

INTRODUCTION

This book is a comprehensive treatment of inner speech—also called self-talk, internal conversation, and inner dialogue. By “comprehensive” I mean I try to cover all the important facets of this topic, providing an overview. In a few cases I go more deeply into a topic, hoping to add to it.

My approach is as a humanistic social theorist, leaning toward the classical pragmatism of Charles Sanders Peirce, John Dewey, William James, and George Herbert Mead. This means emphasizing the semiotic and dialogical features of the topic while skipping over many of the biological and neurological issues. In addition, I emphasize theory over empirical research. There are actually few empirical studies of inner speech, particularly within sociology, but there is a scattering of such studies in several fields. In other words, this field, at present, has only moderate visibility, but these publications and their visibility is increasing.

Given these limits, I try to hit all the important aspects of this topic. Inner speech is considerably more central to human life than is widely understood. As Oliver Sacks puts it:

“We are our language,” it is often said; but our real language, our real identity, lies in inner speech, in that ceaseless stream and generation of meaning that constitutes the individual mind. It is through inner speech that the child develops his own concepts and meanings; it is through inner speech that he achieves his own identity; it is through inner speech, finally, that he constructs his own world. (1989, 59)

The centrality Sacks attributes to inner speech is difficult to see because by its nature this form of speech has low visibility. It is silent; we are not always paying attention to it, particularly if it is a passive daydream; and we are usually busy doing something, such as driving a car, cooking, or talking to someone.

This inattention is probably due to its low visibility in our consciousness. However, its prevalence is much greater than people realize. As Noam Chomsky says:

Language is not properly regarded as a system of communication. It is a system for expressing thought, something quite different. . . . [L]anguage use is largely to oneself: “inner speech” for adults, monologue for children. (2002, 76–77)

And in another place, he says:

Now let us take language. What is its characteristic use? Well, probably 99.9% of its use is internal to the mind. You can’t go a minute without talking to yourself. It takes an incredible act of will not to talk to yourself. (2012, 11)

This introduction positions the topic in its major contexts: intellectual history, the major academic disciplines, and other human faculties and capabilities that are affected by or make use of inner speech.

Introduction: The Nature of Inner Speech

Inner speech, as stated, is difficult to observe, since we cannot see it in other people. We get direct contact with it only in ourselves, and even here it usually goes on in the inner reaches of our consciousness. It is like dreams in that it is difficult to see and hard to explain. But dreams are passive experiences that happen *to* us, whereas inner speech is an active process, often quite deliberately used *by* us and aimed at important goals.

We do encounter some inner speech in novels and films, although these texts cannot be completely faithful to their topic. If they were structured exactly as we experience inner speech, the audience would be unable to understand them, as with some of James Joyce’s extreme examples. L. S. Vygotsky points out that inner speech, if viewed as we actually experience it, is a private language that only the speaker can understand (1987b, 204, 278). Fiction writers have to find a balance between imitating inner speech, on the one hand, and making it understandable, on the other. People who reveal examples of their own inner speech also have to strike this balance.

Some Examples of Inner Speech

The following examples are somewhat long, but the best way to discuss inner speech is to have some texts in front of you. In the first example, a waitress reports on her thoughts going to work. Her inner speech is presented linguistically along with brief sketches of her imagery.

“Only eight minutes, takes five to change. I’ve got to book [hurry].” Imagery: A disgustingly filthy locker room. Visions of me running from table to kitchen table. Sounds. Forks and knives scraping plates, customers yelling over each other. *“I have to make money. At least it’s not as bad as last summer.”* Memory imagery: A tiny dumpy diner. Visions of me sweating. Sensations of being hot. Visions of thirty marines eating and drinking. Sounds: country music on a blaring juke box. *“I’ll be right there, just a minute please.”* Sensations of burning my arm in a pizza oven. Visions of dropping glasses. Sounds: Glass breaking, manager yelling, marines cheering. *“Oh God, get me out of here.”* Sensation: Cringe, humiliation. *“I hate waitressing. Can’t wait to graduate and get a decent job.”* Visions of a paneled, brightly carpeted office with scenic pictures and healthy plants. Visions of me fifteen pounds thinner in a new skirt suit from Lord and Taylor. A great-looking coworker is pouring us coffee. Sounds of a clock chiming five o’clock. *“Sure I’d love to go out Friday night.”* (Caughey 1984, 135; italics added)

A second example is of a girl, a little under two years old, overheard when she was in her bedroom. The researcher sees this as an example of imaginative play. This text is what is called private speech, but it has the same qualities as inner speech.

