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CAPTIVE CONSCIOUSNESS AND THE NEW JABBERWOCKY

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I

Preliminaries

Citing semi-public jokes is not an enterprise for which one can easily find bibliographic support. One must, therefore, appeal to the memory of linguists who used to work or study at American universities in the 1970s for corroboration when one recalls a conference, held either in Chicago or in some other Midwestern university, which purported dealt with *the languages of the Soviet Union* but was informally called 'the captive languages conference'.

In one direction, this joke hand-waved at the belief, consensually held by the overwhelming majority of western scholars throughout the cold war, that to live under communism was to live in captivity. This *aspect* of the joke (pardon my pun on the salient presence of a grammatical phenomenon called 'aspect' in the structure of Russian) targeted the Soviet intelligentsia and their foreign conversation partners for acquiescing in the existing arrangements. Apparently, these arrangements did not empower speakers of non-Slavic languages in the Asiatic republics to critically comment on views expressed about their languages by experts speaking for them. In the other direction, the joke alluded to a term frequently used at that time for listeners who, for institutional reasons, did not have the option of walking away from a lecture they found boring – the term 'captive audience'. This second *aspect* of the joke suggested that ideas based on unverifiable claims about the languages of shackled speech communities were bound to be boring; they would not be presented in interesting ways that could possibly contest or modify anybody's views about language phenomena or linguistic theories.

In the present paper, the point of revisiting that old joke is to help place some classical notions at the heart of the democratic imagination – such as freedom of speech, freedom of inquiry,

possibilities for criticism and debate – in the context of questions of consciousness. Linguists who circulate a 'captive languages' joke imply that discourse coming from a captive consciousness is a not fully self-aware controlled discourse, therefore boringly predictable, and thus incapable of stimulating new thinking in an open society. In contrast, if your consciousness is free, then you enjoy the privileges of an unfettered imagination and are likely to come up with new and interesting thoughts.

What is attempted in this paper could in principle have been rendered irrelevant by some coherent and compelling body of scientific or other systematic writing that uses 'conscious' or 'consciousness' as a technical term. But psycho-analytic writings that contrast conscious phenomena with preconscious and unconscious phenomena never became defining texts on which ordinary uses of these terms crucially depend. The more recent body of publications, sometimes called consciousness studies, also represents a bit of an enclave, whose ways of using the term 'consciousness' are anaphoric to ordinary public usage rather than the other way round. Even such an outlier as Jaynes (1976), in the relatively recent past, even a systematic philosopher like Whitehead (1929: 184ff, 274) in an earlier period, and other authors who come to mind, keep the term 'consciousness' anchored in its ordinary usage when they exercise their right to deploy it at crucial points in their terminological geometry. We dare not do otherwise.

Many influential writings dealing with consciousness – far too many for bibliographic gestures to serve any purpose – tend to focus on a particular, episodic moment, to ask whether you or I are paying *conscious* attention to a rabbit, say, darting across our path, and to note that it makes sense to ask such a question only if you or I or some other sentient being is paying attention to that rabbit. Well, not all sentient beings are you or I, and this is not a reference to a second rabbit who might be paying attention to the aforementioned rabbit. It makes sense to ask a seven-year-old child this question, for instance, and the answer might even be *Yes*. But the child is not going to remember paying that attention to that rabbit of ours.

Why should remembering or not remembering make any difference? Well, there are contexts in which it matters whether the consciousness in question has some continuity to it. Consciousness at age seven undoubtedly exists. But it is ephemeral. Discourse by that child at later stages of her life cannot retrieve that consciousness, unless some external factor steps in – like an adult who takes the responsibility of preserving the memory, or like technological aids that produce an auditory or visual or written record.

Is the child-adult difference here a contrast between what we regard as the not-fully-attentive childish quality and the wide-awake adult quality of the consciousness directed at the rabbit? By claiming that the child's ephemeral awareness of that rabbit becomes a matter of record if an adult takes charge (or if, equivalently, adult-built recording systems produce and store some long-term record), just what kind of move are we making?

