

**REPLY TO DEVITT\***

NENAD MIŠČEVIĆ

*ABSTRACT*

*I agree completely with Devitt, first, that people do immediately understand sentences presented to them, that this understanding goes together with perceiving the sentence in question (pronounced or written), and that it demands an explanation. Devitt himself stresses the involvement of competence in the process, and I agree. But, if the competence is involved, why is voice-of-competence view on the wrong track? And the view connects well with findings reported in psycholinguistic literature. Of course, there are several very broad areas that are sufficiently specific to allow for hypothesis of a specialized competence and about which people have intuitions. One is human general understanding of number(s) that is quite specialized, and can be lost, as a consequence of brain damage, without impairment in other areas. The next is our spatial competence, presumably producing our spatial-geometrical intuitions. Coming closer to the domain of philosophy, there are several normative areas, the paradigmatic one being the moral domain (and I guess the aesthetic one). The voice-of-competence view can and should be generalized to all of them.*

**Keywords:** *Moderate Voice of Competence (MoVoC), simulation, competence*

I am deeply honored by Michael's readiness to contribute to the present volume. He and I have been discussing the issues about the nature of language faculty for a very long time, all this against the common background of a naturalistic approach in philosophy; I have learned a lot from him, and each round of the discussion is full of new and exciting surprises. This time, there are two topics in the oven: the disagreements about the nature and the role of competence, which is a huge topic, and the almost-disagreement about the role of language understanding in our respective views. However, I want to add a third issue, the generality of MoVoC proposal.

## 1. The Moderate Voice of Competence (MoVoC) proposal

Michael called Chomsky inspired theories of the role of linguistic competence “Voice of Competence” theories. I liked his choice of the name a lot, and decided to call my own proposal The Moderate Voice of Competence (MoVoC) proposal. In the present paper Michael comes with several accusations against MoVoC. He lists six points. Let me start with the first three. The first has to do with insufficiency of detail needed to turn the voice of competence hunch into a real theory. Here is the application of his general criticism to my particular proposal, from the paper above:

Well, concerning the first point, Nenad has, with his flow-chart, provided a bit more than a hand wave to explain how the allegedly embodied principles yield the intuitions. But it seems to me only a *very little* bit more and not nearly enough. We need an account of *how* Ann’s competence which, we are supposing, produces strings like (W) but not (W\*), *also* “comes out with some kind of answer, some Yes or No signal” about the acceptability of these strings. *How* does competence move from (1) in the flow-chart to the “immediate spontaneous answer” of (2)? Why should we even suppose that there is such a move? I don’t see any explanation in Nenad’s discussion.

Second, again to my knowledge, no argument has ever been given for VoC until Georges Rey’s recent attempt (2013) which, I argue (2013), fails (see references in Michael’s paper above). Concerning the second point, Nenad (2009, 2012) has produced an argument for VoC and against ordinarism, to his great credit. But, in my view, Jutronic (this volume) shows that this argument fails.

Here is his third objection:

So far as I can see, Nenad has not addressed my third point, a point also emphasized by Jutronic: whichever way VoC is understood, *given what else we know about the mind*, VoC seems most unlikely to be true.

I have decided to follow Michael’s reference to Dunja Jutronic, and address the first three questions in my reply to her, which thus becomes reply to her and Michael together. (I hope also thus to avoid repetition, and be able to stick to the usual limitations of space).

Let me now list the additional three questions, raised by Michael long time ago (Devitt, references: 2006a,b, 2010b, 2013), and reiterated here:

- (i) If competence really spoke to us, why would it not use the language of the embodied theory and why would it say so little?
- (ii) There would be a disanalogy between the intuitions provided by the language faculty and by perceptual modules.

- (iii) Developmental evidence suggests that the ability to speak a language and the ability to have intuitions about the language are quite distinct, the former being acquired in early childhood, the latter, in middle childhood as part of a *general* cognitive development. (Forthcoming)

An argument for VoC should confront these implausibilities.

Let me try to do it. Here is Devitt's additional question one: "If competence really spoke to us, why would it not use the language of the embodied theory and why would it say so little?"

Well, this is how processing devices in our heads and on our tables speak to us. My laptop communicates with me in Slovenian and English, not in its native code. Our spatial competence is sensitive to topological transformations, but does not use the professional vocabulary of topology when informing me about my perceived surrounding. I guess that this is generally the way our central nervous system works, and neurologists and evolutionary epistemologists will surely have a long story to tell about the reasons and the history behind this phenomenon. But it is not a specific problem that would tell against language competence in particular.

