

**teorema**

Vol. XXXIX/3, 2020, pp. 55-78

ISSN: 0210-1602

[BIBLID 0210-1602 (2020) 39:3; pp. 55-78]

## Are Inner Speech Utterances Actions?

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### RESUMEN

Argumento en este artículo que, para que experimentemos las preferencias del habla interna como instancias de uso de lenguaje significativo, tenemos que considerarlas como actos de habla. Sin embargo, argumento también que las preferencias del habla interna no pueden ser actos de habla puesto que en absoluto son acciones. Nuestra experiencia ordinaria del habla interna depende de una mala comprensión de su naturaleza.

PALABRAS CLAVE: *habla interna, teoría de la acción, teoría de los actos de habla, acción mental.*

### ABSTRACT

I argue that, in order for us to experience inner speech utterances as instances of meaningful language use, we must treat them as speech acts. I also argue, however, that inner speech utterances cannot be speech acts because they are not actions at all. Our ordinary experience of inner speech depends upon a misapprehension of its nature.

KEYWORDS: *Inner Speech, Action Theory, Speech Act Theory, Mental Action.*

### INTRODUCTION

It is obvious that some inner speech utterances are actions. If you consciously decide to produce the inner speech utterance, ‘Grass is green’, and then do so, you perform an action – just as you would perform an action if you consciously decided to produce the utterance externally and then did so. What about the inner speech utterances which form parts of the ordinary inner monologue, the ones which we do not consciously plan to produce? Are these actions?<sup>1</sup>

Why does the question matter? Here are four reasons:

1. The question is important for understanding the relationship between inner speech and interpersonal speech. In interpersonal speech, we perform ‘speech acts’: we assert, ask, promise, etc.

Speech act theorists disagree about many things, but none would dispute this: speech acts are actions. So, if our ordinary inner speech utterances are not actions, they cannot be speech acts. This would seriously complicate any attempt to understand inner speech by analogy to interpersonal speech.

2. The question is relevant to suggestions that inner speech facilitates the acquisition of self-knowledge, i.e., knowledge of one's own mental states. It has been suggested multiple times that one way that we acquire self-knowledge is by interpreting our own inner speech, which we do in the same way that we interpret the external speech of others [e.g., Ryle (1949), Carruthers (2009), (2011), Cassam (2014)]. But, extending the point above, interpreting the external speech of others involves treating their utterances as speech acts. Determining what people are doing with their words is as important as knowing what their words mean. If inner speech utterances are not actions and, therefore, not speech acts, it is hard to see that we could acquire self-knowledge by interpreting our inner speech in the same way that we interpret interpersonal speech.
3. It is important to understanding the relationship between inner speech and private speech, i.e., audible self-directed speech. Plausibly, inner speech is an internal version of private speech, but there is a striking difference. Neurotypical adults and children beyond a certain age have significant control over their private speech. Even someone who produces a lot of private speech can stop doing so, e.g., when taking an exam. By contrast, it is extremely difficult to make the internal monologue stop. One common characteristic of actions is that you can stop performing them if you choose. It would be a challenge for the view that inner speech is internal private speech if private speech utterances are generally actions, but inner speech utterances are generally not.
4. Martínez-Manrique & Vicente (2015) distinguish two ways of analyzing inner speech, by focusing on the phonological format in which it occurs and by focusing on the action of producing it, and they highlight advantages of the latter approach. For example, they believe that this best allows us to understand how inner speech utterances can be meaningful. If we focus on the phono-

logical format of inner speech, we would have to make sense of how a phonological representation can apparently also have semantic content – why it does not just represent how a particular utterance would sound, if spoken aloud [see also Langland-Hassan (2014)]. However, if we focus on the action of producing inner speech, we can understand the content of an inner speech utterance as what the individual intended to express. This approach would obviously need to be reconsidered if inner speech utterances are not actions.

So, determining whether inner speech utterances are actions could be extremely profitable. It could illuminate a lot of issues. My objectives in this paper are to demonstrate 1) that our ordinary experience of our inner speech utterances as instances of meaningful language use is only possible if we treat them as speech acts, but 2) that inner speech utterances are in fact *not* actions of any kind – and therefore not speech acts.<sup>2</sup> Our ordinary experience of inner speech depends upon a misapprehension of the nature of the phenomenon.<sup>3,4</sup>

Two things have to be said before beginning. First, I emphasize that my concern is with those inner speech utterances which are *not* obviously actions. Again, you can consciously decide to produce an inner speech utterance and then do so; the resulting utterance is an action. My focus is on the inner speech utterances which form parts of the ordinary inner monologue; the ones which accompany our everyday activities; the ones we produce without seeming to think about it. Mostly, when I use the term ‘inner speech utterances’ without further specification, it will be these I am referring to.

Second, the work that I will draw on in arguing that inner speech utterances are not actions is classic work from action theory which focusses on physical actions, e.g., Davidson (1963) and Frankfurt (1978). If inner speech utterances are actions, they are mental actions. There might then be a worry that traditional action theory cannot provide any appropriate test for determining if inner speech utterances are actions. Other mental states often mentioned as candidates for mental actions include judging, deciding, and directing attention. If these are actions, they are not at all like any physical actions that we perform. It is certainly an open position that traditional action theory is not well-suited to analyzing mental states such as these; maybe it is also not well-suited to analyzing inner speech.

