that utterances like “I know...” or “I don’t know...” necessarily tell us something about knowledge as such. And Coulter, via his consideration of actual uses of ‘believe’, ‘understand’ and so on, carries this forward into areas of pragmatic interest. In addition, the discursive psychologists are beginning to show that the pragmatic analysis of psychological terms in actual talk and texts has important consequences for mainstream psychology’s interests. From here, we want to try to ground these insights in further perspicuous and suitably illustrative cases of psychological terms doing things of overt and direct pragmatic consequence as opposed to referring, abstractly, to mental states.

Our next case, from Sacks (1970), involves “having a thought” — surely a matter of central psychological interest if ever there was one — along with some closely related kinds of utterances. Sacks, at this point in his work, is interested in how speakers may get to be able to do a multi-clause or multi-sentence turn at talk — what conversation analysts would now call talking beyond more than a single transition-relevance place (TRP) — and have it heard, right off, that that’s how their turn is designed, such that, at the first TRP, someone else does not begin to speak. He introduces his data fragment with the following observation: “[T]here are ‘on topic’ topic markers, and they are routinely used where it may be that the utterance they are part of is both extended and more than a possible complete sentence, and where also it might
from its beginning otherwise not seem on topic” (1970: 45). So there is a general problem for speakers when they want to talk to topic but, at first blush, their projected talk may not seem to be so relevant. And one way they can do this is to use an “on topic” topic marker which signals both upcoming multiple TRPs and the upcoming topicality of their turn. Sacks (1970: 45) then cites the following fragment:

→ A: Um I just had a thought. I know someone who um uh has two smaller children, and uh would like, I think to get in some— just some weekends you know, but whether um she could do it regularly or not —

B: Well—

A: I think I’ll talk to her.

The crucial utterance-part here is: “I just had a thought”. Can analysts or members hear this part as anything like a reference to an internal state or process on A’s part? Whereas cognitive psychology would no doubt be tempted to seize upon “I just had a thought” as evidence of an internal state, in this instance it manifestly is not. And it is not, because, for one thing, “I just had a thought” (although it can complete a turn-constructional unit) occurs here in an unlikely sequential position for an interlocutor to take a turn directly addressing the (then) previous speaker’s mental state. That is — Beckett and Pinter notwithstanding — we don’t routinely get such things as:

* A: I just had a thought.

B: Tell me about your thought processes?

Sacks gives us the following contextual information on the actual fragment, and this brings us a little closer to what, instead, “I just had a thought” is actually doing in this place:

In the conversation from which this fragment is taken, A has been engaged in offering and attempting to convince B to take a nursing job.
B has refused, in part because she doesn’t want a seven day a week job which the job would be, were she unable to get someone to surely take over on weekends (1970: 45).

Accordingly, “I know someone who has two smaller children...” could not quite start the turn in question. Its topicality would be, without the “on topic” topic marker (“I just had a thought”), at least somewhat opaque with respect to its topicality. Sacks puts this, elegantly as ever, as follows (and we quote, necessarily, at length):

Now it seems on the one hand that the first sentence of A’s utterance is an instance of what is generally used as an “on topic” topic marker, and that her otherwise first sentence, or the sentence that follows it, might, lacking the marker that precedes, be either some sort of possibly complete utterance, and be one whose topical status is not apparent. It is only by virtue of what is thereafter said that the way the utterance is in point is made apparent. I do not mean to suggest that the utterance, were it to have gone: “I know someone who um uh has two smaller children” possible period, would be heard as utterly puzzling, but, e.g., that such an utterance or such a begun utterance might have a range of topical interpretations which would allow for seeing it as complete then, e.g., it might be heard as complete and the recipient might hear it in such a way as to say to herself “Well, maybe she’d be interested” or, “And does she have the same problem as I?”, for example. I do mean to suggest that with the use of an “on topic” topic marker a recipient can be informed that he is to wait out the particular sort of on-topicness that the forthcoming talk will have, and thereby may find the sort of on-topicness that the speaker intends for it to have (1970: 45-46).

