

Studying Linguistic Competence

The Problem

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Abstract

Posing the problem of linguistic competence involves analyzing or on the contrary assuming previous conceptions about many radical realities or at least it involves examining the concepts to be used to determine the degree of reality of them all. In order to avoid all possible beliefs on the blind assumption of concepts previous to the conception of linguistic competence (the concept of language, a language, speaking, the nature of competence, science, linguistics, etc.) it is necessary to make *an initial foray into the problem*.

Keywords: Language, A language, Linguistic competence, Act of knowing, Previous knowledge

1. Initial Foray into the Problem

When you say linguistic competence you mean the fact that language and language use manifest themselves in *speaking* or *the activity of speaking*. Competence is the ability to do something well or effectively. Speakers know about linguistic competence only if they verify someone speaking and reflect on the fact of speaking. With this they verify that they themselves speak and if they speak they have previous knowledge about what linguistic competence consists in. Linguistic competence consists in speaking. Language and language use are nothing but mental elaborations (concepts) made on the fact that people speak everywhere and every-when (Martínez del Castillo 2012a). The problem with language and linguistic topics consists in determining the degree of reality (Ortega y Gasset 1996) of the concept of language and linguistic competence. Language in itself is a concept designating a reality manifest in speaking. Linguistic competence as a concept and a reality then is closely linked with speaking and in speaking. Language and linguistic competence cannot be verified in themselves but in speaking (Cosieriu 1992). But to verify what language is it is necessary to separate it from the concept of “a language”, another concept created and invented by speakers in different languages, either with a specific word (Sp. *lengua* as opposing *lenguaje*)

or with a linguistic combination, as it is the case in English, *a language* vs. *language* —*tongue* is not consistently used to denote what it means at least in linguistics. Language in itself is something underlying the many and different languages. This fact is *intuitively known* by speakers and accepted as such when speaking about the reality we are discussing. With this there are different realities to be born in mind in order to say what linguistic competence is, language and a language. Linguistic competence is another concept *intuitively known* as well by speakers although coming perhaps from the jargon of linguists. Linguistic competence is to be conceived as the capability or the knowledge to speak thus involving both activity and the knowledge previous to the performance of that activity. The problem with linguistic competence is in the mode it is conceived. It can be conceived in two ways. It can be conceived as something objective or as something merely mental. If it is conceived as something objective it must exist or have the objective bases to exist somewhere (in society, communication, the human body, the human psychology, the psychology of the mind, the human biology, the genes, etc.). If linguistic competence is conceived as something merely mental (=a concept) it constitutes nothing but a perspective imposed on a particular reality that must be determined and guessed out. Since linguistic competence is intuitively known it is the union (=synthesis) of simple ideas (Descartes, Ortega y Gasset, Kant). This means that the concepts language, a language and linguistic competence are previous to the intuitive apprehension of them. The reason for this is that the realities denoted with these three concepts are necessarily to be executed before they are conceived as concepts. We could not make a synthesis of two simple ideas (intuition) if we did not have those ideas before hand. Hence that language, a language and linguistic competence are concepts *a priori*, concepts intuited needing demonstration on reflection about the previous conception we as human subjects have about ourselves. So these concepts intuited can be verified in experience (speaking) but only after the intuition is had. Linguistic competence then constitutes a fact in itself elaborated mentally and verified in the fact of *people being able to speak* essentially connected with both language and a language and known intuitively. It is licit then to speak of three different mental realities existing in speakers and because of speakers to be demonstrated mentally, that is, *a priori* since they can be verified in the real.

So then to verify the existence of language, a language and linguistic competence it is necessary to analyze the fact that *people speak*. To verify the existence of the fact that *people speak in a language* it is necessary to restrict our analysis to the speech of one of the many modes of speaking (=languages) thus neglecting the others. And finally to verify the existence of the fact that people speak individually it is necessary to restrict speaking to *διάλογος*, *diálogos*, (*διά*=by means of *λογος*, Ortega y Gasset 1987), that is, the speech act.

Language thus is to be analyzed (analyzing=deducing=method *a priori*; anything deduced is in the thing analyzed) in speaking. Speaking thus goes beyond language. Anything in language is in speaking. In speaking there appear many other realities not usually included in language, for example, contexts and situations. But language and linguistic competence constitute the determination of speaking. At the same time speaking cannot be understood unless with language and linguistic competence. This means that to know speaking, that is, to determine the degree of reality of speaking it is necessary to know the concepts of language and linguistic competence. Aspects such as gestures, movements, attitudes, contexts and

situations, etc. are to be included in speaking. Aspects such as serious illnesses, misunderstandings, etc. which influence on speaking are to be included in linguistic competence. Or said in other words, for language to exist it is necessary that speaking should previously exist and for speaking to exist speakers should have the knowledge to speak.

