The world at one
Special issue on the XXII World Congress of Philosophy
Interviews plus full reports from Korea

Interviews with David Chalmers, Alvin Goldman Jonathan Israel, Joanna Kucaradi and Ernie Lepore
The pluralism problem • Where are the Brits? • Korean thought

THOUGHT PROVOKING THOUGHTS
Words don't come easy

ERNIE LEPORE HAS A GOOD RABBIT ABOUT LANGUAGE

4TH QUARTER 2008 tpm
Most linguists think that there are infinitely many sentences, that languages are productive and systematic. Maybe the most remarkable achievement of our lives is that we learn this thing with infinite power. But the whole thing hangs on those sentences being built up out of their components, which are words. So it's not even clear what one of the more striking theses in the development of linguistics over the last half century signifies or means without an account of the atoms, so to speak, out of which we build these things.

Ernie Lepore is the Easter bunny. Or so he tells me. That's because his family are of Neapolitan origin and his full name is Ernesto Pasquale Lepore, "lepore" meaning ‘hare’, and "Pasquale" the adjectival form of "Easter".

Such trivia is no way to introduce a distinguished philosopher of language, you might think. But, in fact, the example of his name is pertinent to the subject he talked about in Seoul. You see, the Italian word for 'hare' is not lepore at all, but lepre. Lepore certainly derives from lepre, but is it accurate to say it's a variation of the same word, or a different, related one?

Lepore, the man, is interested in this issue, specifically, in David Kaplan's question about what makes two utterances utterances of the same word, and more generally in what exactly words are. For Lepore, the fact that we haven't got a good answer to that most fundamental of questions is something of an intellectual embarrassment.

"Most linguists think that there are infinitely many sentences, that languages are productive and systematic," he told me in Korea. "Maybe the most remarkable achievement of our lives is that we learn this thing with infinite power. Very limited, finite beings are able to achieve this remarkable accomplishment. But, of course, the whole thing hangs on those sentences being built up out of their components, which are words. So it's not even clear what one of the more striking theses in the development of linguistics over the last half century signifies or means without an account of the atoms, so to speak, out of which we build these things."

The challenge is to lay down the rules for "individualizing" words, that is to say, for saying when two utterances are of the same or a different word. Sounds easy? Then what about lepore and lepre? The fact they have different spellings doesn't clinch it; consider "colour" and "color". Nor does meaning settle the issue: synonyms are not the same word, even though they have the same meaning.

Of course, philosophers have made more sophisticated attempts to answer this question, and in his Seoul paper, Lepore says he "did a pretty good job, I think, of running through the main candidates, and I hope I convinced you that they're all bankrupt, none of them work."

What he was then set to do was provide his alternative. But the famous world congress time constraints got the better of him. "I still think they were lying about how much time I spent," he tells me, but I was there, and they weren't.

"Well, you know what happened is I looked up, because there was some young Korean
student, and he looked puzzled. He probably wasn’t. He was probably thinking about his girlfriend or something like that. And then I thought, well, I’m a guest, let me repeat that. And you don’t factor your repetitions when you’re timing yourself.”

Fortunately, *tpm* is able to transcend such limitations and bring you Lepore’s unstated conclusion. First, however, is the (abridged) story of how Lepore got there, which is a fascinating example of how philosophers develop their ideas and make connections.

For starters, he co-wrote a book with Herman Cappelen, published last year, called *Language Turned On Itself*, which is on the nature of quotations. “When Jerry Fodor realised I was writing an entire book on quotation marks, he said to me, ‘You know, Emie, with you around, the semicolons aren’t safe.’”

“But, in writing that book, it became clear to me that one of the giant lacunae in the literature is that no one really has an adequate understanding of what expressions are. We just assumed all our readers would know when you have two expressions and when you have one expression, and then we went to show you what quotation expressions are among the set of expressions. Well, we left that part unchecked.

“So in the back of my head, I felt I had to finish that part of the project some day. And then two years ago, I taught a seminar at Peking University in China, and just by coincidence, I stumbled into a discussion on ‘the heresy of paraphrase’. This is an expression from the new critics, who were literary critics from the mid to early part of the last century, inspired by T.S. Eliot and I.A. Richards.

“One of their theses is that poetry cannot be paraphrased. And they use an inductive argument: well, look at these efforts to try and paraphrase a poem. Poems can’t be translated. They can’t be paraphrased. They can be described and they can be analyzed in some sense, but the analysis and description will always be incomplete.”

Initially, Lepore found the view absurd. “Sure I could put the poem in another medium. I could describe it somehow to other people. That was my simple analytic philosophical dismissal of literary criticism. But then the more I looked at it, the more I was overwhelmed by the evidence. It’s striking. You get a uniformity from Aristotle forward about this resistance of poetry to paraphrase and translation. I don’t know a single book of poems in translation that doesn’t begin the preface by apologising.”

This set Lepore off onto another project, to “reconcile that view about the nature of poetry with my views about the nature of meaning, my training in cognitive science, which tells me surely the poem has significance, there ought to be a way of re-representing it.” However, once again, this work “presupposed that I had a prior understanding of when two expressions were different. So again, I found myself having a manuscript that I was pleased with, but it had this giant lacuna at the bottom: what are expressions?”