To put our argument concisely then: what “I just had a thought” is actually doing here is clearly not making a reference to a mental state or process — whether or
not, concurrently with its utterance, or just prior to it, A. actually experienced a mental event glossable as “I know someone who has two smaller children”. It does not ‘refer’ to an immaterial state or process concurrent with it or preceding it; rather it works in the talk to prefigure some talk yet to come. It looks forward to a quite public, social and material thing rather than backward to a putatively private event ‘in the head’. We are reminded of a comparable remark of Wittgenstein’s — that “the language game of reporting can be given such a turn that a report is not meant to inform the hearer about its subject matter but about the person making the report” (Wittgenstein, 1958, IIx, our emphasis) — in this case of course the informing accomplished by “I just had a thought” is not that the speaker has been suddenly assailed by an announceable cognitive happening, but rather that they are an attentive interlocutor who is on-topic and whose turn is not, despite possible first appearances, to be taken as a accountable non-sequitur.

Here it might be objected, for example by strong cognitivists, that questions of what people, as it were, actually wonder, remember and think have been left behind in favour of a glance at some merely ‘trivial’ fragment of conversation. To such an objection — often called in ethnomethodological circles the ‘so what’ question — Sacks has a fairly definitive answer: the fragment is not just a fragment; rather it is an instance of a large class (or “population”) of material social practices that are critical for the production of social order in the first place — and prior to any analytic interest in them:

It seems that “I just had a thought” is not merely an “on topic” topic marker by convention. Instead, since topical organization serves as a basic means for the locating of things to be said ... it happens that the thoughts, remembrances, wonderings and the like that persons engaged in topical talk have will routinely be on topic, and then that they do exhibit that they are operating, absorbed in the talk, by presenting their
talk with such specific “on topic” topic markers as “I just wondered”, “I just remembered”, “I just had a thought”, and the like (1970: 46).

That is, we don’t just have wonderings, memories, thoughts, and the rest in some department of internal affairs; and we don’t just say we have them at any old points in the talk; we routinely talk of them in ways that turn out to be topical, and in ways that get recognised by others for the topicality of that talk. (Of course both Wittgenstein and Coulter rightly insist that the ratifiability criteria for claims to private ‘internal events’ such as ‘having a memory’ and ‘understanding’ are overwhelmingly public.) And this doesn’t simply apply to fragments like “I just had a thought”, it applies to a class or “population” of such things, as Sacks makes clear in his final remark on the matter:

Note in this regard that the question of the status of each item as “on topic” topic marker may gain some support through the manifestly, or seemingly close relation, between such usages as “I just had a thought” and e.g., “It just occurred to me” and in that regard we can use as the distributional population not merely the one, but a range of similar seeming objects for finding the work that they commonly do (1970: 47-48; our emphasis).

And this is characteristic of Sacks: the search for a “population” of expressions (in this case a population involving intensional expressions) in terms of the work they commonly do, rather than in terms of, for example, their putative referential function as mental state descriptors.iv

To put this another way, unlike standard psychological accounts (even soi-disant ‘social’ psychological accounts) in which an individual, person or mind is inspected (on the basis of ‘its’ utterances) for how it has its own specific attitudes or memories or makes, for example, its own inferences or predictions, Sacks refers instead to “the way that society goes about building people” (1992a: 117), pretty much regardless of individual differences within the
society. Hence, at the close of his first published lecture, he announces what we might call the ‘basic Sacks injunction’:

First of all, don’t worry about whether [participants are] ‘thinking’, Just try to come to terms with how it is that the thing comes off. Because you’ll find that they can do these things [that is, act with remarkable immediacy such that “they couldn’t have thought that fast”]. Just take any other area of natural science and see, for example, how fast molecules do things. And they don’t have very good brains. So just let the materials fall as they may. Look to see how it is that persons go about producing what they do produce (1992a: 11).

