

THE OBJECTIVITY OF SUBJECTIVITY: REPLACING NOTIONS OF SUBJECTIVITY WITH MATERIAL SOCIAL EXCHANGES

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ABSTRACT: This paper argues that material social exchanges form the basis to what have hitherto been called ‘subjective’ experiences and so make them ‘objective’ and potentially observable. The problems raised within philosophical debate about the ‘objective’ and the ‘subjective’ worlds are shown to arise from the very nature of philosophizing itself. Social contextual analysis shows that there are different ways we interact with what have been called the ‘objective’ and ‘subjective’ worlds although both are firmly material and real and further suggests that these material differences are what have created the false distinction in the first place. The major difference is that what have been called ‘subjectivity’ are parts of our language behavior, which includes thinking, and these only ever interact with the objective world through social exchanges with other people, and not directly with what is being talked about. This means that spoken or written sentences can never be called ‘true’ or ‘false’ since there is no reference, correspondence, or representation to an objective world that can be true or false, and no expression or communication of a subjective world that can be called true or false. Language just does things or not to people in context but has no effect on what is being talked about. The ‘subjective’ is therefore ‘objective’ but within a limited scope of interaction and influence (social exchanges). It is suggested that both terms be avoided and focus instead on observing and describing the life contexts in which our behaviors do things or not, whether this involves language or not.

Key words: objective, subjective, social analysis, social contexts, philosophy, social sciences, behavior analysis, discursive contexts, embedded cognition, 4E cognition

For centuries, verbal distinctions have been made between the ‘objective’—the real physical world—and the ‘subjective’—what a person thinks or experiences (e.g., Nagel, 1974). Many different terms have been used for these, and philosophical debates have switched between all these terms. In general, only a few have denied that there is an objective world, most of these exceptions using variations on solipsism. The main debates have been about whether there is a subjective at all, or what it is if it does exist. These debates continue and the recent discussions about ‘embedded cognition’ and the 4Es are a new variation.

The debates on these issues have been various, but they are usually ‘resolved’—or paused for a while—by introducing new terminologies, which then must be reconciled with all those that went before. The terms used for the subjective have been the most numerous, and include meaning, consciousness, experience, states, thought, mental, mind, cognition, semantic networks, truth, subjective probabilities, etc. A further problem in all this is that a mix of disciplines have been brought into these debates, including philosophy, mathematics, logic, linguistics, semantics, psychology, phenomenology, and sociology, so these need to be understood and reconciled also. They have not provided solutions yet, however.

The present paper aims to provide a new pathway through this morass by considering a contextual and social alternative which has hitherto gone unnoticed. Rather than claim that the objective is true but not the subjective, or that the objective exists but not the subjective, it will be shown that neither is ‘true’ in a traditional philosophical or logical sense, and that the ‘subjective’ turns out to be objective in a way not yet considered. The paper will also show why all the many disciplines appear within these debates, and why it has spread out to many otherwise disparate positions without resolution.

Objective and subjective

The terms objective and subjective have been used in many ways and I will not review them all here (Nagel, 1974). In this paper they will refer loosely to previous uses, but I will not try to integrate them since they will be dispensed with in the end anyway. ‘Objective’ usually refers to some sort of physical reality that we cannot deny; we interact with trees, birds and mountains in our worlds. ‘Subjective’ is more varied but refers to a person’s experience or talking about the ‘objective’ world, and perhaps more besides. The subjective is usually talked about as ‘inside’ a person, or in a mind or spirit, but the main import is clearly that ‘subjective’ views or experiences do not always match those of the objective world, and that the subjective is not observable in the same way as the objective. Ramsey, for example, refers the subjective to ‘beliefs’ and ‘subjective probabilities’ opposing Keynes who viewed probabilities as existing in the objective world (Ramsey, 1926/1931).

While the *objective* seems most straightforward, we bump into trees, we hear birds sing, we climb up mountains, etc., the philosophical debates for the objective have been over how we can *talk* about these events as *true*. This has been the mainstay of epistemology and ontology within western philosophy (Guerin, 1997, 2021). I can throw you a tree branch and you can catch it, and that is not a problem; the problem is whether the sentence, “I threw you a tree branch,” can be said to be ‘true’ or ‘false.’ Note here that while we get on with our lives and catch tree branches, climb mountains and observe birds in the garden, the philosophical debates are really over how we *talk* about these objects and events. This is one reason why semantics and other parts of linguistics become involved in these debates. Can words *refer to* or *reference* the objective objects and events? How do words even work? This all becomes murkier when we turn to the *subjective*.