Go Grandma and buy a pretty doll Grandma for me under the bed for me to play the piano . . . get up cling, cling-ling-ling. Grandma comes up the steps. Oh, oh, ah, ah, ah, lying on the floor tied up no cap on Theodosia (the doll) lie on the bed, bring yellow sheep to Theodosia, run tap, tap, tap, for Lena. Strawberries, Grandma, wolf lie on bed. Go to sleep darling Theodosia you are my dearest; everybody is fast asleep. . . . A cat came in here, Momma caught it, it had feet and black boots on—short cap, band on it. Poppa ran, the sky—Grandma gone—Grandpa resting. (Singer 1966, 134)

A third example is from the thoughts of the social theorist Randall Collins:

Music is going through my head, an aria from Don Giovanni, which I had seen the previous weekend with my wife. *“What scene is that*

from?” Vague images of different scenes in the opera. I notice a woman, of professional age and dress, ahead of me amidst the crowd of students on the walkway. “*Is that the egregious Elizabeth Dougherty?*” On closer approach, it is not the woman professor I am thinking of. “*Damn economists.*” Vague imagery of economist on a university committee. “*Economists have bad values.*” Feeling pleased with myself for the lapidary formulation. (2004b, 201)

Another example is that of John Johnson, who is illustrating the condensed quality of inner speech. His is a to-do list with only three items: “car, dinner, kids.” He explains the meaning of this string of words as follows: “Make sure to fill up the car’s gas tank, stop by the store and pick up a gallon of 2% milk and a loaf of whole wheat bread, and be certain to pick up John and Kate from daycare before coming home” (1994, 177).

And a final example:

Sometimes the things you do with inner speech are so natural, habitual, and even kind of silly that it never occurs to you to share them with anyone else. One thing that comes to mind is using code words. One of mine is “Windsorize.” Years ago I worked with several dozen doctors in Kaiser ER/Minor Injury Clinic. The fastest ones didn’t always give the best care, but we liked them because they kept the patient flow moving right along. This meant far less nagging from patients who were sick of the long wait to be seen.

A super fast one was Dr. Windsor. I suspect he cut corners, but he had a way of just zeroing in and getting the job done with a high degree of efficiency. So “Windsorize” is now a routine expression in my inner speech. (Katie Wiley, e-mail, February 12, 2015)

Katie Wiley’s example shows how condensed inner speech can become, into a single word in this case. This condensation is figurative, to be sure, but it does not seem to usually involve metaphor. Instead, metonymy, or the part for the whole, seems to be the main figurative device.

These examples show how inner speech violates the linguistic rules of ordinary language. Sentences are fragmentary, semantics is irregular, and nonlinguistic images abound. The waitress shows how inner speech can be full of imagery. Jerome Singer’s childhood example shows how both vocabulary and grammar can be irregular and fluid. Collins shows how inner speech can veer from one theme to the next, including imagery. Johnson shows how inner speech can be squeezed into a small number of words. And Katie Wiley’s code word shows how inner speech can gather a complex and wide-ranging meaning into a single word.

Historically, inner speech has been identified and named at least since Plato. He saw it as the medium of thought (1961, 189e, 190a, 263e), and he envisioned it as going on in ordinary language. For a long time after Plato, philosophers viewed inner speech in a more abstract manner. Augustine turned attention from inner speech in ordinary language to what he called mental language (Augustine [417] 2002, 34). This, for him, was the abstract language of pure thought. It did not entail words, at least not in any ordinary sense. For Augustine the thinking process used pure concepts or abstractions, even though they might be organized like sentences.