We can see the problematic upshot of this for psychological realism generally if we look at another “way that society goes about building people” also analysed by Sacks, but this time from an early lecture.

In this lecture originally from 1965 (1992a: 113-125; cf. Sacks, 1985), Sacks turns to the question of inference making; again a topic close to mainstream psychology’s heartland. But rather than turn to individual capacities for inference making, Sacks refers instead to a general social machinery (an “inference-making machine”) available to any person who happens to be built by a society that includes such a device. Sacks refers to the following data (1992a: 113):

(1) A: Yeah, then what happened?
(2) B: Okay, in the meantime she [wife of B] says, “Don’t ask the child nothing”. Well, she stepped between me and the child and I got up to walk out the door. When she stepped between me and the child, I went to move her out of the way. And then about that time her sister called the
police. I don’t know how she ... what she ...

→ (3) A: Didn’t you smack her one?
   (4) B: No.
   (5) A: You’re not telling me the story, Mr B.
   (6) B: Well, you see when you say smack you mean hit.

→ (7) A: Yeah, you shoved her. Is that it?
   (8) B: Yeah, I shoved her.

Sacks suggests this exchange works because inferences can go backwards from member-categorial explanations (that it was “her sister” that called the police) to describe events (that B. “smacked her” or “shoved her”). To see the importance of this, we need to briefly summarise a general finding of membership categorisation analysis (MCA).

In MCA, we often see cases like the following: a category of actions is held, by members, to obtain for a general category of persons in the society; so if an activity takes place but the actor is not known, the actor can be inferred from the ‘types of persons who do that’. For example, if it’s known that an arrest has taken place, we have instant candidates for who (as a type) might have done the arresting and who (again, as a type) might have been the one arrested. The reverse also holds: knowing the type that a particular person is, we can infer the kinds of actions they are likely to engage in. In the materials just cited, however, the categorial action is relatively more specific: something like ‘the types of activities that lead to the police being called’. If there is (a) an argument between spouses + (b) an unknown action + (c) a call to the police, we can reasonably infer that (b) is an action warranting (c). Given, then, that the wife’s sister makes the call (and not, say, a passer-by in the street or one of the neighbours) it is likely the husband has been in some way violent towards the wife. The inference-making machine then runs through possible actions of this type and, as it turns out, reaches the correct action on second try: he shoved her. (Note:
this is a necessarily truncated summary and the whole of Sacks’s analysis
should be consulted for the fine-grained detail.)

The upshot is that while categories of person-in-general are relevant to the
mundane inference (husband, wife, wife’s sister, child, and police) no particular
person’s psychological state, interiority or mental capacity must be
comprehended in order for the correct inference to be drawn. As Sacks puts it:

[I]t is an awesome machine if one needs to know only that it is “my wife”
and “her sister”. And you can do this because that holds for every like unit
in society, such that you don’t need to ask for example, “Well tell me
some more about your wife’s sister, is she elderly? Is she prone to
hysterics?” which is something that would be absolutely essential in
psychology (1992a: 117; our emphases).

By contrast with Sacks’s basic injunction — indeed, by contrast with his overall
conception of social science as describing the way society builds people — then,
psychology works in the following way: it can turn routine inferences based on
categories of person (like the one above) into questions about the personal
characteristics of the individual or individuals involved — questions that are
redundant to the inference as such. It can then ‘explain’ the inference, qua
ordinary everyday categorial procedure, in terms of its (psychology’s)
supposedly (extraordinary) assessment of an individual’s, for example, ‘mental
capacities’ (see Rapley et al., in press).