Why would it say "so little"? There is an element of misunderstanding here: when talking about competence I talked only about one kind of task, namely deciding if the given string constitutes a sentence of my language. The example of language perception-understanding introduces a lot of new elements, and we shall come to this soon. For the moment, notice that even in my original kind of cases, deciding about the grammaticality of a given string, what competence says is not so impoverished. You ask me about one presumed sentence of my mother tongue, the competence says Yes, the next No, the following again Yes; if a competence can do it for thousands of sentences in the due course of time, it is not so little. Take Michael's example:

- (1) John seems to Bill to want to help himself.

On the standard Chomskyan account competence produces a structural description (SD), a tree where "himself" is tied to John; this information enables the hearer to understand who is the "himself" who is the object of the helping intended. The hearer also understands that it is not Bill who wants to do it, rather that Bill is confronted with this seeming about John, and what John wants. Is this little? And the like for tens of thousands of sentences.

The additional question two: what about the "disanalogy between the intuitions provided by the language faculty and by perceptual modules"? I don't get it. Why would the MoVoC proposal be committed to any such disanalogy?

In the case of language perception, for instance auditory one, it is plausible that language faculty either completes the work of perceptual system (if you take “perceptual” very narrowly), or forms a late stage of the perceptual work (if you take “perception” to involve linguistic understanding).

The additional question three. The “ability to speak a language and the ability to have intuitions about the language are quite distinct”; the first appears in early childhood, the second later “as part of a *general* cognitive development.” Doesn’t his point to a separation of intuition-capacity from linguistic competence? Not necessarily. Psycholinguist offer various theories; here is an exemplary proposal that ties the acquisition of full competence to a later stage:

However, there are two qualifications that need to be made about the indirect and complex relationship between form and meaning in linguistic expressions. The first concerns language users who might be described as ‘not fully competent’, such as very young children, second language learners, or aphasics who have lost access to part of their language competence. Such language users may resort to simplified strategies or heuristics for sentence processing. An example of a sentence processing heuristic is the ‘agent first’ strategy, which says: ‘assume that the first noun phrase (NP) you encounter in a sentence is the “agent” of the “action” of the verb’. John C. L. Ingram (2007) *Neurolinguistics An Introduction to Spoken Language Processing and its Disorders*, CUP, p. 18.

Let me finally mention a somewhat puzzling formulation from Michael’s criticism of G. Rey in his “Linguistic intuitions are not “the voice of competence” (in *Philosophical Methodology: The Armchair or the Laboratory?* ed. Matthew Haug, London: Routledge.) He mentions properties like morphemic constituency, syntactic structure and logical form” and discusses the question of information related to these properties that might be contained in the output of the language module. He doubts that the language module has a structural description output “that *specifies* those properties” and tentatively proposes rather than the output that *has* those properties. I keep being puzzled. The input sentence already has these properties, and central processor cannot decode them; why would it function better with an input from module having the same un-decodable properties?

## 2. Simulation, production, understanding

Let me now pass to the second topic, the role of linguistic competence in speech understanding (and understanding of written material as well). Michael writes:

Before getting to his criticism, Nenad gives an interestingly different account of how a speaker begins the process leading to her intuitive judgment: she “might try to say the target sentence to herself, she engages in a ‘tentative production’, sometimes described as ‘simulation’” (2006: 526). So, where I talk of the speaker questioning herself about both the production and the understanding of the expression, Nenad talks only of production. And Nenad introduces talk of “simulation”.

I now think that both these aspects of Nenad’s account are mistaken, for reasons I will give in a moment.

As I mentioned above, this is a bit of misunderstanding. I did not mean to limit the role of MoVoC to grammaticality decisions; I just limited myself to discussing this issue, since it provided central examples about which Chomskyans and their critics disagree. So I agree very much with what Michael says in the sequel:

Before that, however, I must give two developments that I have already made to my ordinarism.

What I am emphasizing here is that a person’s linguistic intuitions are *perceptual* judgments that can be as immediate as those of the art expert and Braden, without the conscious and deliberate exercise of her competence in what, following Nenad, I am here calling “simulations”.

Yes, I agree completely. To return to John and Bill example, the competent hearer normally ‘hears’ the sentence as claiming that what seems to John is that Bill wants to help himself, Bill. Immediate understanding of sentences in one’s mother tongue is very close to perception; let me describe it as following immediately after “hearing” in the very narrow sense of the term, call it hearing-n, and thus as completing the “full hearing”, call it hearing-f. So much we can agree upon, I hope. The question now concerns the role of competence in such hearing-f. Here is Michael:

Just as the paleontologist’s, art expert’s, and Braden’s years of experience and education have made them quick at deploying their concepts of *pig’s jawbone*, *fake*, and *fault*, respectively, so too a speaker’s years of experience and education is likely to make her quick at wielding her concept of *grammaticality*, at least in simple cases. Thus Ann may well arrive at her intuitions about (W) and (W\*) without needing the help of a “simulation”.