Since all human beings speak in this or that language the reality of both language and a language is to be analyzed, attributed to, verified and interpreted in speaking and because of speaking. Since speaking is performed multifariously (speaking Japanese, Greek, English, etc.) the reality of a language and thus the reality of linguistic competence is restricted to speaking in a language. And since speaking is created at the moment of speaking the reality of linguistic competence consists in the knowledge necessary to speaking individually involving both speaking in general and speaking in a particular language.

Because of speaking and in speaking language manifests itself in a treble level. First, language is universal, that is, it has to do with the human capability of expression involving language and thought, words and gestures, attitudes and implicit beliefs, speaking and contexts and cultural creations. Second, language is particular or historical, that is, language is a cultural object made in history by all speakers in participation and collaboration with one another. If language in itself unites all members of Mankind (universal level) it separates them in different *speech communities* supporting different languages (particular or historical level). Language thus constitutes the basis of human society. And third, language is individual, that is, language is created at the moment of speaking by individual subjects living in a particular speech community with particular traditions in the technique of speaking and in accordance with their individual conditions, contexts and purposes (individual level) (Coseriu 1981; Coseriu 1988; Coseriu 1992). With this the reality of language appears different from the reality of a language and linguistic competence they all manifesting in the activity of speaking.

Speakers when they are to speak to foreign people speaking a language different from theirs can understand those foreign people to a certain extent because of gestures, movements, mimics, the expression in the eyes, attitudes and especially the context reflected in their indications and behavior. This means that the reality of linguistic competence is manifest in speaking, that linguistic competence goes beyond the particular language spoken, that linguistic competence involves the reality of both language and a language, that they all (language, a language and linguistic competence) need speaking and the activity of speaking not only to manifest themselves but to exist. A speaker will never abandon his speech even when he knows he will not be understood in his words. Together with this a foreigner will accept the words he does not understand if accompanied with gestures, movements and mimics. On the contrary if a foreigner saw that his questions are answered merely with gestures he would interpret that the person answering his questions is upset by the mere fact of having being asked. So then the linguist when he wants to study language or linguistic competence has to deal with four different realities: language, a language, linguistic competence and speaking.

So the problem is just this one: language, a language, linguistic competence and speaking are concepts dealing with a unique reality, the fact that *people speak*, a fact describing the execution of an internal activity by humans. At first view then the problem consists in a

problem of knowledge. It is the human act of knowing and the way of knowing of humans that created these four different concepts and realities. The solution to the problem then consists in separating the concepts and the realities in them.

2. The Human Act of Knowing

The act of knowing by humans consists in creating a mental symbolic representation of the thing apprehended or intuited (Humboldt, 199). Human knowledge starts with what Aristotle called *aísthesis*, the sensation come to us through the senses or creation (=intuition). This way of knowing means the synthesis of *aísthesis* (*sensitive intuition*) and *intellect* (something added on the part of the human subject) with the help of *imagination* (Kant, 2004). Since human subjects are free and creative the synthesis is not determined but voluntarily determinable. Since imagination intervenes both in sensation and intellect the possibilities of performance are infinite. This means that both the thing apprehended and the thing represented constitute two objects in the human conscience thus constituting the synthesis (=knowledge). With this the human subject separates himself from the sensation in his senses or *aísthesis*, the synthesis made and the mental image created (cf. Martínez del Castillo 2015n).

The mental representation of the object known is very adequate to represent things outside the human conscience, that is, adequate to know facts to be constituted out of the conscience of the knowing subject (the so-called world) since the synthesis made merely represents facts of sensation or intuition symbolically. Knowledge in this way is something fabricated, the mental representation of sensation constituted in things because of the intervention of the intellect and imagination. Knowledge thus involves the transformation of the way of being of the thing felt, which from sensitive and concrete is made into mental, abstract, virtual and objective thus representing categories of things created to interpret what surrounds the human subject and creating things in a world full of things (Martínez del Castillo 2004, cf. Appendix I).