- First is the question of whether these subjective experiences or beliefs even exist in any sense of that word, and is this the same sense of ‘exist’ as for the objective?
- Second is the question of why what is called ‘subjective’ appears or seems to be different from when we talk about objective?
- Third is the question of what these subjective experiences or beliefs even are?
- Fourth is the question of how these subjective experiences relate to the objective world, their status in the objective world?
- Fifth is the question of how we talk about these subjective experiences and states?
- Sixth is the question of whether our talk about the subjective can be said to be true?
- Seventh is the question of how the talk about the subjective relates to the talk about the objective?

To give one initial example, consider Tarski’s equation and purported solution: “This is a cat” is true iff this is a cat. In this example, “This is a cat” is *talking* about a subjective event: that I think this is a cat; I have a belief this is a cat; my experience is that this is a cat; or my subjective probability is that this is a cat. The second part, ‘iff this is a cat,’ is *talking* about an objective state of affairs: if there is a cat in the same way that you catch a tree branch.

So, while there are confusions over the objective in philosophical debates, the major problems have been over how we *talk* about the subjective experiences and whether they exist. But this is even more confused because the philosophical debates usually assume that the subjective exists ‘inside’ a person in either a material (brain, cognition) or non-material (mind, spirit) way. This mixture of positions is one reason why psychology, phenomenology, and sociology become involved in these debates. Can words *express* or *communicate* events from inside a person?

Traditional questions in philosophy, therefore, revolve around whether talking (or thinking) can *refer to* or *reference* objective objects and events, or *express* or *communicate* subjective events inside a person, and then whether any of this talk can be labelled as ‘true.’ It will be argued in this paper that none of these are correct. Other disciplines are dragged in to resolve issues but end up replacing one set of words with another.

A social contextual exploration

The way of exploring these questions in this paper will be to forget the terms ‘objective’ and ‘subjective’ and focus on what we know about concrete talking and thinking and how they occur (cf. Guerin, 2021). That is, the intuited differences between objective and subjective will be given a concrete and potentially observable basis and this will supersede the philosophical talking about what is happening.

To do this, social contextual analysis will be followed since, deriving from behavior analysis, it allows for non-mentalistic versions of the ideas of psychology and linguistics without completely eschewing some basis for those ideas (Guerin, 2020, 2024). As will become clear, the basic force of these arguments comes from *giving priority to doing things and observing*, rather than from talking about them while trying to judge whether that talk itself can be true or not. Philosophy has been entirely based on the latter, which then fails to be able to do anything in the world except get people to talk more (Guerin, 2021).

The ‘objective’

The key starting point is that what initiates and maintains our talking and thinking is *unlike* what controls our seeing and moving, and to begin, these differences will become like the new version of ‘objective’ and ‘subjective.’ Seeing, moving, and physical actions with the world involve responding to changes in the world including eye and body movements by the person. All this can be done without words (Gibson, 1979; Guerin, 1997). This is shown in Figure 1.