In trying to answer this question, however, Lepore found that he was delving into metaphysics, and wasn’t equipped for it. So he started working with John Hawthorne, who holds the prestigious Waynflete chair of Metaphysical Philosophy at Oxford. “He’s a really fascinating philosopher. You throw your ideas at him and he throws back interesting responses.”
With Hawthorne, he went though and rejected all the proposed solutions to the problem of individuating words. But what about an answer?

"When you say schedule [skedule] and I say schedule [shedule], and you say tissue [tish-yoo] and I say tissue [tiis-yoo], most people say we've used the same word. Why? It can't be merely that they mean the same. For example, I guess in Britain you guys use 'presently' to mean something different than we do. Even though we pronounce them the same way, but they don't actually have the same meaning. So it's not clear we can get a hook on this by saying, well, it's the meaning that holds it together.

"So we think, maybe it's been wrong to look at the intrinsic properties of our performances. Instead, just look at certain relational, historical factors about them. I learned my word from someone and you learned your word from someone. When we look back at the history of many such learnings, we find out that they converge." So the broad answer they settled on, which has recent precedents, was that "two performances across time are performances of the same word, just in case they have the right appropriate historical relation to each other."

This solution entails some bad news. If the identity of words is to be found in their histories, then it seems we're doomed never to be able to specify the actual conditions for the identity of words.

"Here's an example that John and I put in the paper. Most people would agree that performances of the word 'mean' and the word 'mean' are totally separate words. I can't imagine anyone denying it. However, if you take the cluster of performances of the one word and the cluster of performances of the other word, you could trace them back to a single cluster of performances in Saxon England. Now, from that, I don't think anybody would feel compelled to say, 'Oh, isn't that interesting: in Saxon England they had a homonym that was two words.' I think most people would agree that whatever they were doing in Saxon England, those performances were performances of one word. So that raises the interesting question, since those performances of that single word somehow or other provoked and inspired performances of distinct words, contemporaneously, when did these two words come into existence, exactly?"

"And here's the amazing thing about the literature on this and our investigation -- nobody has a clear view about that. So there's this notion that the performances of words, of the same word, changed across time. But in this case, the logic of identity tells us that we have two words now and we had one word then. Something happened. When did it happen? And you would think that any theory of words has to give an answer to that question. Right?"

The trouble is, there doesn't seem to be a good one.

"On the one hand, we're really good at local performances. Mean/moan: different words. Schedule/schedule, same word. No one pauses to say, well, schedule and schedule, are they the same word? When you first hear it you might wonder, but almost any authority is going to tell you immediately they're the same word with different pronunciations.

"We're also really good at telling you that that's a non-performance of a word, or a bad performance of the word. So we're really good at listening to people's accents and recognising the
words that they performed, as opposed to recognizing that a child doesn’t have a grip on his word at all, that it’s not a bad performance, that’s a non-performance of the word. But we’re really bad at the historical questions.

“Now, why is that interesting? Because on the one hand, it suggests that we’re not sceptics about the existence of words. There’s enough regularity in our performance identification to say there’s a true ontological posit here, there is something, a word. No one’s prepared to go sceptical, atheist about words. On the other hand, it doesn’t look as though that’s enough, because there are these fuzzy, borderline cases.

“Normally, when you’re presented with that metaphysical profile, where you have a lot of clear cases and borderline fuzzy cases, you’ll appeal to your favorite theory of vagueness. There are a number of theories of vagueness out there, but among the two prominent ones, one is the so-called epistemicist view, which says, there are facts about words, but we’re never going to know them. The other one is there’s no fact to the matter at all about those borderline cases.” Lepore and Hawthorne opt for the former.

“The good news is most people don’t feel that vagueness all by itself destroys the existence of a topic or the entities postulated in it. The bad news is it looks as though our concept of words is metaphysically second-rate. It’s robust enough that we feel comfortable accepting the posit, but flimsy enough to suggest that the pursuit of the criteria that the history of the literature is full of is misguided, misplaced.

“So at this stage – remember I said this was a work in progress, this is not a finished product – we have, for the moment, convinced ourselves that the pursuit of criteria of identity is misguided. So I don’t know how it’s going to go.”

Reflecting on this conclusion and the lack of time at the world congress, Lepore suggests,

The bad news is it looks as though our concept of words is metaphysically second-rate

“Maybe it’s a good thing I didn’t get to the end, because it’s a little bit of a letdown. But what I think is exciting about the stuff that John and I are doing is the journey that led us to the end.

“You know Kahneman, the Nobel Prize winner in economics? He wrote a paper not that long ago in which he talked about how when we recollect prior events, we use this kind of a formula for recollecting. We remember the peak and the end. And when I was listening to his talk, I thought I could take guidance from him on how to give public presentations. You want to make sure you don’t begin with a bang and end with a dud. And I risked that by saying, well, you know what, we’re kind of skeptical about a positive end to this project. That’s not exactly how you want to end, so I have to think about it.”

You can be sure he will. In the meantime, perhaps we’ll have to settle for the conclusion that “Pasquale lepore” is probably not “the Easter bunny”, but we’ll never know when it ceased to be so.