My approach, relying on traditional action theory, is justified for three separate reasons. First, I will rely only on very high-level principles from traditional action theory. Even if mental actions have some different characteristics from physical actions, one could hardly deny that they also instantiate the most fundamental features of physical actions,<sup>5</sup> if one wants to say that they are actions at all. Second, inner speech seems to have much more in common with external speech than it does with judging, deciding, directing attention etc. It *does* closely resemble a kind of physical action. Even if traditional action theory is ill-suited to analyzing other mental states, it does not follow that it is ill-suited to analyzing inner speech. Third, if it is true that we treat our inner speech utterances as speech acts, and that speech acts are actions on traditional conceptions of action, then what will really be of interest is whether our inner speech utterances are also actions on the terms of those traditional conceptions.<sup>6</sup>

I turn now to my first claim: that our ordinary experience of inner speech utterances, as meaningful linguistic items, requires treating them as speech acts.<sup>7</sup>

### I. A TACIT ASSUMPTION

The literature on speech acts is enormous and there are many ways speech act theory can be developed. Harris et al. (2018) identify five different groups of theories. I will come back to the various iterations of speech act theory but, to get started, here is one simple development of it:

1. Many utterances are intentional actions. When utterances are actions performed with intentions of the appropriate kind, they are speech acts.
2. The ‘appropriate kind’ of intentions are intentions to express some content with some particular force. Expressing involves, e.g., saying words aloud or writing them in a letter. Content is propositional or, at least, semantic. Force is the mode in which content is expressed, e.g., asserting, asking, promising.
3. Speech acts can be performed sincerely or insincerely. For example, an assertion is performed sincerely if the speaker believes the proposition expressed.

4. If a listener surmises that an utterance is produced with intentions of the appropriate kind, this determines how they will interpret the utterance. For example, if a listener surmises that a speaker intended to express a proposition that they believe, this will incline the listener to conclude that the speaker believes the proposition.
5. A speech act can have effects beyond a listener's interpretation of it. For example, an assertion may not only incline a listener to believe that the speaker believes some proposition. If the listener believes that the speaker would only believe the proposition if it were true, the speaker's asserting it might also persuade the listener of something that follows logically from the proposition.
6. A speaker might perform a speech act hoping to produce some such effect, but whether they succeed will also depend on other factors. For example, whether a speaker succeeds in persuading a listener of some conclusion by asserting a premise entailing it will depend on the listener's rationality.

All of this can be demonstrated with an example. Suppose someone says at a departmental meeting, 'I still have eighty exams to grade'. Ordinarily, the speaker could be interpreted as having done various things, because certain intentions could reasonably be attributed to them. They have performed the physical action of speaking aloud. They have expressed the proposition that they still have eighty exams to grade and they have done so with the force of an assertion. Possibly, they will also persuade colleagues that, e.g., they are not available to assist with certain administrative tasks.

By contrast, consider the phenomenon of coprolalia, i.e., the involuntary production of obscene utterances, symptomatic of some tic disorders. Someone suffering from coprolalia who produces such an utterance is not performing a physical action; a tic is no more an action than a heart attack is. Moreover, they should not be interpreted as expressing any content with any force, even if we know that the utterance could be so interpreted in a different context. They could only be interpreted as expressing something if they could be interpreted as performing the physical action – and they cannot.

Does speech act theory transfer to inner speech?<sup>8</sup> Let us stay for now with the simple version sketched above. There are some obvious

complications. First, when we produce inner speech, we do not perform the physical action of speaking aloud; we produce internal auditory representations. For present purposes, this is not significant. We can just allow that these internal auditory representations suffice for 'expression'. Second, while speaker and hearer are distinct in interpersonal speech, this is not so in the case of inner speech. So, if we sought to elaborate the different kinds of force with which inner speech utterances might conceivably be produced, we would have to do so without reference to a distinct interlocutor. But this does not mean that inner speech utterances do not have force; it just means that the kinds of force that they might have are different. For example, although you cannot realize an intention to convey your belief in some proposition to other people by asserting it in inner speech, perhaps you can realize an intention to make the proposition salient in your consciousness. With these points noted, we can proceed with the question: Does speech act theory, as sketched above, transfer to inner speech?

In the next section, I will argue that inner speech utterances are not actions and, therefore, not speech acts. What I will now contend, though, is that we could not experience the utterances of our ordinary internal monologues in the way that we do if we did not *treat* them as speech acts.

Consider: What would you make of the utterances in your internal monologue if you did not treat them as speech acts? An utterance produced aloud which is not treated as a speech act can only be treated as a series of sounds. It cannot be treated as expressing particular content with particular force; this would, after all, amount to treating it as a speech act. (Thought of properly, a coprolalic utterance is just a series of sounds, precisely because it is not a speech act.) Similarly, if we did not treat our inner speech utterances as speech acts, we could only treat them as auditory images, not instances of meaningful language use.<sup>9</sup>

One might pause here. In interpersonal speech, you are either speaker or listener; in inner speech, you are both. The remarks just made apply if you think of yourself as primarily listening to your inner speech. But what if you think of yourself primarily as speaker? Largely the same point applies. If someone produces an audible utterance but does not take themselves to be performing a speech act – if they believe that they do not have intentions of the appropriate kind – then they must believe that they are just producing sounds. (Setting aside coprolalia, this would be a strange thing to do, but it is certainly conceivable.) In parallel, if someone produces an inner speech utterance but does not take them-

selves to be acting on intentions of the relevant kind, then they must believe that they are just producing auditory imagery, not a linguistically meaningful utterance.