Children as young as that are unable to sustain a thread of continuous attention over a span of months and years. That they hand over the task of sustaining such threads to the adults who take care of them reflects the social distribution of ability. But one expects children to grow into responsible and capable adults. In situations where adult populations are infantilized – where some imperial community M (as in Master) colonizes some population S (as in Slave) and claims that these poor benighted heathens have a childish mentality and that their thoughtful and enlightened M society must generously do all the thinking and serious record-keeping for them – exactly what type of picture is being presented to us? Are we only being told that society S is subjugated, that there is a cultural *power* differential connected to other consequences of military conquest? Or do M's culture managers claim a demonstrable *ability* contrast between S and M?[1] What type of claim (and here we are talking only about the claims, not about their truth or falsity) would appear to endow the predicate 'childlike' with specifiable content when M's 'intellectuals' apply it to an entire population S? Is a restricted language, of the sort that M's managers routinely attribute to population S, inherently incapable of bearing the weight of 'free' or 'imaginative' discourse at a level that can be identified with precision?

It is in the context of these questions that I invite you to take a rigorous look at the Ascian thought-experiment. Readers who routinely refuse such invitations, applying the hermeneutics of suspicion across the board, are likely to refuse this particular invitation on the grounds that thought-experiments are a priori useless and that only pulling 'real' examples into the picture will help by sharpening the issues. They are welcome to their churlishness, but the few (if any) readers who are serious about this defence of their attitude will perhaps eventually take on the task of demonstrating that the putative 'reality' of their favourite mode of projecting from empirical data can possibly make a difference to the terms of the debate. Surely projecting and imagining are closely related enterprises. Thought-experimentation is an empirical activity.

II

Gene Wolfe's Thought-Experiment

The Ascian thought-experiment was conducted by Wolfe (1983), who in a work of fiction imagines a person from 'Ascia', a country where adults utter only quotations from an authorized body of official texts. Wolfe imagines an Ascian encountering 'non-Ascians', whose language use is 'normal', is as untutored as ours. It is evident from Wolfe's text that his point is to show what happens if a language community, due to cultural domination of an extreme kind, systematically flouts the principle that sentences are in principle assembled on line rather than stored. I shall first present Wolfe's portrait of 'Ascia' and then return to the main thread of our reasoning. I am focusing on this concrete example of the coercive mode of cultural (and discursive) domination because the persuasive form is a derivative of it that dresses itself up in claims of epistemic and ethical-political superiority – replacing Wolfe's oligarchic 'group of seventeen' with a mega-oligarchic 'group of seventeen million'. Their numbers and entrenchment enable mega-oligarchic rulers to convince themselves and their adherents that they are benevolent, but a conceptually literate theory of language must diagnose their rule too as a version of dictatorship. Structural violence, while bloodless, is nevertheless a system that violates fundamental rights at all times.

Wolfe opens the relevant scene in his novel by showing the protagonist, Severian, amidst his fellow prisoners, trapped in a captivity whose details need not detain us. On his 'right lay a man' with a 'close-cropped scalp' – the speaker of that restricted 'Ascian' language we wish to focus on. Severian calls to him, and is shocked when he looks up: "His eyes were emptier than any human eyes I had ever seen[…]. 'Glory to the Group of Seventeen,' he said" (1983: 31).

Severian tries to start a conversation, but finds there is something deeply wrong: "'Good morning. Do you know anything about the way this place is run?'A shadow appeared to cross his face […] He answered, 'All endeavours are conducted well or ill precisely in so far as they conform to Correct Thought'" (1983: 31-2).

Severian persists, and is stonewalled again. Seeing his predicament, a 'normal' prisoner to his left intervenes: "'You won't get anything out of him. He's a prisoner. […] He talks like that all the time. Never any other way. *Hey, you*! We're going to beat you!' The other

answered, 'For the Armies of the Populace, defeat is the springboard of victory, and victory the ladder to further victory'"s (1983: 32).

This 'normal' neighbour, Melito, informs Severian that the man is an Ascian, and that it is only because he is an interpreter that he has learnt the language used by Melito and Severian. Another prisoner, Foila, indicates that she has had some experience with Ascians and understands their restricted discourse. Severian asks, "if the Ascian [is] composing his remarks or quoting some literary source with which [Severian] was unfamiliar." Foila explains: "Just making it up, you mean? […] No. They never do that. Everything they say has to be taken from an approved text. Some of them don't talk at all. The rest have thousands – I suppose actually tens or hundreds of thousands – of those tags memorized. […] **Where they come from, only the smallest children ever talk the way we do**" (emphasis mine – PD) (1983: 34).

Wolfe then sets the stage for the exercise of showing us how the Ascian, in his restricted instrument of discourse, can nevertheless tell a story, with Foila interpreting into ordinary discourse for the others. I now quote some passages from this uniquely important text of linguistic science fiction, which deserves to be as celebrated in our period of inquiry as Lewis Carroll's word play had been for the word-focused period that preceded ours (hence the term 'new Jabberwocky' in the title of this study).