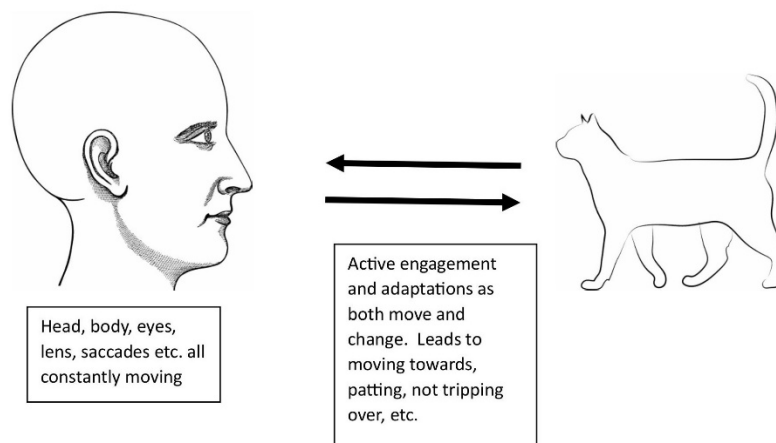


Figure 1 illustrates what is meant in this paper by the objective world (doing without talking about it). Humans do this constantly without realizing (that is, without talking or thinking about it) and non-human animals *only* do this. This occurs without needing any philosophizing (Guerin, 2021), and we do not have to think or talk about what we do before being able to do it, although there are reasons why this often seems to be the case (Guerin, 2020). This is the ‘real, objective world’ for social contextual analysis, and it can only be demonstrated by actions and observations. But all this changes when it is talked about and those changes are what make the talking (‘subjective’) appear to or seem to be different from the ‘objective.’

The ‘subjective’

In the present analysis, the ‘subjective’ is what happens when we talk or think, although it does not originate inside us. The most important thing to glean from this is that the talking and thinking events are *not* engaging or interacting with the objective objects and events that seem to be talked about. As shown in Figure 2, saying “This is a cat”, is not about the cat, whether or not there is even a cat there. Speaking those words does not engage with a cat even if present, nor does it interact or have consequences from any cat.

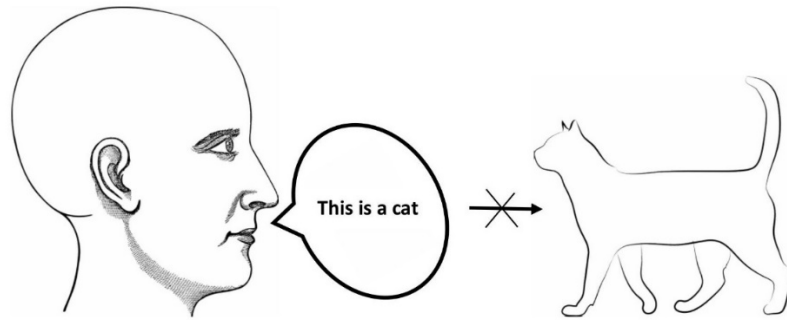
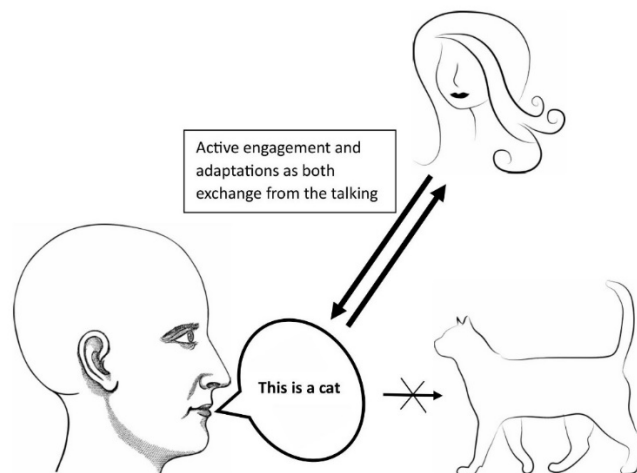


Figure 3 next shows what actually takes place in terms of talking and the objective world. In the same way that you interact with the ‘objective’ world of the cat in Figure 1 by patting it, *talking* is about interacting or engaging *with other people* who have learned to speak the same language. What occurs, and what consequences there are for the speaker, depends on all the many social contexts and social exchanges present—social, economic, cultural, etc. (Guerin, 2016, 2025a).

So, Figure 3 illustrates the ‘*objectivity of subjectivity*’. The effects of talking in the world are just as objective as patting a cat or not tripping over one when moving around. But the objective effects of the ‘subjective’ talking are only the external effects that the talking has on a listener or reader and then on the speaker. Just as your behavior adapts and changes when you pat a cat depending on or adapting to its responding without any talk, so the same happens when talking or writing, although, as we will see, the effects can be delayed, or the audience not even be present when the language response occurs.