Although psy-professionals rarely make such procedures explicit — indeed,
to do so might raise questions about their claim to special expertise — in pop
psychology the process can be more overt. For example, it can turn ordinary
inference into something apparently more extraordinary and (pseudo-)
mysterious: intuition:

As a teenager I could always tell when my parents were due home from
work. Minutes before their arrival our family cat sat expectantly at the
window above the driveway. Animals often have a finely-tuned sense of perception (Osfield, 1997: 58).

The ordinary inference is visible: working parents return from work at more-or-less regular times; if they have animals, that is when the animals get food and affection; and animals are not without a trained sense of the regular timing of food and affection. Ergo, the cat waits for the sound of the returning car. A perfectly ordinary inference for the teenage Osfield, then, until ‘intuition’ is added to the account as a supernumerary feature of the event (albeit, in this case, as a quality of her particular cat or, indeed, of cats in general). Then, transferring back from the cat to persons, the ‘analyst’ can add ‘expert’ testimony:

"Unfortunately, rational society tends to trust only what people can see, hear, taste, touch, smell. We tend to disregard our sixth sense and rely completely on our thinking minds", says Simon Turnbull, President of the Australian Psychic Association. “Most people live disconnected from their intuition until it fights its way out from the subconscious” (Osfield, 1997: 58).

So, on this account, some individuals appear to be built with a unique (animal-like?) pre-social inner capacity that resides in the “subconscious” and is a psychic corollary of the (five?) bodily senses. Almost anything that is explicable by normal inference or is generated by probability (such as getting a call from someone you were just thinking of) can then have ‘intuition’ superadded to it. But at the same time, the superadding process (which may, in some circumstances, be a kind of analytic dishonesty) is, itself, actually quite ordinary, if not utterly commonsensical:

What is intuition?

Intuition is not as mysterious as you might think. It mixes life experience with commonsense and a willingness to tune in and find out what you
are feeling about something, as well as thinking. It’s a good idea to try out your intuition on relatively trivial matters before using it to make big decisions (Osfield, 1997: 61).

The pop-psychological case is, no doubt, both extreme and terribly confused; but it does illustrate the danger (in professional analysis, in ‘psychic’ explanations, or in popular-magazine accounts) of taking apparent mental-state terms as corresponding to reified psychological conditions or capacities. Indeed, Sacks, shortly following the analysis of the transcript in question, shows how highly professional (non-pop) clinical assessments can ‘run’ the inference machine and use familiarity with its workings (or its thereby noticeable failings to work) on specific occasions of clinical diagnosis:

If you read Cleckley’s book The Mask of Sanity [1955], the psychopathic personality is reported to be that person who, at any given point in their behavior, you never know what’s going to happen next. You’re never able to say “Here is an nth point in this sequence, and now X, Y, and Z will come”. And they are taken to be about as painful a person as you can have around (1992a: 119).

Immediately following this, Sacks goes on to neatly summarise his position and to explicate the very particular kind of ‘behaviourism’ it entails:

Now, what I have been proposing could be restated as follows: For Members, activities are observables. They see activities. They see persons doing intimacy, they see persons lying, etc.... And that poses for us the task of being behaviorists in this sense: Finding how it is that people can produce sets of actions that provide that others can see such things (1992: 119).

Again, contrast this so-called behaviourism with the standard account and with the Ryle-Wittgenstein position (Button et al., 1995: 35 and 58-75). Returning to the transcript: no doubt A. acts with remarkable speed in getting from a set
of events E1, E2 ... E4 to inferring a particular E3 that must have intervened and which must, given E1 and E2, have provided *grounds* for E4 occurring. But, with Sacks, we need attribute no specific inner capacity to that inferential work (and/or its alacrity) on her part. To say that she inferred something (here, that the husband was violent) is to describe what *she* did in the course of her talk, as what *anyone* could do in such a course of talk. It is not to make guesses about, for example, her inner psychological state: such guesses about putative inner states and processes are, of course, the sort of officially sanctioned superadding that we now rely on professional psychology to supply. As ever Wittgenstein clearly points to the substantive issue here. He asks “how does the philosophical problem about mental processes and states and about behaviourism arise? — The first step is the one that altogether escapes notice. We talk of processes and states and leave their nature undecided. Sometime perhaps we shall know more about them — we think. But that is just what commits us to a particular way of looking at the matter” (Wittgenstein, 1958: §308). In line with this, the basic Sacks injunction points us towards inference (and other supposedly ‘psychological’ processes) as routine culture-wide and visible practices rather than as instances or outcomes of, for example, hidden cognitive activities only available to recondite expert analysis.