Since human subjects are together-with-others thus participating with others and recognizing themselves in others (*otherness*, Coseriu 1985) this way of knowing is made in participation with all speakers just because of language (Humboldt). Human knowledge is nothing made once and for all but something being made in speaking, before speaking and after speaking. It is made in speaking either if the speaking subject speaks to himself (thought) or to others; before speaking, because for a human subject to speak means understanding the thing he is going to say and speak of; and after speaking because the human subject evaluates his own speech. For a human subject, knowing, speaking and understanding means the same reality (Martínez del Castillo 2004; cf. Martínez del Castillo 2015a-h). Knowing thus is apprehending things, that is, approximating reality and creating reality. Since apprehending things becomes virtual language is the apprehension of being (Coseriu 1985a), that is, it is apprehending the essence of things not real things. Since knowledge is the mental representation of things the percept and the creation on the percept being transformed into a thing constitutes reality (Ortega y Gasset 1992). That is, knowing, apprehending, speaking and understanding (language, in a word) do not create things but constitute categories to be applied to the percept come to us through the senses or intuition (*aísthesis*) creating reality by means of determination thus interpreting (understanding) reality and constituting the world.

3. The Interpretation of Human Activities

The human subject defines himself because he is able of making a problem of himself thus asking about his essence (Coseriu 1985). In the case of things not existing in the world but being created by humans, human activities determined with freedom and aimed at achieving something different from the statement of them, the symbolical representation of them may be misleading. Human free activities (speaking, knowing, behaving, the so-called history, the arts and creation in general) cannot be represented mentally since they are known beforehand because of intuition. The purpose of knowing is creating contents of conscience about the thing apprehended (Coseriu 1985). Because of this reason human free activities can only be interpreted since they constitute contents of conscience previous to the act of knowing (Coseriu 1988). Since they are determined with freedom they are first conceived and then executed. Because of this they constitute part of the so-called *original knowledge* (Coseriu 1986b), that knowledge a human subject has about him himself and his free activities (and the purposes of those free activities (Husserl, Coseriu 1999). So trying to represent them symbolically would mean making a mental symbolic representation on a previous mental symbolic representation already in the conscience of the speaker thus leading the process to an infinite regress. Human free activities exist as contents of conscience previous to the reflection on them. Knowing means conceiving something as identical with itself and different from anything else (Coseriu 1985). In the conscience of human subjects there cannot be contents of conscience representing other contents of conscience because knowledge makes things unique. For example, the concept of language and the word *language* mean the mental representation of the reality of language as contents of conscience, a type of knowledge known intuitively by humans since they all speak. The reality known in the example is contents of conscience involving the activity of speaking with all aspects in it. If now a linguist says, following with the example, that *language is communication* this statement cannot be applied to the human reality of language since the syntactic predicate in the statement (communication) is extensive, that is, it adds further information to the syntactic subject (the concept of language). This would mean that language would be included in communication. But for communication to be it is necessary that humans should have language previously (Coseriu 1988). Language goes beyond communication. Because of this the concept communication cannot add or substitute the information given in the concept language. It is just the contrary: the concept language includes and determines the concept communication. So the concept of communication cannot represent symbolically language. They constitute two different concepts represented symbolically designating two different realities, one referring the reality in the human conscience, an internal reality, and the other one referring something created on the base of an internal reality to denote other external realities. On the other hand the concept language is not identical with the one in communication because this fact would contradict what knowing means (contents of conscience identical with themselves and different from anything else).

4. The Radical Reality

Human activities as human free creations aim at achieving something not necessarily mentioned. In this sense human creations go beyond the things stated. They are the result of human freedom, invention, creation, intention and motivation. As we saw earlier the human

act of knowing aims at creating a symbolic mental representation of the thing known thus interpreting it. We said that the human act of knowing started with sensitive intuition (aisthesis). In aisthesis you have the thing apprehended in its entire reality because it is the union of two simple ideas. Different from animals human subjects change the character of the thing initially apprehended from the sensitive and concrete into the abstract, virtual, objective and finally real (Martínez del Castillo 2015b-2015e, cf. appendix I). Because of this things created by humans manifest the way of being of humans and way of knowing. They are the result of human freedom and adoption motivated only purposely (Coseriu 1988). The origin, foundation and reality of the problems of language, a language and linguistic competence rely on the reality of humans. To be a human being means living in a circumstance and trying to overcome it in order to survive (Ortega y Gasset 1999: 119-120). Since human subjects are free and non-determined they do not find things in the world, they put them (Ortega y Gasset 1971), that is, they create things in order to survive thus interpreting what surrounds them. Because of this the reality of a human being is co-existing with things in order to overcome the circumstance he is in. The only means human subjects have when come into this world is their freedom involving the capacity to feel, imagine, create and understand, faculties to be developed in the circumstance they are in. With freedom and because of freedom they will create and represent what they apprehend. But to acquire the full functioning of their capacities involved in freedom (feeling, imagining, creating and understanding) they must intuit, create and learn language from others through speaking. Since speaking is nothing but an activity created and performed by human subjects the character and mode of being of human subjects will determine the character of the activity performed. Human subjects then make themselves with freedom in speaking and because of speaking in participation with others. As a consequence speaking, language, a language and linguistic competence constitute a unique reality in the interior of humans, created and performed in humans. The reason for the existence of language is human subjects: *language exists and is defined because human subjects created it in their conscience*. Since language is something in the interior of humans linguistic competence is *knowledge*, the knowledge to speak.