The trick here is that attempting to call what is said ‘true’ by reference, correspondence, or representation, does not work when viewed in this way. What might be said to be ‘true’ about saying “This is a cat” is not the presence or absence or anything ‘cat-like,’ but only the real effects (‘objective’ and potentially observable) of the listener or reader when they hear or read these words. We do things with language to people, language in the right contexts makes things happen via people, but we cannot call the sentences themselves ‘true.’ This would be like calling the *action* of patting a cat or catching a tree branch “true” (not the talking about it). But patting a cat is neither true nor false, it just is. In philosophy, the attempt has been to attribute truth or falsity to *talking* about patting the cat and this fails (“I am patting the cat”).

So, this is the way of asserting the objective reality of what is *said*, but not through any reference, correspondence, or representation between word and object, nor between an inner world and a truthful

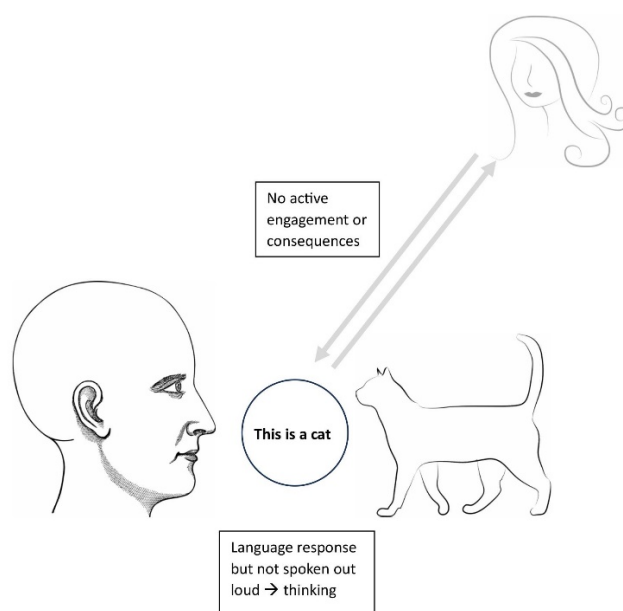
expression or communication from within. There is no ‘meaning’ or ‘hidden subjective reality’ to words; their objective reality is just what gets done or not by the listener, in the same way as patting a cat just gets done or not depending upon the contexts. And what gets done is the effects on the listener or reader from the words shaped in the more specific contexts. In the same way that talking about patting a cat is very different from just patting the cat, so talking about saying words (philosophy) is very different from just saying the words and getting consequences from listeners. And we do not need to talk about our talking before we can do it.

Thinking (not saying language responses out loud)

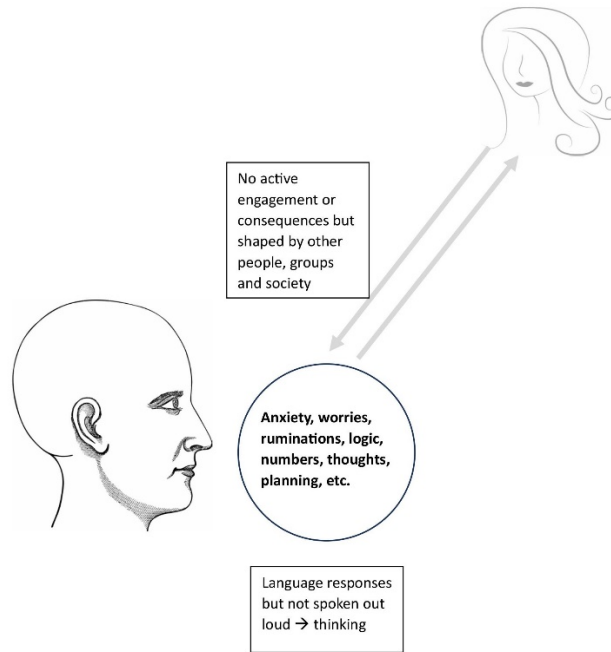
The final part of a social contextual analysis that impinges on the topic under consideration is the analysis of thinking and thoughts. Thinking, more than talking, has been confounded with subjectivity throughout the history of philosophy (Nagel, 1974). Thinking appears very different from both talking and to acting without talking. We cannot locate it easily, and it is usually therefore made into a mentalism (Guerin, 2024).

