Three Kinds of Alienness

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1. Alien languages

Let a language L1 have semantically alien kinds of features relative to – for short, *be alien relative to* – another language L2 just in case L1 differs semantically from L2, in the following ways:

(i) it is *structurally* different
(ii) it is so by having *added* elements.

"Structurally": the difference doesn't just have to do with what the language has expressions for but with what kinds of resources it has. What are the linguistic categories to which its expressions belongs? What are the modes of composition?

No doubt some languages are alien relative to other languages. A simple example: the language of predicate logic is alien relative to the language of propositional logic.

Let a language L be alien (full stop) if it is alien relative to all familiar languages.

This is no clearer than the notion of a "familiar language". I won't attempt a precise characterization of that notion. It can be sharpened in different ways. But familiar languages include Western natural languages and the well-known – familiar – languages of logic that have been developed partly with the aim of capturing logical features of these languages.

This characterization obviously leaves open some questions: Which natural languages? Which languages of logic? But regardless of how we choose to answer these questions it is plausible that there are alien languages.

Applying this to metaphysics: If L1 is alien relative to L2, then it can be that L1 is capable of representing aspects of the world that L2 cannot represent. If there are alien languages they might be capable of representing aspects of the world that familiar languages cannot represent.

Remarks:
Might we be radically mistaken about how familiar languages work?
The label "alien" might suggest: something *really different and weird*. But an alien language could in principle employ kinds of expressions that are *almost-but-not-exactly* like familiar kinds of expressions. This is *merely somewhat* alien.
Language vs. system of representation. Language vs. thought.

2. *Thoroughly* alien languages

The following is (part of) a story with which I begin my (2024):

> Suppose an explorer of a faraway planet returns and tells us the following about the community there and the place they inhabit. The environment, she says, is not very different from well-known places on Earth. The inhabitants of this planet are as successful in

navigating their environment as we are in navigating ours. They have successful science, as shown for example by their technological advances.

But the language they use, both in daily life and when engaging in scientific inquiry, is radically different from ours – so different that their words can't be classified as belonging to any of our linguistic categories. They do not, for example, use nouns, verbs or adjectives. And it is not possible to faithfully regiment their language using familiar devices like, for example, singular terms, predicates and quantifiers. We face here an especially radical form of nontranslatability. Their language is not simply a language with words we cannot translate into our language but a language whose words belong to altogether different linguistic categories.

The previous section concerned the possibility there are alien elements that can be *added* to an otherwise familiar kind of language. The story of the explorer highlights the theoretical possibility of alien languages that are *from the bottom up* alternatives to familiar ones.

Let a language L1 be thoroughly alien relative to another language L2 just in case L1 differs semantically from L2, by (i) being *structurally* different and (ii) having not just *added* elements but by having sentences built up from alien kinds of expressions *instead of* familiar ones.

A language is thoroughly alien (full stop) if it is thoroughly alien relative to all familiar languages.

I am inclined to believe that there also are thoroughly alien languages. But the argument from the previous section that there are possible alien languages does not, even if persuasive, immediately show that there are possible thoroughly alien languages.

3. Examples of thoroughly alien languages?
Here are two possible examples of thoroughly alien languages. Presented not primarily to persuade but to illustrate the issues involved.

(i) Peter Sullivan (2020) says:

> [Ramsey] observed that nothing rules out propositions consisting entirely of several expressions of the same type […] He was not suggesting that we could make sense of non-sentences like 'Socrates Plato' or 'mortality senility wisdom'. Any type or category that did self-combine as those familiar ones fail to would be very different from those we employ. It would be employed in thought of a very different logical shape, and altogether alien to us.

A *flat language* of the kind envisaged by Sullivan only has subsentential expressions of one logical type.

Actually, we *can* easily envisage languages with sentences like "Socrates Plato" and "mortal senile wise". The former can express that Socrates stands in a certain relation to Plato. The second can express that something is mortal, senile and wise.

This points to a more general issue. It is *easy* to concoct *seemingly* alien languages, e.g. flat ones. The question is whether what is described is *really* alien. How can this ever be ensured? This issue applies also to previous examples. (*The disguise objection*.)

If I present you with a putatively alien sentence "αβγ" and you ask me what it means, then it seems I have two options. I can either explain using familiar language and thus encourage the

disguise objection, or use alien language in which case you can raise the question of whether the symbols I use really mean anything. Your dilemma is not a strong argument against the view that there are alien languages. But it illustrates a possible difficulty in arguing by example that there are such languages.

If you happen to be impressed with the disguise objection: note that this objection can with equal force be raised against putative examples of the non-thoroughly alien.

(ii) Feature-placing languages. Many philosophers (early examples: Strawson, Quine) have discussed so-called feature-placing languages (/predicate functor-ese). Such languages don't contain referential devices like singular terms and quantifiers. Instead all sentences are built up by predicates and predicate-functors. (Standard informal illustration: "it is raining".)

Are these alien languages? – As just described they are not: some things are simply subtracted from familiar languages.

But are the "predicates" of these languages really predicates? Not if it is in the nature of predicates to be incomplete/unsaturated.

If they are not predicates, then these languages can be not just alien but thoroughly alien.

Note: if "it is raining" and its ilk are feature-placing, feature-placing languages are still not alien in the sense characterized.

4. Predication
Both examples dramatize issues about predication. Some questions:

Do all familiar languages employ predication?

Do all languages employ predication?