One way to see all of this is to think about inner speech utterances which are clearly not intended to express anything. Sometimes, we repeat things in inner speech so that we do not forget them, e.g., items you must remember to buy at the shops as you drive there. You just have to remember the words; if you can do that, what you will have when you arrive will be as good as a written list. Very soon, your inner speech utterances lose any meaning; you find yourself just repeating words or, more accurately, imagery of word sounds. You have no sense that you are either performing or interpreting the speech act of reminding. You are just producing and experiencing auditory imagery. Maybe such utterances are atypical, not a part of the ordinary internal monologue, but the point also applies in this latter context. If you do not treat your ordinary inner speech utterances as intended to express particular content with particular force, then you will be left with only the auditory imagery. You will have representations of word sounds, but nothing which is meaningful in the way that speech acts are meaningful.

So far, I have been taking one simple version of speech act theory as given. As mentioned above, however, speech act theory comes in different forms. Harris et al. (2018) identify five groups of speech act theories. One version, the origins of which they locate in Grice (1957), (1968), (1969), emphasizes speakers' intentions and listeners' determinations about these intentions. The simple iteration of speech act theory that I sketched above falls into this category.<sup>10</sup> I will briefly mention just two more of the groups of theories which Harris et al. (2018) identify. A version which they associate with Austin (1962), (1963), (1970) emphasizes conventions. Austin was primarily concerned with very regimented speech acts. He held that we perform speech acts by producing appropriate utterances in appropriate situations. For example, one performs the speech act of marrying by saying 'I do' in a wedding ceremony; this is the convention to which one must conform. Other, more common speech acts, such as asserting and asking, are performed when utterances are produced in conformity with certain linguistic conventions; Harris et al. point primarily to Searle (1969) for this extension of the theory. A third version (Harris et al. point to, e.g., Davis (1992), (2003)) emphasizes the mental states which utterances express, rather than the mental states which utterances are intended to induce in a listener. So, an asser-

tion is not necessarily an utterance intended to generate a belief in a listener, but it is still an action that expresses something the speaker believes.

The relevance of this review is to see that, whichever version of speech act theory one holds, one will have to accept that we can only experience our inner speech utterances as meaningful linguistic items if we treat them as speech acts. There is disagreement as to what exactly speech acts are: what mental states we are in when we perform them and how we interpret them. But there is no disagreement that, in order to experience external utterances as meaningful instances of language use, we must treat them as speech acts – *whatever exactly this turns out to mean*. Again, words spoken aloud that are not treated as speech acts – as things that the speaker does with their words – can only be treated as sounds. This will be true whether one thinks of speech acts as utterances intended to influence the mental states of others; as utterances produced in conformity with particular conventions; as utterances that express a speaker's state of mind; and on any other plausible account of speech acts. Insofar as we experience our inner speech utterances as meaningful instances of language use – and not just series of auditory images – it must be that we treat them as speech acts too. We assume, tacitly, that they are speech acts.<sup>11</sup>

But inner speech utterances can only be speech acts if they are actions. Are they?

## II. A MISTAKEN ASSUMPTION

For Strawson (2003), there are very few actions that take place in the mind. He writes:

Obviously thought involves – is – mental *activity*, but activity, whether mental, chemical or volcanic, does not always involve action. And if we consider things plainly, we find, I think, that most of our thoughts—our thought-contents—*just happen*. In this sense they are spontaneous ... Contents occur, spring up—the process is largely automatic. Even when our thoughts are most appropriate to our situation and our needs as agents, action and intention need have little or nothing to do with their occurrence [pp. 228-229; emphasizes original].

For Strawson, the only genuine actions that take place in the mind are cases of consciously initiating or directing a chain of thought and in-

stances in which we, say, consciously decide to imagine something and then do so.

Anyone who agrees with Strawson will likely need no further convincing that inner speech utterances of the kind I am concerned with are not actions. They will say that most inner speech is ‘spontaneous’. It just ‘occur[s]’; it ‘spring[s] up’.

In arguing that the utterances of our ordinary internal monologues are not actions, I will not rely on any background view about the incidence of actions in the mind generally. So, even someone who holds that we very frequently perform some kinds of actions in our minds should be able to accept my arguments, if they are persuasive. My approach will be to review the leading theories of action and show that our ordinary inner speech utterances are not actions, on any of these theories. Perhaps some of what I say could be adapted to argue that other mental states – such as judging, deciding, directing attention – are not actions, but I will not explore this.

### II.1. *Reasons*

On Davidson’s famous (1963) account, actions are things we do which can be explained by ‘primary reasons’. Primary reasons have two components. The first is a ‘pro attitude toward actions of a certain kind’ [p. 685]. Davidson gives many examples of ‘pro attitudes’, including ‘desires, wantings, urges, promptings’ [p. 686]. The second is a belief that a particular action is of the kind towards which one has a pro attitude. ‘Giving the reason why an agent did something’, Davidson says, ‘is often a matter of naming the pro attitude (*a*) or the related belief (*b*) or both’ [p. 686]. Usually, it is only necessary to name the pro attitude *or* the related belief because one will be obvious from the other. For example, if I ask why you are drinking a glass of wine, it will typically suffice to say *either* ‘I want to do something to relax’ *or* ‘I think drinking a glass of wine will help me relax’. If you say one of these things, the other will be so obvious as to be superfluous. However, in situations where this is not the case, it will be necessary to elaborate the reason fully, i.e., to provide the pro attitude and the related belief.