For a contextual analysis, thinking is objective since it is an event, but in a different and external way. Thinking is considered to be all the language responses that have been shaped in any contexts, but which are then *not said out loud*. There are many reasons why some language responses do not get said out loud, even when they occur in a given context. This can be innocuous—someone else is busy talking and cannot be interrupted—or more insidious—when what would be said would be punished in the local context (Guerin, 2016, 2020). The most important point for this paper is that what stops a language response from being said out loud arises from the external world.

Figure 4 tries to portray language responses not said out loud. Like talking, the language response is not ‘inside the head’ but arises from social exchanges with listeners who have previously shaped that response. This results in a second unique property of thinking compared to talking, that thoughts do not result in consequences. The language response has been shaped into existence by the external social contexts and previous shaping by audiences in that context, but if it is not said out loud then it will not be consequted.



One effect of thinking not being consequted by ‘objective’ reality (potentially observable effects from a listener, not what appears to be referred to) is that thoughts can therefore keep occurring in that context, be exaggerated, or generalized, or change in content. Figure 5 shows various common forms of thinking—talk that commonly does not get said out loud.

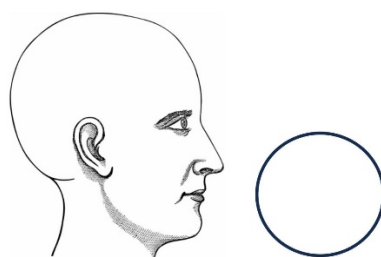


With this brief outline of analyzing thinking and thoughts, we can now see a stronger connection to what have hitherto been called ‘subjective’ experiences. The human experience from Figures 4 and 5 is that language responses seem to appear from nowhere but then many are neither spoken nor written. This was Nietzsche’s comment on Descartes’ *Cogito*, that the active agent ‘I’ in “I think therefore I am” is unwarranted:

With regard to the superstitions of logicians, I shall never tire of emphasizing a small terse fact, which these superstitious minds hate to concede—namely, that a thought comes when ‘it’ wishes, and not when ‘I’ wish, so that it is a falsification of the facts of the case to say that the subject ‘I’ is the condition of the predicate ‘think’. It thinks; but that this ‘it’ is precisely the famous old ‘ego’ is, to put it mildly, only a supposition, an assertion, and assuredly not an ‘immediate certainty’. After all, one has even gone too far with this ‘it thinks’—even the ‘it’ contains an interpretation of the process, and does not belong to the process itself. Thinking is an activity... (Nietzsche, 1966/1886, p. 24)

Instead, thinking is an action or behavior, like catching a tree branch, but the agent is not a “I.” The agents of such actions are the listeners and other contexts that engender the language responses, *plus* the contexts that then result in these language responses not being said out loud. All this is external and in the material objective world of cats and tree branches, but it only engages with listeners not what is being talked about. It does not originate or take place ‘inside’ the person or a mind, and there is no agentic “I” required as Descartes assumed. The agency is the external social exchanges that have shaped the language responses in context and the external social contexts that stop the language responses from being said out loud.

The final piece of the puzzle is that from all that has been briefly said about thinking and thoughts contextually, the *experience* of thinking and thoughts becomes very much like what have been called subjective reality, consciousness, phenomenology, awareness, beliefs, etc. Figure 6 tries to show the experience a person has of their thinking and thoughts. A language response occurs in the external social context but there is very little that is still salient or observable of the external contexts which engendered that thinking. Thoughts do not seem connected to external cats and tree branches, and the all-important listeners who shaped those thoughts in context might not even be there.



Normal experience of thinking (the 'subjective') since the audiences that have shaped the language of thoughts are not present. Thoughts are still external ('objective') social events, however.

It seems to make sense in everyday life, therefore, to talk about our thoughts *as if* they were 'inside' us or were a non-material mind or spirituality, since there seems to be no other ways of talking about it or explaining it. Our 'experience' of the 'subjective' is the actions of having language responses shaped but not saying them out loud, all of which happens from the external world but does not appear that way. Thus, we have behavior that strikes us as very different from patting cats and catching tree branches. This is our report of experience.

The philosophy of assigning truth at this point relies on ideas about 'something' originating from inside the person being correctly 'expressed' or 'communicated' through language, but this can be seen now as misleading. Like talking out loud, our use of language is shaped by people and audiences and happens without being true or false. That only occurs when we think we talk about what happens but there are no references or representations. Other philosophical positions can be seen as variations on these themes but missing the point that the listeners and their responses are the link between language and the 'objective' reality, not truth.