Are we saying, then, that wherever and whenever psychological terms crop up in ordinary everyday settings — or indeed, by extension, in professional analytic settings — they always and necessarily must be doing something other than reference to private, mental objects? The strong Wittgenstein-Ryle-Coulter thesis has already suggested as much. To rehearse the point: “Wittgenstein proposes that, *if* ‘beettle’ has a use in the public language, then the object in the
box must be irrelevant to its meaning. If this private object \textit{does} play a part in the understanding of ‘beetle’, then intersubjective communication would be impossible” (Coulter, 1979: 78). Sacks, at least on our reading, and given our selections, appears to come close to such a view. The public machinery for building social persons, at least, is always held to be what is actually ‘running’ when folk say such things as “I just had a thought”, when inferences are made instantaneously in phone conversations, when pop-psych merchants discover mysterious ‘intuitions’, or when clinicians describe the psychopathic personality (cf. Sacks, 1992a: 72-80; esp. 80).

So is it impossible, as it were, in the actual mechanics of talk (as described by conversation analysis and Wittgenstein-inspired ethnomethodology), for members to do something like ‘referring to mental states’ — or would members, if they \textit{thought} they were doing so, be just plain \textit{wrong} about themselves?\textsuperscript{vi} Put another way, would it be possible to apply the last two parts of the basic Sacks injunction — “... just let the materials fall as they may. Look to see how it is that persons go about producing what they do produce” (1992a: 11) — to the production of a putative ordinary activity called ‘referring to mental states’?

It is clearly the case — in the claims to the presence or absence of thoughts and knowledge that we have seen so far — that it is impossible to sustain the claim that these utterances index mental events in the manner which mainstream psychology would have it. But what are we to make of an actual, rather than hypothetical, exchange such as that below reported by Leudar and Thomas (2000) in their analysis of descriptions of ‘hearing voices’ — surely a paradigmatic ‘inner’ ‘mental’ experience if ever there was one. It would seem that KL (in the transcript) reports, unequivocally, that he hears voices ‘in his head’; as opposed to ‘in his office’, ‘in the street’, or in any of the many other possible locations where such experiences can be said, in a grammatically
correct fashion, to be had.

RS: [...] OK that’s fine (. ) um (. ) OK (. ) um would you (. ) do you
see differences between the voice and yourself?

KL: yeah

RS: like what?

KL: I am real (. ) but the voice isn’t real

RS: right (. ) OK (. ) and how do you know it’s not real (. ) how
do you identify it as not being real?

→ KL because it’s in my head and no one else can hear it

(Leudar and Thomas, 2000: 202)

If one adopts a strict Coulterian position, it is difficult to avoid the
proposition here that KL is either just plain wrong, or that he is mistaken about
the experience he claims. Alternatively, it might be suggested that KL is
engaged in some subtle recipient design work. After all, people who report
hearing voices routinely attract the ascription of schizophrenia in consequence.
As such, KL’s display here of his utterly routine mundane reality-testing
procedures, and a relentlessly logical (ergo, non-‘insane’) approach to the
establishment of what is and what is not really ‘real’ may be read as an instance
of ‘doing being normal’, of countering any possible ascription of insanity to
him.