There is another, important aspect of Davidson’s account which he brings out with a now-famous example: ‘I flip the switch, turn on the light, and illuminate the room. Unbeknownst to me I also alert a prowler to the fact that I am home’ [p. 686]. The subject here – Davidson – has done one thing, described in four different ways. What he has done is an

action, because it can be explained with a primary reason, but some care is needed. ‘I flipped the switch’, Davidson says, ‘because I wanted to turn on the light, and by saying I wanted to turn on the light I explain (give my reason for, rationalize) the flipping’ [pp. 686-687]. He goes on: ‘But I do not, by giving this reason, rationalize my alerting of the prowler nor my illuminating of the room’ [p. 687] – even though what he did when he flipped the switch is exactly the same as what he did when he alerted the prowler and when he illuminated the room (he just moved his finger). In the famous phrase, the movement, ‘*under the description*’ [p. 695, emphasis added] of ‘flipping the switch’, can be explained by a reason – and the movement is therefore an action. It does not matter that the same movement, under a different description (such as ‘alerting a prowler’), cannot be explained by a reason. It is enough that what Davidson did, described in one way (‘flipping the switch’), can be explained by a reason (here, wanting to turn on the light).<sup>12</sup>

If someone asks for a reason why you said something to someone else, it is usually easy to provide one. The reason might be that you wanted to influence that person’s beliefs, or that you wanted to elicit information from them, and so on. You may not have been conscious of the reason before producing the utterance or while doing so, but you will ordinarily be able to recover one if you are asked to, even if you recognise that the reason was foolish. It would be very surprising if someone was asked why they said something to someone and could only say ‘I don’t know; I really have no idea’.

What about inner speech? Can you ever really give a reason that you produced some utterance in the course of your ordinary internal monologue? Let us start with an example. Suppose you are walking through a park one day towards the end of winter. Noticing some green leaves, you produce the inner speech utterance, ‘Spring’s starting’, without having consciously decided to do so. You then find yourself wondering why you produced the utterance.

It seems like there are two things which you might say:

1. ‘I wanted to make the propositional content that spring is starting salient in my consciousness and I believed that producing the inner speech utterance would achieve this.’
2. ‘I don’t know. I just did.’

If (1) is true, then you can confidently conclude that you performed an action when you produced the inner speech utterance (at least on Da-

vidson's account of action). For (1) is really just a report of a primary reason, with both the pro attitude and the associated belief made explicit.

However, the purported explanation in (1) is implausible. It is a confabulation. It is akin to Davidson saying, 'I flipped the switch because I wanted to alert the prowler'. In flipping the switch, Davidson did alert the prowler, but this was not his reason for flipping the switch: he did not even know there was a prowler in his house. The only plausible account of the event is the account given in (2) – which is really just an acknowledgement that the event was not an action (again, at least on Davidson's theory of action). Moreover, this pattern will apply for any purported explanation resembling (1). Whether you say 'I produced the inner speech utterance because I wanted to re-focus my attention' or 'I produced it because I wanted to consider some question' or 'I produced it because I wanted to make myself do something', the purported explanation will be a rationalization in the bad sense – an explanation concocted when you have none other to give.

I think this is intuitive, but it can also be demonstrated by argument. Sometimes in external speech, we misspeak. For example, we produce assertions that do not express precisely what we mean, or we say something that is ambiguous. We often realise what we have done a moment after speaking or even while still speaking. A Davidsonian explanation of instances of misspeaking would involve a speaker having a pro attitude towards utterances of a particular kind (e.g., assertions expressing a particular proposition) and, at least for a moment, a belief that the utterance they are about to produce is an utterance of that kind. The speaker would misspeak when the belief is false, e.g., if an utterance does not, as a matter of fact, express the relevant proposition precisely.

If (1)-style explanations for inner speech utterances are plausible, then it should be the case that we sometimes misspeak in inner speech. Recall that a (1)-style explanation is really just a statement of a pro attitude toward a certain kind of action and a belief that a particular inner speech utterance is an action of that kind. But, if we have such beliefs, they should sometimes be false. We can believe that a particular utterance will express a proposition precisely in external speech and be wrong about this. If we really have corresponding beliefs in the context of inner speech, then we should expect that these beliefs will sometimes be false too. This would only require, e.g., thinking that some inner speech utterance will express some proposition precisely despite poor phrasing or poorly chosen words. But it does not seem to be so. We never seem to

misspeak in inner speech as we do in external speech. We never have the feeling that we have not, e.g., expressed quite the right proposition. So, it must be that we do not ever have beliefs that particular inner speech utterances are actions of a kind to which we have pro attitudes. Again: if we did, those beliefs would sometimes be false – which *would* lead to us misspeaking. So, (1)-style explanations cannot be true. If someone provides a (1)-style explanation for an inner speech utterance, then, they must be confabulating.

## II.2 *Control*

Davidson took his account to be a causal account of action. ‘Central to the relation between a reason and an action it explains’, he wrote, ‘is the idea that the agent performed the action *because* he had the reason’ [p. 691, emphasis original]. The observation which motivates this claim is that ‘a person can have a reason for an action, and perform the action, and yet this reason not be the reason why he did it’ [p. 691]. After all, someone might have several reasons to perform an action and yet only act on account of one of them. What is special about the reason on account of which the person acts – what separates it from the others – must be that that reason actually causes the action [Malpas (2019)].