His mental language has a resemblance to the mentalese of contemporary cognitive science, identified especially with Jerry Fodor (1975). Fodor's medium, as he sees it, is an inborn or unlearned and unconscious stream of thought. Mentalese is like the Scholastics' mental language in being abstract, quasi-linguistic, and inborn, but it differs in being completely unconscious. The Scholastics' mental language was sometimes conscious and sometimes unconscious. Fodor (and also Noam Chomsky) thinks you need a preexisting language to learn a language—a point subject to scholarly debate. I am in the group that thinks children learn a language pretty much from scratch, without an inborn preexisting language. But that is a point that comes up later. Now I just identify inner speech and contrast it with closely related ideas about language.

Inner speech in my sense, then, is different both from Scholasticism's mental language and cognitive science's mentalese. It is in ordinary language rather than pure abstractions, and it is not unconscious or inborn. We speak it silently to ourselves, and we can observe ourselves doing this. Inner speech is also unlike ordinary, external language in that it has an abbreviated syntax and a self-styled semantics. These structural features are looked at more closely in Chapter 1. These qualities were noticed and explained by Vygotsky in fascinating detail (1987a). Vygotsky is discussed in Chapters 1 and 10.

Inner speech also is often chaotic in the sense that one theme (e.g., "What shall I make for dinner?") will appear, then it will be interrupted by a different theme (e.g., "What shall I wear when we go out tonight?"), and then, surprisingly, our first teenage kiss will appear as still another theme. At times we have to ride this shifting stream of consciousness like a wild horse, forcing ourselves back to whatever our main concern was. This clashing assortment of themes can be compared to a musical score (an idea suggested to me by Michael Nguyen).

Up to now I have given a rough idea of inner speech, showing the sort of thing we designate by this term. The distinctions I have made so far also give us four different media: inner speech, interpersonal speech, mental language, and mentalese. There is also a fifth linguistic medium, private speech, which is the thinking-out-loud that children do from around ages two to seven.

These are vocalizations, but they are aimed at oneself. At one time, private speech was thought by some scholars to be itself inner speech, but that usage has been abandoned. On the one hand, private speech is now considered a distinct form of discourse. On the other hand, private speech does have a lot in common with inner speech.

The study of the Scholastics' mental language deflected attention from inner speech for many centuries. Occam (1287–1347) had what was perhaps the most developed theory of mental language. But Occam's epistemology, his nominalism, was controversial, so most of the Scholastics opposed his views. In addition, soon after he lived, modern philosophy, with René Descartes and Thomas Hobbes, drew attention away from Scholasticism and mental language (Normore 2009).

Inner speech as such was not rediscovered until Charles Sanders Peirce began writing about it in the mid-nineteenth century. It is striking that such a powerful feature of human psychology could be ignored for so long. It was used in literature—for example, in Shakespeare's soliloquies—but it was ignored by scholars. In addition to Peirce, the other pragmatists also wrote about this topic, partly under his influence. Peirce's comments are mostly in his unpublished papers, and he did not do much analysis of this phenomenon even there.

Peirce's main interest is in looking at inner speech as a means of choice and self-control. We can regulate ourselves, he argues, by analyzing our personal problems, particularly bad habits, in our minds and using inner speech to map out and practice solutions. The actions that we take to cope are first taken in our minds. In that way inner speech guides our lives as we move from problem to problem and toward our overarching goals. This is typical Peirce, introducing a powerful if somewhat undeveloped idea that has just lain there, for many decades, in his unpublished papers.

Although Peirce rediscovered inner speech over 150 years ago, his views were not organized and made available until recently when Vincent Colapietro (1989), who mined Peirce's neglected unpublished papers, wrote his pathbreaking book, *Peirce's Approach to the Self*. Colapietro's research gave a push to the study of inner speech, especially in the social sciences. Colapietro's new material on Peirce helped me construct a systematic model of inner speech based on the combination of Mead's views and those of Peirce (Wiley 1994, 18–39). Subsequently, Margaret Archer wrote three influential books on inner speech, using the same pragmatist sources (Archer 2003, 2007, 2012).

The importance of Peirce for this book is not only in his rediscovery of inner speech; he thought the defining feature of human nature was inner speech. Humans, he says, are signs, words, or language (1934, para. 313). This language is largely in what we say to ourselves as we think our way through and regulate our lives. He argues that inner speech is a core feature of human nature.

