

AQUINAS ON THOUGHT'S LINGUISTIC NATURE

Thomas Aquinas gives us many reasons to think that conceptual thought is linguistic in nature. Most notably, he refers to a mental concept as a *verbum* or word. He further says that such concepts may be either simple or complex, and that complex concepts are formed out of simple ones, through composition or division. These complex concepts may either affirm or deny a predicate of a subject. All of these claims suggest that conceptual thought is somehow language-like. Moreover, Aquinas would have been led in this direction by several venerable traditions. Augustine, for instance, speaks of “the word that we speak in our heart, a word which is not Greek nor Latin nor part of any other language.”¹ And Aristotle, at the beginning of his *De interpretatione*, says that spoken words are symbols or signs of mental concepts; later generations would take this claim to warrant a treatment of mental concepts as themselves a kind of language.² But how exactly should we understand this apparent connection in Aquinas between thought and language?

It is ambiguous and hence dangerous to characterize thought as language-like. One crude interpretation such a characterization invites is that one's thoughts always take the form of a sentence in one's own language—that when I am annoyed by the dog's barking down the street I think about that fact by formulating various English sentences in my head (e.g., ‘Am I going to have to go out and shoot that dog?’) That this is sometimes the case seems obvious. But it does not seem that this is always the case. Jerry Fodor has said that while deep in thought the only phrases he is aware of having in mind are ones such as “C'mon, Jerry, you can do it!”³

There are more plausible accounts of the way in which thought might be language-like. In this paper I will focus on two such accounts, each of which finds some support in Aquinas's work. One is the claim that the content of our thought is in some way linguistic. I will be considering a

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number of ways in which this might be so. In every case the guiding idea will be that there is a match between what we are thinking and what we express (or might express) in our own spoken language. I'll refer to this as the thesis of *semantic likeness*. This thesis would hold to a dramatic extent if the crude thesis of the last paragraph were true—that we think in virtue of formulating within ourselves natural-language sentences. Since it seems that we can think without formulating such inner, unspoken sentences, this is not a good argument for the semantic-likeness thesis. But we will see that Aquinas does partially defend the thesis, on different grounds.

Thought might be like language in another way if thought were *structurally linguistic*. By this I mean that thoughts would be language-like in their underlying form—complex thoughts would be formed out of simpler conceptual units, in accord with some kind of syntax. This thesis points to the medium as distinct from the content of thought. I'll be referring to this as the thesis of *syntactic likeness* between thought and language. This thesis is what has come to be known in recent philosophy as the language-of-thought hypothesis;⁴ it was, as we shall see, also defended by some scholastic philosophers. I will argue that Aquinas defends the syntactic-likeness thesis in part, but at a crucial point stops short of a full defense.

I

The language-like aspects of thought come to the fore in Aquinas's work when he discusses intellect's formation of a mental word (*verbum*). This is the activity intellect engages in after it has taken in sensory information from phantasms through the agent intellect's activity of abstraction.⁵ *Intellect takes this abstracted information and formulates a universal concept, a mental word. Successful intellectual activity requires the formation of this mental word. If no such concept is generated, then intellect is engaged in mere thinking without understanding:*

Understanding is completed only when something is conceived in the mind of the person thinking: this is called the *verbum*. For before some conception is fixed in our mind, we are not said to be understanding, but to be thinking in order to understand.⁶

In this passage 'understanding' translates *intelligere*, which is Aquinas's standard verb for the activity of intellectual thought. Intellect's operation culminates in understanding, and is incomplete before it reaches that stage. *Intelligere*, then, is a success term, at least strictly speaking (unlike the English verb 'to think'). And an essential ingredient in successful thought, for Aquinas, is having in mind a mental word.