Frankfurt (1978) rejected theories which held that what distinguishes a particular bodily movement as an action is its causal history. Causal theories, Frankfurt complains, ‘direct attention exclusively away from the events whose natures are at issue, and away from the times at which they occur’ [p. 157]. So it is ‘no wonder that such theories run up against counterexamples of a well-known type’ [p. 157]. He then offers his own:

[A] man at a party intends to spill what is in his glass because he wants to signal his confederates to begin a robbery and he believes, in virtue of their prearrangements, that spilling what is in his glass will accomplish that; but all this leads the man to be very anxious, his anxiety makes his hand tremble, and so his glass spills [p. 157].

Prior to the event, one might say that the man will perform the action of spilling the glass if his doing so is caused by a desire to signal to his confederates and a belief that spilling his glass will achieve this. This is obviously a Davidsonian primary reason. As things turn out, that desire and that belief do cause him to spill his glass, albeit indirectly, by making him

tremble with nervousness. However, we obviously do not want to say that the man has performed an action.

According to Frankfurt, any causal theory of action will deliver the wrong verdict in some cases. 'No matter what kinds of causal antecedents are designated as necessary and sufficient for the occurrence of an action,' he writes, 'it is easy to show that causal antecedents of that kind may have as their effect an event that is manifestly not an action but a mere bodily movement' [p. 157]. It is worth adding that, even if one thinks that what is distinctive about actions is that they are done for reasons, but denies that actions are caused by reasons, one will still confront Frankfurt's objection. If, in trying to determine whether something is an action, we focus on the subject's reasons for doing it, we will not be focusing on the particular thing that we are trying to classify: the action itself.

So how can we determine which movements are actions? Frankfurt's answer is that we must 'consider whether or not the movements as they occur are *under the person's guidance*' [p. 158; emphasis original]. A movement is under a person's guidance if it is such that the person can adjust it while it is taking place in order to compensate for external interference. For example, the movement of your hand and arm in opening a door might be hindered if the door becomes jammed in its frame. The movement is an action because you are able to, e.g., significantly increase the force you apply (my example). It is not necessary that you do make any such adjustment; the movement is an action so long as it is possible for you to do so.

Importantly, the condition that a movement is such that the subject could intervene to adjust it excludes movements which can be adjusted only by automatic mechanisms. The dilation of a pupil as light dims is a movement which can be adjusted by the operation of relevant parts of the nervous system, but it is not an action. It is just a bodily process; any 'compensatory adjustments' [p. 160] happen automatically. As Frankfurt puts it, '[t]he guidance in this case is attributable only to the operation of some mechanism with which [the subject] cannot be identified' [p. 159]. But the movement involved in opening the door is an action. It can be adjusted in ways not attributable to the automatic operation of any subsystem (e.g., significantly increasing the force applied to the handle) and is thus guided by the subject.

Seen one way, producing external, interpersonal utterances consists of performing physical movements, albeit in the context of a sophisticated social practice. There is room to debate whether an utterance involves

one complex movement or a series of many small movements, but we can set this aside. For, however one individuates speech movements, they are clearly under our guidance. On the most fine-grained individuation, every motion of the mouth or tongue would be considered a distinct movement. These motions are under our guidance. You can, e.g., significantly change the volume of your speech in an instant, adjusting how you manoeuvre your mouth or tongue, to compensate for a sudden increase in background noise. Moreover, even if you do not actually do so, it is possible for you to do so. At the other end of the spectrum, on the coarsest individuation, the entire series of movements involved in producing an utterance would amount to just one complex movement. But speech movements, conceived of this way, include all of the smaller motions of the mouth and tongue, which, as we just saw, are under our guidance. It follows that speech movements, even on the broader conception, are under our guidance. Making an adjustment to a single motion of the tongue would still amount to making an adjustment to the complex movement of which it is a part.

What about inner speech utterances? Again, a slight modification to the applicable test is required. Inner speech utterances do not involve physical movements; they involve the generation of phonological representations. Once more, though, we can make a simple substitution and ask whether the generation of the phonological representations is subject to our guidance.

Inner speech utterances are not vulnerable to physical interference in the way that external utterances are, which rather complicates the question whether they can be adjusted in ways not attributable to automatic mechanisms in order to compensate for such interference. But we can still get to the critical point, via a slightly indirect route. Frankfurt writes at one point that '[o]ur sense of agency when we act is nothing more than the way it feels to us when we are somehow in touch with the operation of mechanisms ... by which our movements are guided and their course guaranteed' [p. 160]. We do not have this sense of agency when our pupils dilate, because we do not have the feeling of being in touch with the relevant mechanisms, whose operation is automatic. We do have it when we significantly increase the force which we apply against a door handle; we, as subjects, feel like we are guiding the machinery of our bodies when we do this. We also have that feeling when we speak aloud. I think it is clear, as well, that we have it in those cases when we consciously decide to produce an inner speech utterance and then do so (recall the 'Grass is green' example). This shows that it is pos-

sible to have the feeling when we produce inner speech – and, therefore, that inner speech *can* be guided by subjects, in Frankfurt's sense. But we do not have it while producing the utterances of our ordinary internal monologues. Actually, its absence in these cases is conspicuous, when we compare them to those inner speech utterances which we consciously decide to produce. All this indicates that the utterances of our ordinary internal monologues are not actions, on the terms of Frankfurt's account. For if they were, then we would at least have the feeling of guiding them – even if we never actually need to adjust them to compensate for external interference.<sup>13</sup>