The following example, popular in discussions of linguistic intuitions (see, for example, Fitzgerald 2010: 139), both exemplifies such immediate perceptual judgments and shows that they can be wrong:

Many more people have been to France than I have.

When a competent speaker is presented with this she is likely to judge immediately that it is grammatical. Yet it isn't, as will become apparent to her as soon as she tests it against words simply makes no sense.

A word of caution is necessary here. To say that a speaker may perceive that a string has a certain syntactic property without *a conscious and deliberate* exercise of her competence, without a "simulation", is not to say that her competence is not involved in her perception.

End of quotation of Michael. As I said, I agree completely with Michael, first, that people do immediately understand sentences presented to them, that this understanding goes together with perceiving the sentence in question (pronounced or written), and that it demands an explanation. (Earlier in my work, I concentrated upon the case most popular in the Chomskian tradition, the one of checking whether a sentence belongs to the speaker's language. It is here that I stressed the role of simulation, since in this context linguists normally mention speaker's "saying the sentence" to herself.) Had I been talking about subject's understanding of someone else's sentence, I might not have appealed to simulation. I also agree with the last passage of the quoted text:

A word of caution is necessary here. To say that a speaker may perceive that a string has a certain syntactic property without *a conscious and deliberate* exercise of her competence, without a "simulation", is not to say that her competence is not involved in her perception.

But I wonder: how does this fit with Devitt's argument against VoC? He asks, "If competence really spoke to us, why would it not use the language of the embodied theory and why would it say so little?" But, if the competence is involved, as the just quoted passage suggests, why is VoC on the wrong track?

So, let me briefly defend the hypothesis that the "perception" option is not only compatible with the MoVoC, but connects well with findings reported in psycholinguistic literature. Here is Michael again:

- (1) In an understanding test, a speaker is consciously aware of the difference understanding a string and not understanding it. In a production test, a speaker is consciously aware of repeating the string and then, it seems, seeing if she understands it. By "experience" I simply have in mind these mental processes of which the person is thus consciously aware.

The person having these experiences goes on to judge whether they are of something grammatical. Such perceptual judgments are likely to be quite reliable for she will have acquired her ability to deploy her concept of *grammaticality* by reflecting on such experiences.

Devitt points to his development of this idea in his (2013), and says

In understanding (1) /i.e. the Bill-John sentence-NM/, we hear it as having those linguistic features and not others *in that*, as a result of all the processing in the language system, we come up with a representation that *has* those features and not others; for example, it *has* a feature that takes ‘himself’ to co-refer with ‘John’ not ‘Bill’. What I do find very implausible is that, in hearing (1) in this way, the central processor *thereby* has the informational basis for the intuitive judgment that ‘himself’ co-refers with ‘John’. We have been given no reason to believe that. Hearing an utterance in a certain way is one thing, judging that it has certain properties, another.

Let me note that the naïve speaker will of course not use the term “co-refer” (I hope we agree on this). So, her understanding (and the intuitive judgment) probably says that “himself” here has to do with John, John is the object of the wanting to help. Now, two questions for Michael:

First, the representation that has this relevant feature (himself=John) must depend on a relatively complex tree-like structure somewhere in the mind; it is probably not present in the central processor (too specialized for it); so where else can it be but in the competence-parser?

Second, I agree that CP does not have “the informational basis for the intuitive judgment that ‘himself’ co-refers with ‘John’.” So, what does have it? The speaker comes up with the intuition (formulated in a non-professional way), and the intuition is correct. Where does it come from, if the CP does not have the informational basis? Where from, if not from competence-parser?

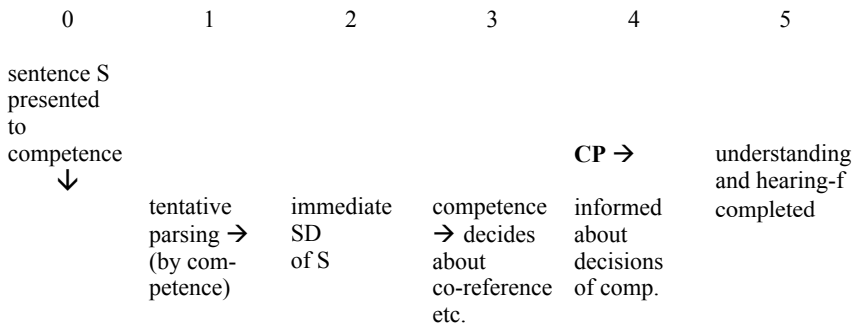
(2) We might metaphorically describe reflecting on experiences in the understanding test as “watching the competence attempt to understand a string” but we should not describe reflecting on experiences in the production test as “watching the competence producing the string”. For, as just noted, the competence does not produce the string, the CP does. So, the first stage of Nenad’s flow-chart for the production test is wrong: there is no “tentative production (by competence)”.