In passing from mere thinking to conceptual understanding, Aquinas distinguishes three operations. Intellect's first operation is to conceptualize an object, to think of it under some general heading. The ultimate goal here is the understanding of *quiddities*, the defining natures of things, but we need not suppose that intellect ordinarily sees very far into the ultimate natures of things.⁷ This first operation is described as simple understanding, because it focuses on a single object under a certain description. The next stage in intellectual activity begins when we predicate one thing of another. This second operation is composition and division; here one simple concept is associated with another, and the mind either affirms one of the other (composition) or denies one of the other (division). Finally, intellect may move to a third sort of operation, discursive reasoning, through which we make inferences and broaden the scope of our knowledge.⁸

Aquinas describes each of intellect's first two operations in terms of forming mental words,⁹ and he encourages a comparison to spoken/written language. If you just say the word 'cat' then you are offering up a simple concept; if you say that "the cat is on the mat" then you are making a complex statement analogous to (and indeed based on) intellect's second operation of composition. And just as the complex sentence may be either true or false, whereas the word 'cat' alone cannot, so too in intellect's case we would speak of true and false mental judgments only as regards intellect's second operation. (We might say that intellect's first operation is accurate or veridical, but not true.)¹⁰

There is an obvious respect in which this account suggests the thesis of syntactic likeness. Thought and language seem structurally isomorphic: just as sentences are formed from words, so the complex judgments produced through composition and division are formed from simple concepts. But for now I want to put this issue to one side, and instead look at the way in which Aquinas is committed to the semantic-likeness thesis. He is led to this thesis by a claim that he takes over from the beginning of Aristotle's *De interpretatione* (16a3–4), a claim Aquinas characterizes in the following way:

It was necessary for Aristotle to say that spoken words (*voces*) signify intellectual concepts immediately and signify external things through the mediation of these concepts.¹¹

This semantic claim is not just something to which Aquinas dutifully adheres when confronted with Aristotle's text; it is also a claim that he fully incorporates into his own thinking about mind. In his theological writings as well he makes it one of the central and characteristic features of the mental word: that it is that which spoken words signify immediately.¹² (Following Aristotle, Aquinas gives divergent accounts of spoken and written words. Written words signify not intellectual concepts, but rather spoken words. It can be hard for us, living in the era of the printed word, to see why the spoken word should be given this kind of primacy. Hereafter I'll often speak of *words* and *language* where I should strictly speak of *spoken words* and *spoken language*.)

This *De interpretatione* semantic principle goes some of the way toward establishing the thesis of semantic likeness. By associating words and concepts through the signifying relationship, Aquinas guarantees a kind of correspondence between language and that segment of our concepts that we express in language. Now, to be sure, Aquinas doesn't say that there is a one-to-one correspondence between words and concepts, so that there is a different concept for each different word. It seems implausible, for instance, to suppose that there are concepts of different types for synonymous words in different languages (e.g., one concept for 'snow', another for 'neige', a third for 'Schnee').¹³ Also, Aquinas suggests that he takes Aristotle's claims about words signifying concepts to apply only to nouns, adjectives, and verbs.¹⁴ Our concepts represent the abstract natures of things, and so we should not expect to find mental words corresponding to the various prepositions, conjunctions, etc., of natural language. But while the correspondence between words and concepts will not be one-to-one, Aquinas does commit himself to the following systematic link between words and thoughts: a significant utterance entails the existence of a corresponding mental thought. This thought corresponds to the utterance inasmuch as the thought immediately signifies the same external reality that the utterance also signifies, through the mediation of the thought.

So language, on Aquinas's way of thinking, is a manifestation of our private concepts: "we express a spoken word so as to exhibit our inner word;"¹⁵ "speech is the sign of thought;"¹⁶ "the tongue, considered as the

instrument of speech, is the special organ of intellect.”¹⁷ The fact that we use language to express our concepts ensures that in general our speech will reflect the way we conceptualize the world. Of course this claim should not be overstated. There is room for unexpressed concepts, and room for a great deal of variety, ambiguity, and indeterminacy within the links between language and concepts. But it is a general theoretical truth, for Aquinas, that the way we talk illuminates the way we think.