### II.3. *Trying*

One of the simplest ways to think about actions is that they are things we can try to do. The classic sources connecting trying and acting are O'Shaughnessy (1973) and Hornsby (1980), though a considerable literature has now developed. Let us set aside any question about what trying involves and about what the relationship between trying and acting might be and focus on a simple point which was apparent even in O'Shaughnessy's early paper. Where you can try, you can fail. This seems impossible to deny. Notice also that you can fail, even when you do not realize you are trying to do something. Indeed, sometimes we only notice that we were trying to do something when we fail. For example, you might only notice that you were trying to put your hand in your pocket upon failing to do so, because your thumb caught on your belt.

Strikingly, we never seem to fail when we produce the utterances of our internal monologues. We might forget a word or name,<sup>14</sup> but this is a failure of memory, not a failure of action. We never seem to find ourselves unable to produce inner speech or even trip over our words. Nor, tellingly, do we ever find ourselves thinking, 'I did not realize I was trying to produce that inner speech utterance until I failed to do so'. It is logically possible, of course, that we *can* fail when we try to produce inner speech but that we never do. However, there are not many things – if any – that we always succeed in doing, if there is any possibility of failing at all. The best explanation, it seems, is that we never fail to produce inner speech because it is not something we actually try to do.<sup>15</sup>

O'Shaughnessy (2000), (2009) has actually considered inner speech and, surprisingly, he holds that producing inner speech is an action. However, he is working with an extremely idiosyncratic notion of inner speech. He takes the sensory aspect of inner speech to be entirely pe-

ripheral: ‘A man can speak [externally] without hearing a word of what he has said: the experience of speaking does not entail the experience of hearing. And the same holds within. Why should we need to internally “hear” if we are internally to “speak”?’ [(2000), p. 381]. What, then, is ‘internally speaking’, if not the familiar auditory phenomenon? In itself, it is nothing more than *trying* to produce a mental representation of speech, which will not necessarily result in the production of anything. “It is, so to say, will through and through.” [p. 382].

There is much here that strikes me as dubious but there is no need to go further. O’Shaughnessy is simply not addressing the question of whether inner speech utterances are actions, as inner speech is ordinarily thought of.<sup>16</sup>

#### II. 4. *We All Make Mistakes*

I have considered only three theories of agency and have reviewed only early, classic statements of them. Much more could be said. Still, there are grounds to hold that the production of the utterances in our internal monologues is not something explained by reasons; not something that we guide; not even something we can try to do. We can have considerable confidence in saying that inner speech utterances of this kind are not actions.

We all tacitly assume that inner speech utterances are speech acts. This is a mistaken assumption, for they are not even actions.

### III. SOME SPECULATION

There is obviously no inconsistency in saying that we ordinarily treat our inner speech utterances as speech acts even though that is not what they are. Again, it simply means that we are mistaken about their nature. There is also no inconsistency in saying that inner speech utterances are not speech acts, or indeed actions of any kind, but that they do not occur randomly. Clearly, they do not occur randomly: they are often either highly relevant to whatever we are currently doing or significant in directing our attention to something else which matters to us. But, even if there is no inconsistency, there is still something to be explained. What are inner speech utterances, such that they are not actions that we perform, but that they are so frequently relevant and useful? I will offer just some brief speculation about this.

I suggest that most inner speech production is an automatic process, but not one that operates in isolation. The focus of your current attention; your immediate goals; your other conscious thoughts; your standing fears and anxieties – all these things and many others influence the inner speech that you produce. Inner speech utterances are not actions, but nor are they reflexes. They are more like automatic *reactions*: the automatic process that produces them is to a significant extent sensitive to context. In this way, the utterances of our ordinary internal monologues are like unbidden imaginings and unbidden memories: events which take place in the mind, which we would not consider actions, but which are clearly closely related to our other standing and occurrent mental states. We experience our automatically generated inner speech utterances as meaningful only because we treat them as speech acts (either as speech acts that we perform or speech acts that we interpret; perhaps we all do both of these things at different times), but maybe it is not so surprising that we do this. The alternative – that we should have an automatically produced stream of linguistic sounds in our minds and treat them only as sounds – would be astonishing. Finally, the production of inner speech is a process that can be co-opted. Once again, we can produce inner speech utterances intentionally – as when you consciously decide to produce the utterance, ‘Grass is green’, and then do so. In these instances, the automaticity of the process is suspended, and the individual takes control.<sup>17</sup>

Is this too radical? We seem to do a lot of things automatically, but we are sure that these are nonetheless things that we *do*. When you scratch your face or switch crossed legs or manipulate cutlery, you perform an action, even if it seems like it was automatic. With this observation in mind, should one be more reticent about saying that inner speech utterances are not actions? I have suggested that inner speech utterances should be thought of as automatic reactions; would it perhaps be better to say that they are automatic *actions*?<sup>18</sup>

If we look carefully, I think we will find that inner speech utterances cannot be characterized this way. One of the advantages of Frankfurt’s theory was that it could accommodate actions like scratching your face and switching crossed legs and manipulating cutlery. On Frankfurt’s account, these are actions because they are under a person’s control – subject to their guidance – even if they are in some sense automatic. As I argued above, our external speech utterances are also subject to a person’s guidance – but our ordinary inner speech utterances are not.<sup>19</sup> This

is not to say that Frankfurt's account is right; the nature of action is a matter of ongoing dispute. But Frankfurt's account is the account which would seem most favorable if one wanted to argue that our ordinary inner speech utterances are automatic actions – and even it does not support the conclusion.