> [T]he Ascian began to speak: 'In times past, loyalty to the cause of the populace was to be found everywhere. The will of the Group of Seventeen was the will of everyone.'
>
> Foila interpreted: '*Once upon a time…*'
>
> 'Let no one be idle. If one is idle, let him band together with others who are idle too, and let them look for idle land. Let everyone they meet direct them. It is better to walk a thousand leagues than to sit in the House of Starvation.'
>
> '*There was a remote farm worked in partnership by people who were not related.*'
>
> 'One is strong, another beautiful, a third a cunning artificer. Which is best? He who serves the populace.'
>
> '*On this farm lived a good man.*'
>
> 'Let the work be divided by a wise divider of work. Let the food be divided by a just divider of food. Let the pigs grow fat. Let rats starve.'
>
> '*The others cheated him of his share.*' […]
>
> '*The just man did not give up. He returned to the capital once more.*'
>
> 'The citizen renders to the populace what is due to the populace. What is due to the populace? Everything.'
>
> '*He was very tired. His clothes were in rags and his shoes worn out. He had no food and nothing to trade.'*

'It is better to be just than to be kind, but only good judges can be just; let those who cannot be just be kind.'

'*In the capital he lived by begging.*' (1983: 79-81).

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[…]At this point I could not help but interrupt. I told Foila that I […] could not understand how she […] knew, for example, that the phrase about kindness and justice meant that the hero had become a beggar.

'Well, suppose that someone else – Melito, perhaps – were telling a story, and at some point in it he thrust out his hand and began to ask for alms. You'd know what that meant, wouldn't you?'

I agreed that I would.

'It's just the same here. Sometimes we find Ascian soldiers who are too hungry or too sick to keep up with the rest, and after they understand we aren't going to kill them, that business about kindness and justice is what they say. In Ascian, of course. It's what beggars say in Ascia' (81-82).

The narrative continues: the Group of Seventeen hear the good man out and promise to put the bad men in prison. He goes home and tells them. They beat him again. Then:

'Behind our efforts, let there be found our efforts.'

'*But he did not give up. Once more he set off for the capital to complain.*'

'Those who fight for the populace fight with a thousand hearts. Those who fight against them with none.'

'*Now the bad men were afraid.*'

'Let no one oppose the decisions of the Group of Seventeen.'

'*They said to themselves, "He has gone to the palace again and again, and each time he must have told the rulers that we did not obey their earlier commands. Surely, this time they will send soldiers to kill us."*'

'If their wounds are in their backs, who shall stanch their blood?'

'*The bad men ran away.*'

'Where are those who in times past have opposed the decisions of the Group of Seventeen?'

'*They were never seen again.*'

'Let there be clean water for those who toil. Let there be hot food for them, and a clean bed. Then they will sing at their work, and their work will be light to them. Then they will sing at the harvest, and the harvest will be heavy.'

'*The just man returned home and lived happily ever after.*'

Everyone applauded this story[…].

From this story […] I feel that I learned […,] first of all, how much of our speech, which we think freshly minted in our own mouths, consists of set locutions. […] Second, I learned how difficult it is to eliminate the urge for expression. The people of Ascia were reduced to speaking

> only with their masters' voice; but they had made of it a new tongue, and I had no doubt, after hearing the Ascian, that by it he could express whatever thought he wished (82-84).

This is a sad, sensitively staged caricature; Wolfe asks us to note that we, who overestimate the novelty of our utterances, are not as un-Ascian as we think. The coercive **dictat**orship run by the Group of Seventeen, whose **writings** control the **speaking** of every mature Ascian, invites careful reflection on persuasive versions of such power, in the context of a take on writing/ speaking we do not have the space to explore here (see Dasgupta 2011 for such an exploration).

III

Some Reflections

The caricature is painted from a viewpoint that assumes that any thinking that deserves to be regarded as thinking is nourished by a 'normal', 'free', uncoerced imagination that is not even clouded by heavy persuasion verging on coercion. In contrast to that norm, the Ascian population is held captive by an imposed discourse. Wolfe's text invites us to view, and to be fascinated by, individuals who can creatively wriggle around in that prison cell and who, thus, manifest the indomitable yearning for freedom that characterizes the human spirit.

Formal linguists will, no doubt, use Wolfe's Ascian thought-experiment as a point of departure for a reexamination of recursion on the syntagmatic and paradigmatic axes. This is not the best place to stage that discussion; I am merely noting its inevitability.