This is not a very surprising claim. It is hardly bold or controversial to hold that there is a semantic fit between our words and our thoughts. What we say typically does match what we think—no surprise there. Aquinas’s Aristotelian semantics does lead him to maintain this word-concept correspondence in a striking way, inasmuch as he holds that spoken words immediately signify our concepts. This directly guarantees that for each of our significant utterances there is a corresponding thought. Different semantic theories would not lead so directly to the same result. If one were to hold, as William Ockham (among other scholastics) did, that spoken words directly signify not concepts, but rather the objects we ordinarily think of them as picking out—so that, e.g., ‘elephant’ immediately signifies the animal itself—then there would be no built-in guarantee of a correspondence between word and concept. But even if such a correspondence is not directly entailed by one’s chosen theory of semantics, still one will surely want to maintain that our words correspond to our thoughts. On the alternative view just mentioned the correspondence would have to take a different form, that of sameness in signification, so that our words and our concepts directly signify the same thing, the same external reality.¹⁸

On Aquinas’s semantic theory the correspondence is directly built-in: our words signify our concepts. This claim yields a corollary, that a necessary condition for verbally expressing a concept is having an intellectual grasp of that concept. For Aquinas, only conceptual thought is language-like in the way described. We cannot, for instance, directly express our sensory impressions in language, unless we first conceptualize those impressions. This is not merely a contingent feature of the way we are wired—as if it just happens that there is no link from the senses to our language center. Rather, we can’t express our sensory impressions because they aren’t in the proper form: until these impressions are conceptualized they remain inexpressible. That is why, for Aquinas, non-

human animals can't speak. It's not just that they lack vocal cords, they lack concepts. Even at the intellectual level, however, not all thought is expressible. There is intellectual activity that occurs prior to concept formation—prior, that is, even to the so-called first operation of intellect. As we have seen, Aquinas characterizes this activity as mere thinking without understanding. Even these sorts of thoughts are inexpressible, evidently. So while language is a reflection of our thought, it is a reflection only of a certain level of thought.

II

So far we've seen Aquinas endorsing the thesis of semantic likeness only to a limited extent, to the extent that there is a correspondence between our words and that segment of our concepts that gets signified by those words. It would be more controversial, and hence more interesting, if Aquinas offered a broader defense of the semantic-likeness thesis. At times he does defend a further, potentially more interesting claim: that the having of a concept guarantees the ability to express that concept. This claim runs the link between language and thought in the opposite direction from what we saw in the last section. There we saw how the Aristotelian semantics led Aquinas to hold that:

(1) *If S asserts p, then S has the concepts signified by p.*

At times, however, Aquinas indicates he would defend an inference in the opposite direction:

(2) *If S has the concepts signified by p, then S can assert p.*

Conditional (2) suggests a much bolder respect in which conceptual thought is linguistic. If conceptualizing a thought is a *sufficient* condition for being able to express that thought verbally, then it is natural to suppose that conceptual thought must already be linguistic in form. This inference would be at best tentative. The fact that we are immediately able to articulate everything that we conceive might mean nothing more than that we have a highly proficient mechanism for translating thought into language.

But still, if we could *always* express in words the thoughts that are in our head, then this would be good *prima facie* evidence for a strong version of the semantic-likeness thesis. It would be at least a plausible explanation of this capacity to hold that conceptual thought is itself already in linguistic form.

In fact, however, the version of (2) that Aquinas is prepared to defend is much weaker than the one just suggested. Here, for instance, is a passage in which Aquinas might seem to be defending (2):

According to the Philosopher, spoken words are the signs of intellectual concepts (*intellectuum*), while intellectual concepts are likenesses of things. And thus it is clear that spoken words are conveyed back to the things to be signified through the mediation of intellect's conceptualizing. *Therefore something can be named by us to the extent to which it can be intellectually cognized by us.*¹⁹

It will be easier to see what is happening in this passage if we consider the context. The question at stake is whether God can be named by us.²⁰ Aquinas is addressing the limits of our ability to understand God. The issue here is not whether we can give God a proper name ('God', 'Deus', 'Jehovah'). Rather, Aquinas is asking whether we can truly describe God—whether we can give any true characterization of God's attributes.²¹ In the course of answering this question Aquinas makes two inferences.

- (3) *We cannot understand God's essence, and therefore we cannot give God a name that expresses His essence.*
- (4) *We can understand God via the created world, and therefore we can give Him a name that we draw from creatures.*

In order to derive each of these inferences, Aquinas invokes the philosophical machinery just quoted. Notice that that passage begins with something close to (1): spoken words are the signs of concepts. The passage concludes with something that looks like his version of (2), the claim that anything one conceptualizes one is able to assert.