Russian theorist Mikhail Bakhtin takes a similar position. Bakhtin's term is "dialogue," and he speaks about both interpersonal and intrapersonal dialogue. For him these two forms of dialogue tend to merge into each other, as they tend to do in real life. As Bakhtin puts it:

The dialogic nature of consciousness [is] the dialogical nature of human life itself. The single adequate form for *verbally expressing* authentic human life is the *open-ended dialogue*. Life by its very nature is dialogic. To live means to participate in dialogue: to ask questions, to heed, to respond, to agree, and so forth. In this dialogue a person participates wholly and throughout his whole life: with his eyes, lips, hands, soul, spirit, with his whole body and deeds. He invests his entire self in discourse, and the discourse enters into the dialogic fabric of human life, into the world symposium. (1984, 293)

In another place he clarifies the two forms of dialogue:

This external dialogue, expressed compositionally in the text, is inseparably connected with internal dialogue, that is, with micro-dialogue, and to a considerable extent depends on it. (1984, 265)

The idea that humans can be defined as language and internal dialogue has had important political implications in American thought. The notion that all human beings are equal, both morally and legally, has gradually become central to the American belief system. This did not happen without plenty of struggle, largely from the minority population. I show later how Peirce's definition of humans as linguistic, in particular his omitting the body from this definition, led to the idea that humans are fundamentally selves (and the psychological attributes that go along with selves). This definition contradicted racism and led to political egalitarianism.

Another introductory attribute of inner speech is its relation to the stream of consciousness. Consciousness is a disputed philosophical issue since its features grate against the dominant materialist view in contemporary philosophy. To explain consciousness you need a property dualism. This position holds that, although body and mind are both part of the same overall substance, the mind has different properties than the body. These properties allow for qualitative consciousness, experienced from the subjective, or first person, point of view.

Consciousness itself, both in its first person perspective and in its qualitative features, does not admit of explanation by purely material processes. So consciousness is generally set aside as an unsolved problem for materialism, the so-called hard problem, although some philosophers actually claim

consciousness is a delusion and has no relevance to the way human life proceeds (Churchland 1981). Life itself, so it is claimed, proceeds on one, presumably unconscious, track; and consciousness, despite its claim to being a window into reality, is merely a dream or delusion. This version of materialism is the opposite of my view.

The experience of consciousness is widely admitted to have the stream-like quality that William James attributes to it (1950a, 224–290). This is a metaphor, but it is so persuasive that it is generally accepted as the way we experience reality. Within this stream, however, are several organizing principles. A major principle is time, which is a measure of the stream's passage. The stream passes down a riverbed constituted not primarily by space but by time.

Another organizing principle is inner speech, which gives consciousness a discursive, as opposed to a purely flowing, quality. This discursiveness enhances the precision of consciousness. Inner speech also gives coherence to the way we experience the flow. More importantly, inner speech gives thought and meaning to our stream. Instead of consciousness being merely something that happens to us, inner speech gives us an interior control such that we can give enhanced cognition and direction to consciousness. Within the relatively passive and uncontrolled stream, we impose inner speech. This linguistic process gives us something of a boat within the stream and allows us to navigate these waters. Or as Peirce says, "Life is a train of thought" (1934, para. 314). Along with attention itself, then, inner speech is a process by which we can control consciousness. It gives significance and narrativity to consciousness.

To put this another way, inner speech *interprets* the stream of consciousness, much as Boris Eikhenbaum, the Russian literary theorist, claims inner speech interprets silent movies ([1927] 1974). One's everyday flow of reality, like a silent film, may require some sense making. Sometimes the interpretation is routine and effortless, but when there are puzzles or "jumps," the interpretation may require thought work and insight. As Eikhenbaum puts it, "Internal speech . . . makes the connection between separate shots. . . . Film viewing is accompanied by a continual process of inner speech" ([1927] 1974, 14). And "each scene is presented to the viewer in pieces, segments. There is much that the viewer does not see at all; the intervals between segments are filled up by internal speech" (27). Life, then, is something of a silent movie, and inner speech makes it hang together.

A final comparison is between inner speech and the language of lovers, pillow talk. Two lovers often communicate effortlessly and in fragmentary form. The syntax may be abbreviated, the vocabulary may be condensed, and there may be lots of in-jokes and intimate slang, including gurgles and eye messages. Lover talk is a lot like inner speech, because it is so stylized and compressed into a small space. A little means a lot.