Are there different possible kinds of predication, such that some languages employ one kind of predication and another one does not? If so, do all familiar languages employ the same kind? Are there kinds of predication only alien languages employ?

5. Familiar and alien metaphysical structure
Familiar languages, at least of the not obviously apparently impoverished kind, present the world as containing objects, having properties and standing in relations.

Metaphysicians have defended different grand theories of reality, many of them radical. But these theories seem to share a common feature: reality consists of some (one or more) *objects*, *having properties* and *standing in relations*. And this feature seems to mirror how such familiar languages present reality. Maybe we should be suspicious of this.

"Object", "property" etc. can be used to mean different things. But here a relevant understanding is this. Objects are the sorts of things that can be referred to by singular terms but not by predicates. Properties are the sorts of things that (also) can be referred to by predicates.

("Having properties", "standing in relations": I don't mean to suggest that there are such *entities* as properties and relations. Talk of "being propertied" and "being related" might be better.)

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Here is how the story in my book continues:

> By immersing herself in this community the explorer managed to learn their language; and the explorer also managed to teach some of them our language. She reports that while her informants did manage to learn our language, in the sense that they learned which sentences it is appropriate to utter when, they did express incredulity regarding the idea that atomic sentences of our language could really express truths, for they found it incredible that reality could contain what is required for our sentences to be true, entities like objects, having properties and standing in relations.

Alien metaphysical structure: metaphysical structure properly presented only by an alien language, if at all.

"Properly presented": one way to understand this is in terms of truth. One may also hold that among true representations, some better – more perspicuously – represent reality than others do.

One view on familiar vs alien is that these kinds of representations are in competition. One kind of competition is competition for truth. Another possible kind is competition for perspicuous representation.

One needn't think of this as a matter of competition.

Another possibility is to take reality to be *rich*, and contain both kinds of structure.

A third possibility (?) is to take reality not to have structure of the relevant kind itself, but to be equally amenable to being described using familiar resources and alien ones. (Reality is *shapeless*.)

(The above three possibilities correspond to familiar kinds of views on, e.g., common sense ontology and weird objects. So along one dimension considering the alien is old hat.)

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It could be that God has no need for compositionality and can simply use a simple, unstructured sentence for each of the classes of possible worlds there are, and when we use structurally more sophisticated languages that is because that is a necessity for creatures like us. God's language, while "impoverished", might also better reflect the world's structure.

In general, and special examples like this aside, one may think that the world's structure has a certain *fineness of grain* and that languages that differ in more fine-grained ways can equally well represent the world.

Compare a simple example, gender marking (die Brücke, el puente). This doesn't correspond to a distinction in reality. There may be more interesting cases which are like that.

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The modal dimension. How fine-grained the world is may be a contingent matter. Some metaphysically possible worlds may have familiar metaphysical structure while others have alien

metaphysical structure. Even if the idea that the actual world has alien metaphysical structure, this has significance for questions about metaphysical modality.

6. Beyond sentences
The discussion so far concerns the possibility of sentences with different subsentential structure than familiar ones.

One might also broaden the scope. Are there, somehow, alternatives to *sentences*? (/alternatives to propositions)

Some things that can be explored:

(i) Maps and pictures. One view: these things represent the world but don't have anything corresponding to individual sentences.

(ii) On some idealist views, individual sentences can never correctly represent the world, somehow being the wrong "size" for that.

(iii) Sentences/our assertoric practices aim at truth (sort of, somehow). Then if there are alternative truth-like notions, there can be sentences/assertoric practices that stand to them as our sentences/assertoric practices stand to truth. Are there such alternative truth-like notions? – One place to look: failed theories of truth. (*The false theory strategy.*)

(iv) Here is a lovely story from the linguist Andrew Carstairs-McCarthy (1999). It involves an Earthling explaining human languages to a Martian:

> The Earthling…might start by explaining that syntactic units called noun phrases are typically used to refer to objects or events in the world, and are typically combined with other units called verb phrases to form sentences, one of whose functions is to make statements about the objects or events referred to. She might add that statements can be true or false, according to whether they fit the world or not, and that reference too can be either successful or unsuccessful, according to whether the would-be referent exists or not…
> The Martian might now reply: 'OK, I get the idea. A noun phrase has one kind of relationship to the world: successful or unsuccessful reference. A noun phrase is combined with a second kind of syntactic unit called a verb phrase to form a third kind of unit called a sentence. A sentence has a second kind of relationship to the world: truth or falsity. Presumably, then, a sentence is combined with a fourth kind of syntactic unit to form a fifth kind of unit, which in turn will have a third kind of relationship to the world, and these relationships can be seen as forming an ordered set such that any odd-numbered syntactic unit n will have relationship $(n+1)/2$ to the real world.'
> At this point the Earthling interjects: 'No! Nothing so elaborate! We stop at sentences. We can indeed combine sentences in various ways, but combinations of sentences still just make more elaborate statements, which are either true or false.'

The question that Carstairs-McCarthy raises is: Isn't there in principle an ascending hierarchy, where noun phrases and sentences just occupy the first two levels (even of familiar languages don't make use of it)? If not, why not? These seem to be very good questions, whatever the answers turn out to be.

If there is an ascending hierarchy of the kind envisaged, what if anything is objectively special about the level of sentences?

Just as in earlier cases, metaphysical questions are raised. Might languages with alternatives to sentences, or going beyond sentences, present reality (or some aspects thereof) better than familiar languages do?

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