Another approach to such reportings is, however, possible. One might
assume, perhaps, that it would be an error to ironise KL’s description of this
‘mental’ experience — inasmuch as we are ordinarily disposed to acknowledge
the actuality of such things as the ‘silent’ ‘internal’ recitation of lists, music and
poems, the having of dreams and so forth. It is, then, possible that, on some
occasions, KL’s and other members’ uses of mental state/process descriptions
(whatever other work such a reporting might also be doing — offering a second
story, attending to matters of identity management, or whatever) may sensibly be taken as such, thus avoiding the antithetical (but, for all that, equally absolutist) positions espoused by both cognitivism and Coulterism.

For it would be pointless to deny that, in ordinary everyday life, people imagine, dream, see things ‘in the mind’s eye’, picture landscapes to themselves, silently recite shopping lists to themselves, and so on. This in no way warrants the ghost-in-the-machine or ‘double-life’ view that there is always some ‘mental event’ vaguely akin to these at the basis of all overt human actions. As Ryle puts it: we may “come to suppose that there is a special mystery about how we publish our thoughts instead of realising that we employ a special artifice to keep them to ourselves” (1949: 27). Still less does this Rylean concession to ‘internal thoughts’ warrant the view that the meanings of such words as ‘think’, ‘know’, ‘understand’, ‘believe’, etc. are given by reference to internal (‘mental’) states or events.

For all this, there appear to be perfectly ordinary but quite context-specific situations where our public talk (or writing) can make reference to imaginings, mental calculations, silent soliloquies, and the rest. Such practices can be undertaken. And so, unsurprisingly, references can be made to them. Indeed Wittgenstein and Ryle, themselves, constantly refer to them (see, for example, Ryle, 1949: 35-40) — and we have just done so here without, we hope, controversy. (Mumblings from what remains of behaviourism-proper notwithstanding.) In some circumstances — especially professional-psychological ones — we might reasonably infer that the use of such mental predicates commits the speaker to a ghost-in-the-machine position such as cognitivism. In other circumstances, we may not. Other criteria may underpin their use. When, for example, James Taylor sings “In my mind I’m gone to Carolina” (Taylor, 1971: 108), we do not attribute a kind of folk-cognitivism to him, or point to his terrible grammar. We would not say that he writes and
sings ‘as if’ Descartes’ mind-body hypothesis had been confirmed. Nor do we assume he has an extremely large piece of American real estate between his ears. Perhaps, instead, we appreciate the assonance of the mind’s ‘i’.

Such cultural objects and practices (in this case, a line from a song) can turn out to be just ordinary talk (or song, or writing) designed for particular purposes and effects, and we should not jump from them to the extraordinary conclusion that they are misguided (Coulter, 1999) or that members talking in such ways are talking ‘as if’ their words referred to occult processes, ‘as if’ they were folk-cognitivists (Bilmes, 1992). We are thus in the paradoxical position that both post-Wittgensteinian scholarship — which is of course (and rightly) critical of the slipshod theorising of cognitive psychology — and cognitive psychology itself, find themselves to be a companion pair: sharing in their ironic stance towards everyday members’ usages. For both Coulter and for the cognitivists he criticises, ordinary members not only cannot know that on which they report but also, in their reportings, they are lamentably (and accountably) in error. They are cast, it would seem, as either grammatical or psychological dopes. Either conclusion, reconditely philosophical or ‘scientific’ as it may be, is both condescending and ironic towards members’ routine practices in the sense criticised by Garfinkel and Sacks (1970).