So, my suggestion that our ordinary inner speech utterances are something like automatic reactions might be an adventurous one, but I do not think it is too radical. Actually, it seems like the natural possibility to explore if even the most accommodating theory of action has no place for inner speech.

What I have offered is really only conjecture about the general shape that an explanation of inner speech will take, rather than an explanation as such. What really demands investigation at this point is the automatic process that results in the generation of auditory images which are apt to be interpreted as speech acts – and typically relevant and useful ones at that. I expect this will require some very careful work.

#### CONCLUSION

In the Introduction, I offered four reasons why addressing the question of whether inner speech utterances are actions might be profitable. I conclude by returning to these and reconsidering them in the light of all of the foregoing.

1. Insofar as inner speech utterances are not speech acts, there is a major schism between inner speech and interpersonal speech. There will be major limitations on the approach of trying to understand inner speech by analogy to interpersonal speech.
2. We interpret the speech of others as speech acts and inner speech utterances are not speech acts. Still, we *treat* our inner speech utterances as speech acts. So, perhaps surprisingly, it remains a possibility that we can gain self-knowledge by interpreting our inner speech in the same way that we interpret the external speech of others.
3. The potential complication in thinking of inner speech as an internal version of private speech is real. It may be that inner speech utterances are generally not actions and that private speech utter-

ances generally are. However, the question of whether private speech utterances are actions may itself require investigation.

4. Although I think that inner speech utterances are not actions, I think that Martínez-Manrique & Vicente (2015) are right that we should focus our attention on the question of how inner speech utterances are produced. This is the position reached at the end of the previous section. The question may actually be more important if inner speech utterances are not actions. For, again, if inner speech utterances are not actions, then we confront the issue of how it is that they should be so consistently relevant and useful for us – something that might be less mysterious if they were actions we intend to perform.<sup>20</sup>

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#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I received helpful feedback on this paper at the New Directions in the Philosophy of Mind and Action workshop in October 2019 and Thomas Sattig's Oberseminar in November 2019, both in Tübingen. I thank Malte Hendrickx, Richard Moore, Helen Steward and Hong Yu Wong for various forms of assistance and Brian Garrett for comments on a full draft. I thank the referees of this journal for their comments. I thank Daniel Stoljar for his many ideas about inner speech.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> From one perspective, the term, 'inner speech utterance', is not ideal. One might think that all utterances are actions, so anything which is apt to be described as an utterance – whether external or internal – must be an action. An alternative phrase would be Langland-Hassan's (2014) 'inner speech episode' (I thank a referee for raising this). I am going to proceed with the term, 'inner speech utterance', for two reasons. First, I think that, on the most natural understanding of 'utterance', not even all external utterances are actions. A wincing sound produced in response to pain is an utterance but not an action. This means that it is open to ask whether inner speech utterances are actions. Sec-

ond, there could also be a worry that the term, ‘inner speech episode’, implies passivity. Plausibly, episodes are things that happen, not things that we do. As I am ultimately going to argue that instances of inner speech are not actions, and do not want to load the die in favour of that conclusion, I will proceed with the term, ‘inner speech utterance’.

<sup>2</sup> This second claim is foreshadowed in Gregory (2020).

<sup>3</sup> For clarity, the claims just itemized should not be understood as providing a formal statement of the overall argument of this paper; they are something more like the main stepping-stones on the way to reaching the conclusion.

<sup>4</sup> My line of thought here is somewhat inspired by a suggestion that Daniel Stoljar made to me about the nature of inner speech. The suggestion was that we cannot avoid treating inner speech as a kind of actual, silent speech, even if we become convinced intellectually that inner speech is not actual speech but just a kind of imagined speech. My topic in this paper is quite different, but one can see the influence.

<sup>5</sup> Apart from being physical movements, obviously.

<sup>6</sup> It could be added that this paper is just a first attack on the question of whether inner speech utterances are actions. If the question deserves further attention, then it is certainly true that the growing literature on mental action would eventually need to be engaged with. The starting point is Lucy O’Brien & Matthew Soteriou’s (2009) anthology on the topic.

<sup>7</sup> At this point, it is worth saying that it would be good to be able to give a clearer specification of which inner speech utterances I am generally concerned with. Which exactly are those inner speech utterances which form a part of the inner monologue; the ones which accompany our everyday activities; the ones we produce without seeming to think about it? There is a significant difficulty here in that I would suggest that what characterizes these utterances is that they, as opposed to some others, are not actions – but this requires first establishing that they are not actions. I have highlighted an exception: I am not concerned with inner speech utterances which we consciously plan to produce; these obviously are actions. But this is not entirely satisfactory. Some things that we do not consciously plan to do are still actions. However, the issue will have to be deferred. As is often the case, we will have to begin just with an intuitive distinction.

<sup>8</sup> I thank Daniel Stoljar for first raising this question with me.