This means that what has been called 'subjective' is really about thinking, but such thinking is actually an interaction with an 'objective' world of a very specific nature (listeners) and not a new realm of subjectivity or spirituality. How this works is more difficult to observe in everyday life, and even more so when other external social contexts mean that we do talk out loud. All this means that it 'feels' very different from patting cats and catching tree branches.

So, when we talk about the subjective world, we are talking about the world of talking and thoughts, especially the latter. 'Subjectivity' certainly appears weird and different from 'objectivity' but only because it interacts with a very specialized and unique part of the objective world—people rather than cats and branches, and only because the thinking rather than talking seems to appear out of thin air. We do not need a 'psychology' or semantic theory of meaning to be inserted between talking/thinking and the real world, nor a complex of associations or cognitive processing, nor a mind or neural network. The effects are all in the material social exchanges between people using language and what gets done as a result. There is no second world out there or inside us.

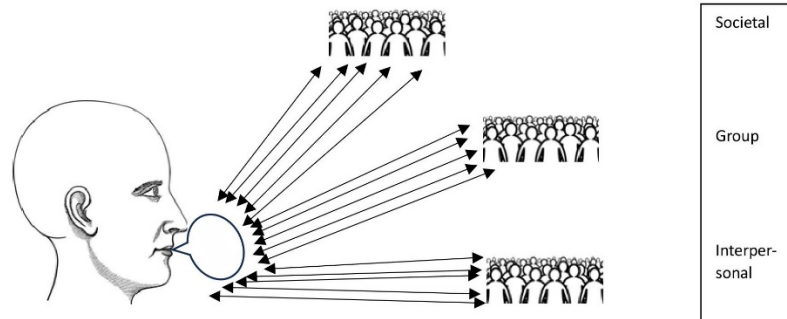
The massive overlay of language social exchanges

The story and Figures so far have shown a single individual talking with another single individual. In life, that is not how things work with language. First, our very languages are learned through massively complex histories of social exchanges involving the same words which have been learned from other people back through other people. All these phrases and sentences were in existence even before we were born (Bakhtin, 1981, pp. 293-294). So "This is a cat" has been used many times, in many contexts, with many people; it is hardly a unique behavior, and even more so for "This is a ..."

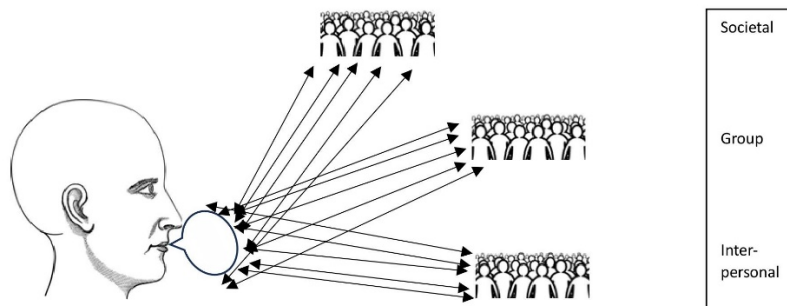
Second, we learn our language and the responses shaped in many different contexts not through a single person but through many sources. A simplified but practical way of considering this is to consider our language as being shaped by societal forces, group or cultural forces, and through interpersonal forces (Guerin, 2025a). The discourses of each of these is different and shapes our eventual individual language responding in different ways. How society shapes us to say (in certain contexts) "I love my country" is very different from how groups or interpersonal encounters would do the same. The idea is

that all these (simplified) three types of discursive shaping happen all the time and for the same language responses (Guerin, 2025a).

Figure 7 tries to illustrate some of this and to give the idea of how complex and massive is learning language. This is reflected in the large number of years it takes us to achieve some sophistication in language use in context, to do nuanced things to people.