The impulse or motive for such a judgment may be a peculiar kind of eliminativism in its own right. What we have in mind here is, for example, Ryle’s dictate: “The phrase ‘in the mind’ can and should always be dispensed with” (1949: 40). But such a position risks securing one’s Rylean moorings at the risk of losing one’s fundamental ethnomethodological grounds. And so, ending very much where we began, we note that Sacks, for one, has stated those grounds contrastively with analytic-theoretical attempts to correct ethnomethodology’s central object of description: what members know and use:

A curious fact becomes apparent if you look at the first paragraph — it
may occur in the third paragraph — of the reportedly revolutionary scientific treatises back to the pre-Socratics and ending up to at least Freud. You find that they all begin by saying something like this, “About the thing I’m going to talk about, people think they know, but they don’t. Furthermore, if you tell them, it doesn’t change anything. They still walk around like they know although they are walking in a dreamworld”. Darwin begins this way. Freud begins in a similar way. Bloomfield’s analysis of language begins in a similar way, and I could provide a much larger list. What we are interested in is, what is it that people seem to know and use? Here what people know and use is not to be mapped for each area on to what it is that science turns out to know, but is to be investigated itself. How does “what people know and use” work? How could it be enforced? What are its properties? It seems to be referred to as ‘time, place, etc’. The problem is that, since each major treatise that has set up scientific fields starts out by saying that what people know and use is wrong, obviously it would not be a way to find out about what people know and use by considering ‘science’ proposals. Instead what we want to do is see if we can look at the enforceable and usable procedures for whatever knowledge persons happen to have (Sacks in Hill and Crittenden, 1968: 13; our emphasis).

So if Sigmund — or anyone of that ilk — calls, tell them it didn’t work.
Notes

i. Intriguingly Boyle’s (2002) work has elegantly demonstrated the intellectual incoherence of the misappropriation by psychology itself of describably ‘specialist’ terminology such as ‘diagnosis’ and ‘syndrome’. See also Sarbin and Mancuso (1984) and Soyland (1994).

ii. This need not in any way imply a commitment to the cognitivist notion that ‘projected talk’ entails the speaker ‘having in their head’ a script of the talk to come, ready and waiting for the vocal apparatus to deliver the mind’s cognitive contents into public space.

iii. The awkwardness of the expression “actually experienced a mental event” highlights our central problem. That is, it is almost impossible to describe putative events, states, experiences, etc., going on ‘in the head’, ‘behind’ a given utterance, without breaching the logical grammar of our ordinary language. This may, in part, account for the introduction of specialist expressions into (philosophical and ‘scientific’) psychology such as Fodor’s (1983; 1987; 1990) “(mental) representations”, “mentalese”, “broad vs. narrow (mental) contents”, “(mental) tokening” and the rest. On the logical-grammatical problems of such expressions, see Button, et al. (1991: 53-109).

iv. This is not to say that Sacks doubts the existence (as do some behaviourists) of ‘real’ mental processes. See, for example, his pass through the distinction between “abstract” and “concrete” thinking (1992a: 109-110); his remarks on “memory” (1992a: 759-760); or his lecture on dreams (1992b: 512-518). Indeed, we have just seen Sacks working directly with “the thoughts, remembrances, wonderings and the like that persons engaged in topical talk have” (1970: 46, our emphasis).
v. In classical sociology, the case is made in somewhat stronger terms. Durkheim (1938: 103-104), for example, writes: “... in the case of psychology and sociology, the same break in continuity [applies] as between biology and the physico-chemical sciences. Accordingly, whenever a social phenomenon is directly explained by a psychological phenomenon, one may be sure that the explanation is false”.

vi. An earlier draft of this discussion can be found in Miller and McHoul (1998: 124-126).

vii. This question was prompted by the following remark made by one of the anonymous reviewers of an earlier draft of the present paper:

One problem with the Coulter-Wittgenstein line on beetles in boxes, and reference to internal mental states, is the notion that despite what a pragmatic analysis can show, people may actually consider themselves to be referring to internal mental states ... and, more importantly, talk as if that were so. Rather than telling people they are wrong, I think the thing to do is to examine, within an empirical and pragmatic analysis, how the ‘internal mental states’ aspect of psychological terms may actually figure in how they are used, rather than [being] something that people can’t ‘really’ do.
References


Sacks, Harvey, 1970(?). Aspects of the Sequential Organization of Conversation. Draft manuscript (Chapter 4).