Yes and No. The first stage as I described it is typical for the kind of case for which I introduced it, namely for the context in which the subject is asked (or asks herself) Is this sentence OK? (Is it a sentence of my language, and the like). It does not look the same in the context of routine understanding, and here Devitt is right about the obvious fact that there is a

difference. We again disagree about the main question: how does subject's cognitive apparatus proceed in the understanding. Here is Michael's proposal:

(3) Perception of the string, with or without an understanding or production test, provides information to a speaker's CP about the properties of the string in just the same way that perception of a white stone, marble statue, and serve provide information to a paleontologist, art expert, and Vic Braden about the properties of their respective entities. Perception, perhaps accompanied by some introspection, is a way of learning about the world.

I agree that there is an analogy: The three heroes, paleontologist, art expert, and Vic Braden are experts in their respective areas. I, a naïve Croatian speaker, might be as good in recognizing and understanding the sentences of my language as an art expert is good at recognizing fakes. But there is difference in detail. How do you know this piece of art is a fake? Well, here are my reasons, the expert hopefully answers, and lists some sophisticated indications for this judgment. His judgment is based on expertise, acquired by academic study, with a lot of explicit material, all worked out by his CP, stored in his memory and accessible to his consciousness. My naïve linguistic judgment is very different: I cannot draw for you the parsing tree for (1) (nor for its Croatian equivalent). "I am not at home among trees." (to paraphrase J.R.R. Tolkien's, *The Fellowship of the Ring*). I have no memories of having learned the parsing trees for relevant language(s). The informational basis for *my* judgment is not there, in the field of my CP. It has to be somewhere else. Why not in the parser? This is what MoVoC suggests. Here is a possibility, and a schematic flowchart:



I hope to develop it further, with big thanks to Michael, of course (see also the reply to Dunja).



### 3. MoVoC Generalized

Let me finally place my linguistic MoVoC proposal in a wider context (see also reply to Dunja, the last section). There are several very broad areas that are sufficiently specific to allow for hypothesis of a specialized competence and about which people have intuitions.

One is human general understanding of number(s) that is quite specialized, and can be lost, as a consequence of brain damage, without impairment in other areas. People do have elementary numerical intuitions, and they show intricate patterns of development. This does suggest numerical competence, as a specialized capacity, and as a source of elementary numerical (arithmetical) intuitions.

The next is our spatial competence, presumably producing our spatial-geometrical intuitions. Both arithmetical and spatial intuitions are crucial for early stages of our understanding of our surrounding, and continue to play some role in the more advanced frameworks of science, in particular in TEs, like the famous Einstein's ones.

Coming closer to the domain of philosophy, there are several normative areas, the paradigmatic one being the moral domain (and I guess the aesthetic one). We do form moral judgments, which often have recognizably intuitional character, with self-evidence and immediacy as the main features. Again, the pathology can often parallel the one in linguistic area: collapse of moral capacities as a result of specific damages to the brain, and so on. (Moral judgments also play a central role in our understanding of politics, and in political philosophy). Aesthetic judgments of taste come quite close.

I am less sure about epistemology and metaphysics, but I would stress that our central epistemological judgments are in fact normative, and in many respects parallel to the moral ones. This points to the availability of epistemic competence, presumably related to the acceptability of evidence and of testimony.

The most speculative hypothesis about specialized competence would concern out metaphysical intuitions: modal, mind-body related, and categories (general kinds) related ones. Modality seems the best candidate: people do make all sorts of modal judgments, and the jump from factual-actual to possible, impossible, necessary and so on is a most common phenomenon in everyday conversation, as well as in science. Again, judgments seem to be specialized, and the most basic among them do have typical features connected with intuition. So, we may, and perhaps even should, apply the MoVoC proposal to them: their basic source is competence, but it can be challenged and modified by empirical evidence.

What about other metaphysical areas? I would go with Austin, replacing his “words” with “knowledge” and assume that our basic metaphysical ‘knowledge’ “embodies all the distinctions men have found worth drawing, and the connections they have found worth making, in the lifetimes of many generations: these surely are likely to be more numerous, more sound, since they have stood up to the long test of the survival of the fittest, and more subtle, at least in all ordinary and reasonably practical matters, than any that you or I are likely to think up on the spot. (“A Plea For Excuses”, in *Philosophical Papers*, 1961, p. 182).

In short, the MoVoC proposal seems to be generalizable to many crucial areas, and in particular to all central areas of philosophy.