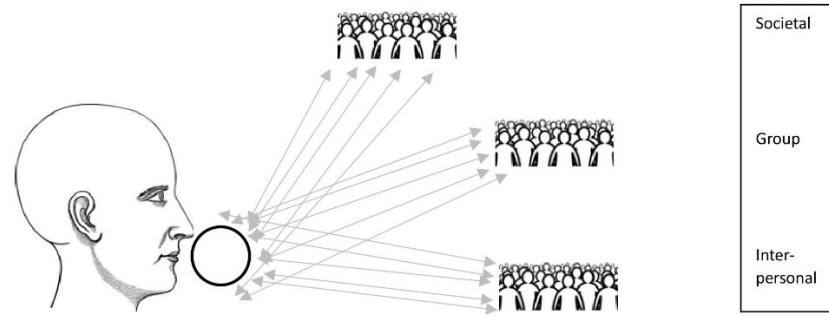


The situation in the ‘objective’ world of talking and thinking is even more confused, however. Figure 8 tries to illustrate that all these social exchanges using language are mixed together and crossed over time. For *any* use of language, even said to an individual, there is shaping through all of societal, group and interpersonal discourses. The idea of a single coherent thought decided upon inside our head and then said out loud to influence a person, is not accurate. What is shaped in this interpersonal context is shaped by a complex weaving of previous societal, group and interpersonal shaping.



That is, our thinking, talking, cognition, ‘inner’ experiences, etc. are formed from a complex and massively overlaid set of discourses happening throughout our lives, which existed before us (reflected in other’s discourses). What are called our ‘cognitive behaviors’ are therefore shaped in this massively woven ‘fabric’ of social exchanges, all of which are at least potentially observable in the world of patting cats and catching tree branches (Guerin, 2025b). They ‘exist’ out in the world of social exchanges with society, groups and individuals, not ‘in our heads.’

The final point is that all the above applies to all the language behaviors shaped in context from the overlay of all these sources, even those not said out loud—our thinking. Figure 9 attempts to illustrate this even though the experience we have is still like Figure 6. While thinking and thoughts do not result in consequences from listeners, since they are not said out loud, they are still shaped by, or built upon, the consequences of many social exchanges across society, groups and interpersonal. Our thoughts do not appear from nowhere, ‘popping into our heads’ as if out of nowhere, they are shaped by all the massively overlaid social exchanges in our worlds. Potentially, by observing and analyzing those social exchanges, we are ‘observing’ thinking (Guerin, Thain et al., 2024).



The upshot of this for ‘subjective’ experience is that how this all works in our everyday life is even more difficult to observe and track. When we appear to ‘think’ subjectively that “I love this cat,” we do not see all the audiences and history that make this possible, both the saying of those words and the external social contexts that means it ends up not being said out loud. It appears a very, very different event to patting a cat, seemingly in another place and dimension. But it is not, if the external social contexts are included and which are all potentially observable.

Weirdly, this supports a new version of Descartes’ *Cogito*. What is real and exists, the objective world, is what we interact with, cats, catching tree branches, and climbing mountains. But in the new version, “I think” really implies that the person is still having real social exchanges but with their social worlds even when their social world precludes them saying the language responses out loud. In effect, “I am” because I am interacting with cats, and I am also interacting with people when I talk or think. Put together, *I think and pat cats, therefore I am*.

To give an example, consider saying to someone in conversation: “*One day, I would really like to go on a boat cruise through Antarctica.*” What are some pieces of the fabric of discursive shaping that might be relevant here? While this obviously needs specific research with that person and their networks of relationships (Guerin, Thain et al., 2024), we can guess some research avenues for exploring possibilities (Guerin, 2016). First, a lot depends on the topics of the interpersonal contexts of this conversation. But the speaker might also be presenting a view of themselves on the spot to the listener even if they had previously never thought about visiting Antarctica. Remember that the objective reality (of talking) is the effect on the listener, not the ‘truth’ of the statement or whether it truly communicates something that has been residing ‘within.’ It could also be pointing out an economic inequality between speaker and listener if the listener could afford such a trip but not the speaker. Again, the possibilities are many and need careful contextual research and observations to find out what is happening (Guerin, Thain et al., 2024).

Second, other groups might be shaping the discourse in part if they both know someone working for a cruise company. The language might also be indirectly referring to another person or family they both know, perhaps hinting that the listener has never been to that person’s house to see their Antarctica photos. The language could refer back to previous conversations about elite travelers, or it could be fishing (Jefferson, 1985; Pomerantz, 1980) for a conversation along these lines.