Equally inevitable, in this day and age, is the following way of taking off on a tangent. Someone who is committed to a censorious public space – like, no doubt, some of my conservative readers, looking around and hoping to find an unpatriotic remark on two in my writing so that they can, with pious horror, set it aside as yet another product of the devil's ubiquitous workshop – will surely resist Wolfe. One such reader, called CPSA (Censorious Public Space Aficionado), will draw on the classical insights of information theory. *Choice and information are colligated*, he or she will argue. *If Ascian discourse has well-defined limits, so much the better for thoughtful and informative exchanges among Ascia's fortunate citizens. If one has grown into a finite but suitably large set of discourses to assemble one's utterances from, wonderful, one is then able to make determinate choices, which ipso facto carry specifiable information.*

CPSA will go on to pontificate that *Absolute freedom of speech is meaningless, as one cannot meaningfully choose from an infinite space. Speakers who imagine that they are doing so are suffering from an optical illusion. They tacitly presuppose a large but finite array that they actually choose from: only so can their utterances in fact convey information. In other words, so-called free speech is drawn from an unconsciously designed Ascia-like domain of limited discourse. Unconscious design is always worse than conscious design: any engineer will tell you this: surely you know that brightest brains of our country go to IITs to become engineers, and you should listen respectfully when they're talking to you and telling you how things really are. They know stuff that you don't, so stop piping up with your uninformed and incoherent talk. Wolfe has misunderstood the point that comes out of his thought-experiment, and he has designed it as a caricature because he doesn't get the point. In fact, that's the way discourse should in fact be designed, though of course the designing should be done by real experts who deliberate and work things out with the necessary mix of formal disciplined work and informal brainstorming, not by some oligarchic 'group of seventeen'. So designed, discourse should be translated into teachable skills and taught to citizens of a responsible republic, so that they learn how to think correctly and become assets rather than liabilities of a proud and growing nation. True freedom is wedded to discipline, not to formless anarchy.*

Readers not committed to a CSP who imagine that they can have a reasonable conversation with our CSPA are welcome to try, especially if they have found a technically formalizable way around our IITian's argument from information theory and choice. As my mild caricature of CSPA's mode of reasoning may suggest, I find this framework of debate not just stultifying in some informal sense but *demonstrably* inadequate, for reasons that I will be happy to unpack for interlocutors who actually ask me what they are.

My purpose here is neither to kickstart a formal linguistic debate about recursion, not to talk to trolls like CSPA, but to draw the reader's attention to the inadequacy of any approach to the study of consciousness – and to the study of the verbal vehicle of many expressions of human awareness – that forgets about the diachronic dimension.

People who engage in serious, so-called 'free', discourse thereby exercise a rationality that both *makes* its own history, projecting into the future, and *carries* its own history, inheriting various lines of remembrance of things past. We have been accustomed to ways of talking about rationality and history-making that emphasize the sovereignty and independence of the rational fashioner of one's own fate. But real histories involve living with others, and living with the

inequalities and subordinations that we find in the package. Many internal and external 'colonizations' are part of our lot, and it is wishful thinking to imagine that they can be *eliminated*, even if the attempt to *oppose* them and to *minimize* their effects sometimes brings out what 'we' come to regard as 'the best in us'. The sense of 'we' is far more parametric than one is willing to admit: people draw and redraw these community boundaries for pedagogic reasons that keep shifting.

My purpose in showcasing the Ascian thought-experiment is to draw attention to the anti-historical terms of reference of the framework within which Wolfe and his obvious sequels (people who can be easily imagined as his cheerleaders and as his opponents) contextualize the enterprise. To my ear, the thought-experiment sounds like a passage most fruitfully construed as a demonstration of what happens if some regime tries to freeze history and fit humans into a purely synchronic Procrustean bed. What I gather after listening to Wolfe's story-fragment is that discourse – with all the baggage about freedom of speech, freedom of inquiry and all that – is essentially history-laden, that the democratic imagination is really all about history-making, and that anything that deprives discourse of this vital essence makes it shrink, even if there is some token retention of the capability to mean (a retention that Wolfe highlights). Subordination per se is, to my mind, a red herring here (although one does understood why Wolfe diagnoses the problem in those terms). I would be grateful for the opportunity to engage in debate with colleagues who think otherwise.

Note

1. Anglophone readers with a taste for perverse word-play are welcome to hear this *S and M* as a ludic reversal of 'us and dem' or even as a reversal of S[adist] and M[asochist].

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