5. The Reality of Language

Language is real in so far as it is related to humans and connected with humans (Martínez del Castillo 2016). Language is something lived by humans: it is intuited, created, performed, spoken, used and evaluated by humans (Martínez del Castillo 2013). As such language is something in the interior of speakers (Ortega y Gasset 2001: 259). A language is real in as much as it is something virtual put in common and supported on a *speech community* (Coseriu 1982). Linguistic competence is real in as much as it is something internal to the speaking subject, a sketch, draft, model or a technique speakers can execute, perform and use when speaking. Since linguistic competence is internal to the speaking subject it constitutes knowledge, the knowledge to speak. The reality of speaking is concrete since it can be verified as an activity. With this speaking of language, a language, speech, speech community, linguistic competence and knowledge is nothing but interpreting aspects of the reality of human subjects, the human life. Linguistic competence can only be verified in speaking. It is in the activity of speaking that linguistic competence is to be found out of, analyzed, described, verified and interpreted.

On the other hand speaking as an activity involves two factors, the agent of the activity and the thing made, that is, speaking is related to human subjects in as much as they perform the activity of speaking and the outcome of that activity, speech. They both represent a distinction made mentally on a single reality, the human act of speaking involving speaking, saying and knowing (Martínez del Castillo 2004).

6. The Problem in the Study of Language

The problem in the study of language and all aspects involved in it is that those who study language are both speakers and linguists, that is, those who study language have to separate themselves from the thing they study in a double sense (cf. Martínez del Castillo 2015n). First, as speakers, subjects who intuit language and perform language, have to study language as something internal in them thus separating themselves from object known. This separation involves objectifying the object known just because the act of knowing is completed and perfected with language. They must neglect this objectification since the object known is internal to them thus establishing a tentative theory on it (an intuition on it). Second, they must verify their tentative theory in the verbal behavior of speakers thus separating them from their intuition again. So once they have had an intuition and verified it in the verbal behavior of speakers (=the real) they must necessarily confirm, reject or re-establish their theory to interpret it and then once again verify it in the verbal behavior of speakers.

7. The Role of Intuition, Speech Acts

The activity of speaking represents a mental creation by the individual speaker executed materially in words at the moment of speaking. Speaking is conceived before it is executed, at the very moment of its execution and after the execution of it. Speakers in order to speak they previously know how to speak and the intention they have to mean and say. This fact means that a) the activity of speaking is based on a technical knowledge. The speaking subject intuit language, performs it led by his intuition and his meaningful intentional purpose (Martínez del Castillo 2004; 2015b) and in its performance he creates and re-creates it through intuition and because of intuition and the development of his intuition. And when the speech act is finished he evaluates his speech, that is, he analyses and examines his creation. Since speaking is speaking and understanding by means of a language (Coseriu 1988: 109) the speaker evaluates his speech in terms of his intuition and the knowledge he has of previous performances of speech; and b) the knowledge implicit in the execution of the activity of speaking is previous to the execution of it. Because of this it can be modified, altered, modeled and re-modeled at the moment of its execution in terms of the purposes and aims by the individual speaking subject. So the character of intuitive technical knowledge entails two aspects: first, it is an image of itself representing an intuition and second, the performance of itself is determined by the knowledge in the previous image being intuited and conceived.

Since human subjects are free the performance of intuitive technical knowledge cannot be predicted at all. It is only determined because of the purposes adopted by the free knowing subject who is in a particular circumstance and has to overcome the difficulties found in it.