Aquinas holds that (1) entails (3): The fact that spoken words signify concepts shows that concepts are necessary for spoken words. So since we lack a concept of God's essence, we cannot describe God in a way that expresses his essence. It is easy to see how the possession of the concept is a necessary condition on giving God that description. As Aquinas says,

If there were someone who had no cognition of God with respect to *any* account [of God], then neither would that person be naming God, unless perhaps in the way that we utter names while ignorant about their signification.²²

Someone with no conception at all of God can't talk about God in any meaningful way. One might utter words that happen to have some meaning for someone else. But, as (1) claims, one cannot make an *assertion* without a grasp of the concepts involved.

Aquinas also holds that his version of (2) entails (4): To the extent that we can formulate the concept of a thing we can describe that thing. Therefore, since we can formulate a concept of God *via* creatures, we can give God a description that is taken from creatures. We are now ready to see, however, that Aquinas is not interested in defending (2) in any controversial form. If one has a certain concept of God, then one is in a position to describe God in that way. But Aquinas does not mean to suggest that the mere possession of the concept entails the ability to use language successfully. One may, for all we have seen, have a concept and not have any word with which to express that concept. Possessing the concept does not insure proficiency in any given language—or, at any rate, there is no argument here for such an inference. Aquinas accepts (2), then, in at most a highly qualified manner.

There are more direct reasons for thinking that Aquinas would not accept (2) in such a way as to suggest a bold version of the semantic-likeness thesis. In his disputed question on the *verbum* from the *De veritate*, Aquinas distinguishes three kinds of words. One kind is the product of concept formation—the word of the heart, as he there calls it. Another kind is the externally spoken word, which signifies the word of the heart. Aquinas emphasizes a third kind of word, however, which intervenes between concept formation and speech. We cannot verbally express our concepts, he says, without first formulating a mental *exemplar* of the utterance:

... the word set forth externally, since it is conventionally significant, has the will as its source, as do other man-made things. And so, just as for other man-made things a kind of image of the externally made thing exists beforehand in the mind of the maker, so in the mind of one uttering an external word there exists beforehand a kind of exemplar of the external word.²³

Before giving voice to one's mental concepts one must formulate a kind of *mental image of the utterance*; one must mentally pick the very words

one will use. This exemplar, this intermediary *verbum*, “is called the inner word that contains an image of the utterance.”²⁴

Aquinas postulates the intermediary operation of exemplar formation because he recognizes a gap between conceptualization and articulation. He develops an analogy, suggested in the above passage, to the creative activities of an artisan. The artisan first forms the intention to make something. But before she can actually start making it she must work out the form of the thing to be built. The same is so in the case of speech. We cannot go directly from concept to utterance. Presumably, Aquinas does not suppose that we are always conscious of this intermediary exemplar stage: surely we do not always consciously think about the words we use, before we use them. But if this intermediary stage is not something we always experience, then the question arises of why Aquinas would have believed it always necessary. The answer must be that he supposes there is work to be done in going from conceptual thought to linguistic articulation. This work, presumably, involves finding the appropriate means of expressing the thought in spoken language. If thought were already linguistic in content, no such intermediary step would seem needed. Once more, then, it has become clear that Aquinas defends the semantic-likeness thesis in a very modest form. Not all thought is linguistic in content; mental concepts must be translated into the words of our natural languages. So far, then, Aquinas has given us little reason to take thought to be language-like.

III

Earlier I characterized the thesis of syntactic likeness as the view that thought is structurally language-like. On such a view, complex thoughts would be formed out of simple thoughts in accordance with syntactic rules (these might rather be thought of as natural laws governing the operation of mind). Such rules needn't reflect those of any one natural language, of course, and we needn't even be able to specify in any detail what these rules are. But the assumption of the syntactic-likeness thesis is that we *formulate complex thoughts in much the way we formulate natural-language sentences*: by putting simple units together in accord with certain rules so as to achieve a complex meaning.