<sup>9</sup> This relates to Martínez-Manrique & Vicente’s (2015) point, mentioned above: If, as researchers, we do not analyze inner speech utterances as actions, we can think of them only as phonological representations. My point is much the same, in the context of individuals’ experience of their own inner speech.

<sup>10</sup> Though the part dealing with the sincerity / insincerity of speech acts really derives from Searle’s (1969) account, which will be mentioned again as an example of another group of theories.

<sup>11</sup> A referee suggests a counterexample to my claim in this section that utterances can only be understood as meaningful if they are treated as speech acts. Suppose you find a piece of paper on which is scrawled, ‘Grass is green’. You

will presumably understand this, even if you do not know who the author is or why they scrawled the words on the page. There could obviously be analogous auditory cases.

I think that we do have to treat the scrawled sentence as the result of a speech act in order to understand it. We can see this by noticing that it can be interpreted differently, depending on the speech act which one thinks the author was performing. Most likely, one will interpret the sentence as an assertion that grass, understood as a kind of plant, is of the colour, green. But one could also interpret it as an assertion that someone named 'Dr Grass' is green, in the metaphorical sense that they are inexperienced, by imputing to the hypothetical author the intention to assert a different proposition. One could also interpret it as the indirect speech act of quoting (e.g., Nelly Furtado's 'The Grass is Green') or of practicing (perhaps the page has slipped from the class notes of someone learning English).

It is certainly true that we would most naturally incline to treat the sentence as an assertion and it is a very interesting question why this is so. Still, what is going on is that we are interpreting the words written on the page as the result of an action which has been performed and this is why we are able to interpret the utterance as we do.

Something similar goes on when we hear a coprolalic utterance. For some reason, we are inclined to treat the utterance as resulting from the speech act of swearing, but we can only do this by interpreting it as an action. As soon as we learn the explanation for the utterance, we are forced to abandon the original interpretation.

<sup>12</sup> Although all of this is so closely associated with Davidson, Anscombe had also observed that 'the very same proceedings [can be] intentional under one description and unintentional under another' [(1963/2000), p. 30].

<sup>13</sup> Hurlburt et al. (2013) actually claim that their Descriptive Experience Sampling studies show that 'inner speech is generally experienced as something one drives, does, or utters' [p. 148]. On the face of it, this presents a serious challenge to my claim about the phenomenology of inner speech. However, there are two reasons that I do not think there is a problem. First, it is not clear that the claim that 'inner speech is generally experienced as something one drives, does, or utters' contradicts my claim that we usually do not have a feeling of agency, in Frankfurt's technical sense, when we produce inner speech. As I mentioned in Footnote 1, not all external utterances are actions. In the case of external utterances which are not actions, the subject will (of course) feel as if they are producing an utterance but they will still not have a feeling of agency in Frankfurt's sense. The same may be true of the majority of our inner speech. So, without a lot more elaboration as to what Hurlburt et al.'s subjects mean, it is not clear that there is a contradiction at all.

Second, without exploring the matter in detail, the experiments which Hurlburt et al. are relying on have usually involved specific populations, e.g., in-

dividuals with depression or schizophrenia (they are forthright about this – see p. 1481; also see their references on p. 1481 for the papers reporting the relevant experiments). The one study where this was not the case involved a sample of only thirty university students. Accordingly, even if the claim that ‘inner speech is generally experienced as something one drives, does, or utters’ should be interpreted in a way that contradicts my claim about the phenomenology of inner speech, one could not say that there is strong evidence that it is true of the general population.

What *would* be problematic for my claim would be strong empirical evidence that subjects cannot detect the difference which I describe in the text between the phenomenology of producing an inner speech utterance of the kind which is obviously an action (e.g., the intentional ‘Grass is green’) and the phenomenology of producing an inner speech utterance in the course of the ongoing internal monologue. I do not know of any such evidence.

<sup>14</sup> Thanks to Helen Steward for this.

<sup>15</sup> I acknowledge that aphasia may generate challenges to what I have just said. For present purposes, I simply note that pathologies often provide exceptions to claims which are, nonetheless, generally true. Compare: It is true that the kidneys remove waste from blood, even if some people need dialysis.

<sup>16</sup> In fairness, O’Shaughnessy does not actually use the term, ‘inner speech’. See, e.g., the quote in the text, with the terminology of ‘internally speaking’.

<sup>17</sup> There are two sources in the background here. One is Wu (2012), who suggests that auditory verbal hallucinations, i.e., voice-hearing experiences, might be the consequence of unintentional, automatically generated voice sounds in the mind. My much stronger claim is that most inner speech is generated automatically. [See also Cho & Wu (2013), (2014).] A little more distant in the background is Dennett’s remarks on Freudian slips in *Consciousness Explained* (1991). He describes Freudian slips as ‘seeming to be mistakes and not mistakes at the same time’ [p. 243]. There is something of this in my suggestion that inner speech is not intentional but also not random.

<sup>18</sup> I am grateful to a referee for the ideas in this paragraph.

<sup>19</sup> Though it is true that an indirect route was necessary. I argued that we can know that our inner speech utterances are not subject to our guidance because they are not accompanied by the ‘sense of agency’ [Frankfurt (1978), p. 160] which we would have if they were subject to our guidance.

<sup>20</sup> There is actually much in Martínez-Manrique & Vicente (2015) that remains relevant to the issue of how inner speech is produced, even if inner speech utterances are not actions. See also Vicente & Martínez-Manrique (2016) and Vicente & Jorba (2017).

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