Language, a language, linguistic competence and speaking are to be performed in *speech acts*. Speech acts represent the only reality involving language with concrete existence. This means

that they can be verified in what they really are. Speech acts are innumerable and occur everywhere and every-when. They have existed ever since human subjects existed in history. As the result of a technical knowledge they are used as models for future performances. The most important peculiarity of them is that they are singular, individual and known *intuitively* (Coseriu 1986a). This peculiarity of speech acts reveals many facts:

- 1) First, the subject performing a speech act is creative, that is, a subject who is free and non-determined to know and thus to speak. Intuition although unforeseen is determined (prompted) by the purposes adopted by the individual speaker.
- 2) Second, as a result the human mind and thus the structure of the human mind constitute something to be made by the individual subject. Every human subject come to this world has to make himself and thus make the structure of his mind by the mere fact of having to do something in the circumstance they are in at any moment. This fact reveals that human subjects since they live in a particular moment in history are limited and contingent, that is, they have to make themselves at a particular period of time in history.
- 3) Third, since human knowledge is intuitive and thus creative and since speech acts are known while they are being performed, human knowledge is mental, creative and purposeful, always created because the human subject aims at achieving something.
- 4) Fourth, since human knowledge is intuitive human subjects separate themselves from the mental image representing the thing known. Because of this human knowledge in itself is transferable just because it is an image of itself.

8. Types of Sciences

Because of the peculiarity of the human act of knowing and thus the peculiarity of the human reality and human free activities it is necessary to define human sciences as different from physical or natural sciences. There are three types of sciences: a) natural, physical or positive sciences studying objects or things conceived as objects (physics, chemistry, geology, etc.); b) analytical sciences, those dealing with imagined but objectified objects considered as existing in themselves. The object of analytical sciences is mental, the outcome of imagination. Because of this analytical sciences cannot find any contradiction or exception in the objects studied. They are exclusively *a priori*, deductive with no verification in the real but demonstration based on the very postulates invented in them (mathematics, geometry and the numbers); and c) human sciences that study human manifestations, that is, human creations and human free activities (philosophy, history, language, the arts, painting, literature, sculpture, music, etc.). Natural, physical and positive sciences are made on the base of *synthetic a priori statements*, that is, they are deductive starting with an intuition made into a synthetic *a priori* statement after a preliminary verification, this one being made into a concept and this one into an assumption and a theory. Facts established in terms of the theory are to be verified in the real, that is, in experience (Kant 2004). If the theory is verified in the real the theory is true (Popper 2002).

From my point of view analytical sciences deal with the possibilities and capacities of the human intellect. Postulates demonstrated in analytical sciences represent the capacity of the human intellect by means of the virtuosity of the postulate itself. The application of the postulates of analytical sciences to natural physical and positive sciences has prompted the

development of these ones thus unifying sciences to a certain extent.

Human sciences, which study human free activities and the human reality, are based on *analytic* and *synthetic a priori statements* with a peculiarity: statements in human sciences are primarily corroborated because they deal with things previously known as contents of conscience. In this sense the universal is known because of an interior experience (Coseriu 1993: 30). Because of this the only means to study human sciences (philosophy, linguistics, literature, history, the Arts, creation in general) is interpreting the object of study in terms of the human life particularly in terms of the human act of knowing, that is, justifying the thing having being made with freedom purposefully (Coseriu 1988). Human sciences then are *hermeneutics*, that is, interpretation (Humboldt, Ortega y Gasset, Coseriu, Di Cesare).

The problem of the separation of human sciences as different from natural physical or positive sciences was solved differently in the history of thought. Aristotle introduced four types of causes in the study of things: first, the entity or *essence*, that is, the reason why; second, the *material* something is made in; third, the origin from which the movement of the thing studied comes, that is, the *agent* or the *efficient* cause; and fourth, that reason because of which or for which the movement is produced, that is, the *purposeful causes* (Physics II, 3 & 7). For Coseriu, when in human studies purposeful causes appear these ones are determining. Purposeful causes are only possible if the subject deciding what to do is free (Coseriu 1988). In modern times G. Vico (1668-1744), contrary to the attitude of Descartes (1596-1650) who defended to achieve truth with reason thus looking for clear and distinct ideas (*idea clara et distincta*) starting with intuition (*intuito*= the synthesis of simple ideas), wanted to reach truth in science with *certainty*. Similar to God who can understand the world because He has created it, for Vico, Man can understand only those things he has created (Ferrater Mora, *Diccionario de filosofia*). Since facts in human sciences are established on things created by human subjects themselves, for Vico, objective *verum* and subjective *certum* coincide (Coseriu 1986b: 70). Coseriu following Husserl and Hegel defends the so-called *original intuitive knowledge* in human sciences. Original knowledge has to do with the conception human subjects have about them themselves and their free actions. With this, for Coseriu, theory appears in human sciences before, during and after empirical verification. Before verification as a primary delimitation of facts; during empirical verification as the foundation and settings of that empirical verification; and after empirical verification as a theory made clear, corrected, enriched and perfected with empirical verification (Coseriu 1999: 36). For Ortega y Gasset, anything made by Man can be more or less authentic, that is, it may have a certain degree of reality (Ortega y Gasset OC, VI, 156n). Because of this he proposed to study the degree of reality of human studies through what he called the search for the radical reality (Ortega y Gasset 1996: 40-41). Karl Popper proposed the so-called problem of demarcation as criterion to study the different objects: “finding a criterion which would enable us to distinguish between the empirical sciences on the one hand, and mathematics and logic as well as ‘metaphysical’ systems on the other” (Popper 2002: 11).

