

LANGUAGE AND THE FORMATION OF GENERAL CONCEPTS:
THE SECOND LOGICAL INVESTIGATION IN A GENETIC LIGHT

1. INTRODUCTION

I suspect the title of this paper may raise a few eyebrows. We all know that Second Investigation does not contain a genetic model of concept formation. To the contrary, in the Second Investigation Husserl constantly attacks the British empiricists for substituting accounts of psychological genesis for phenomenological analysis, and even suggests that the two are mutually exclusive.¹ We also all know that there is no discussion of the role of language in concept formation in the Second Investigation, in the *Logical Investigations* as a whole, or anywhere else in Husserl for that matter. Is not Husserl famous (or rather infamous) as that 20th century philosopher who failed to make the linguistic turn, and so who would have little or nothing to say about how conceptual thought involves words? One could even argue that for all his criticism of the empiricists in the Second Investigation and elsewhere, Husserl remains locked in the very same empiricist conception of the pre-linguistic genesis of concepts that proponents of the linguistic turn have challenged so effectively. For example, Wilfrid Sellars has branded as a version of the Myth of the Given the classical empiricist view that concepts are formed on the basis of perceptions of particulars and associations among these particulars. On the empiricist account, Sellars holds, language enters in only at the end, as a set of convention sounds supervening upon a solipsistic, pre-linguistic logical space of meaning. Sellars opposes this view with his psychological nominalism, which maintains that: (1) the perception of *p* presupposes possessing the concept of *p*, and so cannot be its genetic origin; and (2) the acquisition of the concept of *p* presupposes a complex network of other concepts and social initiation into pre-existing language-games.² For Sellars, the linguistic turn means that language is the pre-condition for the most basic forms of cognition, concepts, and intentionality. He defines psychological nominalism as the

view that prior to language, there is no awareness of the logical space of particulars, sorts, resemblances, facts, and no intentionality at all.³

If the Sellarsian form of the linguistic turn is right, then the prospects of deriving something useful from Husserl for the relation between language and concepts could seem pretty bleak. Minimally, Husserl shares the empiricist view that the attentive perception of individuals and their individual features occurs prior to and as a condition of the formation of general concepts. Further, although Husserl does not explicitly deny that language plays a role in the formation of general concepts, he also does not give an actual account of the role of verbal language in ideation. So arguably, ideation *could* be interpreted as an essentially solipsistic, non-verbal process according to Husserl.

Yet despite the validity of some of the objections against Husserl raised from the point of view of the linguistic turn, and despite his own distaste for genetic analyses in the Second Investigation, I will argue that certain insights from Husserl are quite useful for addressing the question of the relation between language and conceptualization. I also believe these insights can help us understand the role of language in a deeper and more adequate way than is generally done by advocates of the linguistic turn, including Sellars himself. One central contribution is Husserl's analysis of what conceptualization is (and what it is not). The difficulty of arriving at a clear understanding of the nature of general concepts is made evident by Husserl's critique in the Second Investigation of the many wrong turns of the empiricists. Lacking such an understanding, it is impossible to give an accurate determination of the relation of language to concept. Further, Husserl's own later genetic approach emphasizes that there are many levels and stages of conceptualization. This approach corrects the tendency to an all-or-nothing notion of conceptual awareness characteristic of Sellars and others under the influence of a certain interpretation of the Kantian distinction between concepts and intuition. The Sellarsian–Kantian reasoning runs: intuitions without concepts are blind, concepts presuppose and are formed on the basis of language, intuitions without language are blind, all intentionality is linguistic. Arguably, it is the all-or-nothing approach that founds the claim that *all* conceptual awareness presupposes language. One chooses as paradigmatic what is in fact only a relatively sophisticated type of conceptuality that does in fact presuppose language, and claims that there is no other kind. But if there are more primitive and genetically prior forms of conceptualization, then this approach really does not answer the *general* question of whether concepts presuppose language. Further, this approach says nothing about how and at what point language enters in, or precisely what changes it effects in pre-linguistic intentionality. That is,

the Sellarsian-Kantian version of the linguistic turn does not provide an account of the *genesis* of conceptual awareness, the genesis of language, or of the interrelations between the two.⁴

Indeed, I would argue that a serious failing of the Sellarsian-Kantian approach is that it undercuts the very possibility of providing an adequate genetic account of concepts and language. For if we start with the view that there is no intentionality at all prior to language, how can language and concept acquisition ever get off the ground? On this view, we must assume that at the start of language acquisition there is no attentive awareness, but only the stimulus-response production of sounds. Yet how can even the most rule-governed production of sounds move a system across the abyss from blind stimulus-response behavior to vision, attentive awareness, and conceptual thought?⁵ By contrast, in the mature Husserl we find a detailed genetic account of the various stages of pre-predicative and predicative judgment on the basis of which conceptual judgments first emerge. The idea that there is at least some pre-linguistic intentionality and that this gradually becomes conceptual and linguistic intentionality is far more plausible than the view that language and concepts emerge out of a system with no intentionality at all.⁶

In the first part of my paper I will set forth a genetic account of the stages of conceptualization. I will also show how the Second Investigation can be read in the light of *Experience and Judgment* as contributing to such a genetic account. In the second part I will discuss the role of language in this genesis. It is true that even the mature Husserl has little explicitly to say about the genesis of language, or how language enters into the genesis of concepts. Therefore in the second part of my paper I will draw upon other sources (especially the developmental psychologist Vygotsky) to develop an account of the role of language at the various stages of conceptualization outlined in Part I. Although I will examine certain empirically-based developmental models, it should be stressed that I do so only as a starting-point and illustration of my analysis. In fact I ultimately support a view quite different from that of Vygotsky. My concern here is in any case not the empirical developmental question of how concepts *in fact* emerge, or of what role language *in fact* plays in their genesis. Rather, my concern is the philosophical question of the *necessary* genetic conditions for the emergence of concepts, and the *necessary* role (if any) of language. In this sense, I maintain the distinction dear to Husserl between a psychological and a phenomenological genetic account. However, I think that accounts of empirical genesis can at least give us clues about what would be an adequate philosophical account. Minimally, we would want the necessary relations asserted by the philosophical model to be consistent with the



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