Third, societal discourses could be part of the mesh of social exchanges shaping the language here. Our social exchanges with society include images and marketing about how to live, and ship cruises are part of this marketed lifestyle. Presenting an image to the listener will contain societal discourses of what is good to be, what ‘self’ is worth presenting. Societal discourses about wealth could also partly shape such conversations in different ways—it could be making fun of wealthy people or berating them, or else show the speaker’s position relative to the societal status rankings.

Finally, all the above also applies when a person is by themselves and has this thought ‘pop into their head’ as if from nowhere (Guerin, 2001), “*One day, I would really like to go on a boat cruise through Antarctica.*” They have not ‘decided’ this in their cognitive processes or mind, but rather, this not-said-out-loud piece of talking has been shaped by all the possibilities given above and is still shaped by audiences, past and present. For such thoughts, we need to additionally research why this was *not* said out loud (Guerin, Thain et al., 2024). It could be that no one was present at the time, or it could be that the people they know would laugh at them if they said this out loud.

The point of this example is not to explain or interpret “Why people talk about ship cruises,” but to show the possibilities that range over complex shaping from all of societal, group, and interpersonal discourses. The advantage of the present position is that all these are potentially observable and researchable, even though this is difficult (Guerin, Thain et al., 2024). This is not possible when tracing subjective models of the internal truth of someone saying, “*One day, I would really like to go on a boat cruise through Antarctica.*” That can never be observed.

Conclusions

The present paper has furthered the goal (Guerin, 2021) of replacing philosophy (talking about talking) as a way of finding *new* answers about the world with the observation, interaction, and descriptions of our contextual worlds, especially our discursive worlds. The problems raised within the philosophical debates about the ‘objective’ and the ‘subjective’ worlds were shown to arise from the very nature of philosophizing itself, which has focused on whether *talking* about these can be called ‘true’ or ‘false’ *with respect to* referents, representations, expressions, or correspondence. Seeming differences between doing things and talking about doing those things are misinterpreted as differences in real referents, representations, expressions, or correspondence. This has led to the misleading ideas that talking can be true or false depending on whether it refers to, represents, or corresponds to an objective world, or whether it arises from the ‘true’ expression or communication of a subjective world. In the material world, all our behaviors either do something or not in their contexts, and talking about this cannot in addition be true or false, even when you are talking about your talking behaviors.

From this, what have been called the objective and subjective worlds have only appeared to differ because they do things (or not) to different parts of our worlds and in different ways. In particular, what has been called the ‘subjective’ is about the experiences of talking and thinking and appears different from the way our other behaviors work.

The social properties of language behaviors therefore can describe our experiences of what has hitherto been called the subjective but without inventing a new domain: the language behaviors only work or not in social exchanges with other people and do not interact at all with what is being talked about; they can appear when nothing seems to be happening in the world and even when no one is present; language responses occur in context even when they are not said out loud (thinking); and they are shaped by a variety of contexts including through societal, group, and interpersonal discourses and social exchanges. The various terms for the ‘subjective’ experience have been invented to try to capture these very real but material properties of language exchanges (meaning, consciousness, experience, states, thought, mental, mind, cognition, semantic networks, truth, subjective probabilities).

This means that the ‘subjective’ is potentially observable with contextual research methods (Guerin, Thain et al., 2024) and not hidden away in a private ‘inner’ world inside the head or a mind. By finding out the contexts of social exchanges across societal, group, and interpersonal discourses we can potentially observe the ‘subjective’ and the interactions with other people that engender the language responses.

The main implications from this are:

- stop trying to prove that statements and talking can be true or false about the interactive world, both for interacting with cats and interacting with people using our language behaviors
- stop inventing new words and metaphors to describe or explain the ‘subjective’ world, focus instead on what has shaped the language involved and (usually) what has shaped it not being said out loud
- focus instead on observing and describing the material and social language contexts that allow language to have effects and social exchanges
- focus on observing and describing the material language contexts for thinking and what occurs in context so that the language behaviors are not said out loud and what the effects are of not being said out loud
- analyze in new ways the topics which can *only* occur as language behaviors in terms of the material social exchanges that shape them (subjective probabilities, thought, numbering, cognitions, anxieties, etc.; Guerin, 2025b)

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