9. Problems in Linguistic Competence

The problem of linguistics competence consists in describing the knowledge of speakers to speak. This type of knowledge can be summarized in the activity of speaking. Since speaking is speaking in a particular language the description of linguistic competence is the description

of the means used to express their ideas, purposes and aims. Speaking involves speaking and understanding, speaking, saying and knowing, a mental activity developed by individual subjects. Because of this linguistic competence involves four problems:

- A. The identification of speaking, what is linguistic competence? What does linguistic competence consist in?
- B. The contents of speaking: what does linguistic competence consist of?
- C. The nature of speaking: what is the character of linguistic competence?
- D. The configuration of speaking: is linguistic competence structured?

These problems will be studied separately.

10. Conclusions

Language, a language and linguistic competence do not have concrete existence (Coseriu 1986a: 27). They constitute mental realities, the outcome of an act of knowing. They are contents of conscience of facts intuited and created by human subjects. Because of this they constitute the original knowledge known by speakers before it is executed.

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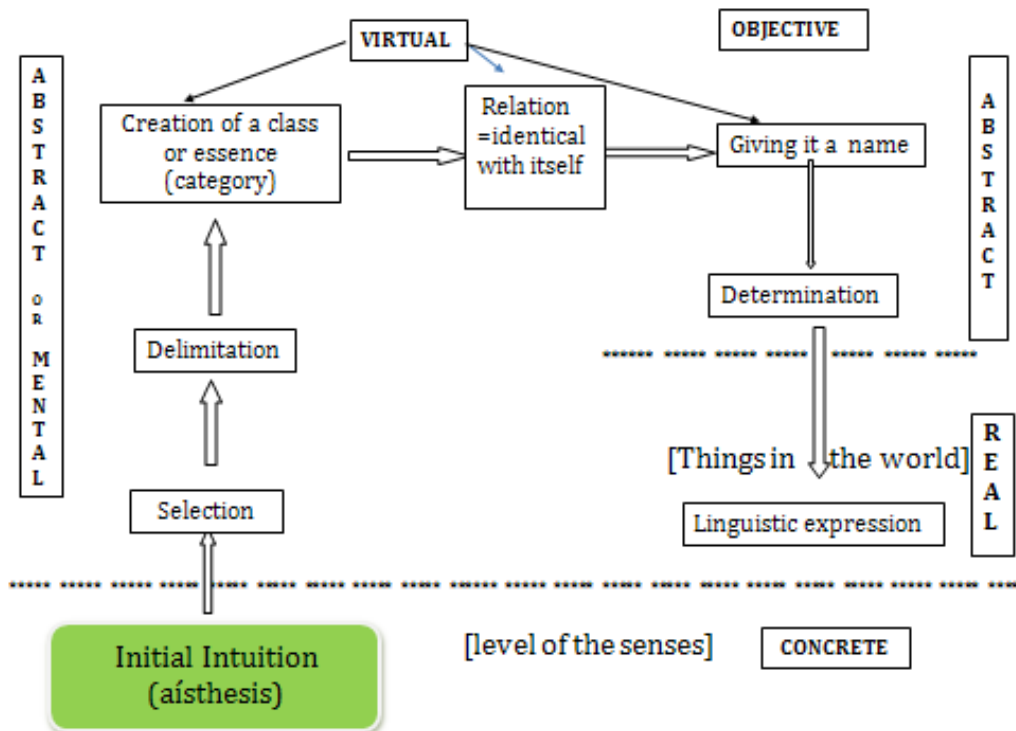
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Appendix I. The speech act as an act of knowing



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