This is clearly William Ockham's view. Ockham distinguishes spoken, written, and mental language. After carefully considering how mental language compares to the others, Ockham concludes that any part of speech that could make the difference between a sentence's being true or false will be included in mental language. On this basis he infers that mental language will contain the following grammatical types:

Just as some spoken and written terms are names, some verbs, some pronouns, some participles, some adverbs, some conjunctions, and some prepositions, so too some mental concepts are names, some verbs, some adverbs, some conjunctions, and some prepositions.²⁵

Ockham gives careful thought to why mental language will need conjunctions, for instance, but not pronouns. What is important from our perspective, however, is that he aims to describe the *structure* of mental language, not merely its representational content. We saw in the previous section the extent to which Aquinas does the latter. Ockham defends a similar version of the semantic-likeness thesis, as we are about to see. But he makes a further claim: he holds not just that mental concepts have the content of a noun—e.g., *elephant*—or the content of a verb—e.g., *swim*—but that mental concepts play the functional, syntactic role of nouns or verbs.

So far, all I've reported Ockham saying is that mental language will contain nouns, verbs, etc. This, in itself, might just mean that mental language will contain concepts that have the content *elephant* or *swim*. How do we know that Ockham is making the bolder claim that these concepts will function as nouns or verbs—i.e., that in composite thoughts they will play the sort of syntactic role that these parts of speech play in natural language? In fact Ockham tells us as much. He continues the previous passage as follows:

This is clear from the fact that corresponding to every true or false spoken expression there is some mental proposition composed of concepts. Therefore, just as the parts of a spoken proposition that are imposed to *signify things are distinct on account of the demands of signifying or expressing*, . . . so too the parts of a mental proposition that correspond to the words are distinct so as to form distinct true and false propositions.²⁶

This is meant as an explanation of the earlier passage—of why mental language contains the grammatical parts he lists. What this explanation

makes clear is that Ockham supposes that complex thoughts are actually composed out of individual mental concepts. They will be *actually* composed in this way inasmuch as these thoughts will be complex not just in content—i.e., being about swimming elephants, and not just about elephants, or swimming—but also in structure. He explicitly indicates this by saying above that “the parts of a mental proposition . . . are distinct.” Such structural complexity, he says, follows from “the demands of signifying or expressing.” His conclusion is that mental language must have various parts of speech, functioning grammatically, so that “distinct true and false propositions” may be formulated. In other words, mental language must be syntactically similar to spoken and written languages in order for similarity in content to be possible.

We can see, then, that Ockham is led to the thesis of syntactic likeness because he accepts, at least in part, the thesis of semantic likeness. That partial acceptance is indicated in the above passage when Ockham says that there is a mental proposition “corresponding to every true or false spoken expression.” Ockham’s view differs from Aquinas’s on this question of semantic correspondence, inasmuch as Ockham holds that spoken words signify external objects directly.²⁷ But despite this disagreement he, like Aquinas, is committed to mental concepts that correspond, as he puts it, to our spoken utterances. It is this correspondence that, for Ockham, entails the thesis of syntactic likeness.

IV

Aquinas goes some of the way toward Ockham’s position, but stops short at a crucial point. As mentioned earlier, Aquinas describes intellect’s first operation as the formation of simple concepts; indeed, he indicates that these simple concepts are signified by noncomplex spoken words: “one name is imposed to signify one simple intellectual object.”²⁸ Intellect’s second operation is the process of composition and division, and Aquinas explicitly infers this capacity from the thesis of semantic likeness: intellect must be able to compound and divide concepts, he says, because we do this in language, and language signifies intellectual concepts.²⁹ Moreover, Aquinas makes it clear that the products of such an operation are not concepts that are merely complex in content, but concepts that are somehow *actually* combined out of simpler ones. Aquinas indicates this when he compares human and divine intellectual activity. Our intellect, he says,

judges the conformity between intellect and the world (*rebus*) by compounding and dividing; the divine intellect's judgment, on the other hand, occurs without composition and division. For just as our intellect understands material things immaterially, so the divine intellect cognizes composition and division without distinction (*simpliciter*).³⁰

The divine intellect grasps what we grasp through composition and division, but does so simply, all at once and without distinction. The doctrine of divine simplicity precludes divine thought from involving *actual* composition or division. Human thought, in contrast, is actually combined and divided. It is not obvious how these spatial metaphors of putting together and taking apart are to be understood in the case of the immaterial human intellect. (This seems problematic in Ockham's case as well.) But, putting this difficulty aside, the essential point is that complex thoughts are the product of discrete simpler thoughts, brought together in some way.

All of this may very much suggest that Aquinas does accept the thesis of syntactic likeness. Yet his acceptance, I now want to show, is tempered in a crucial way. This becomes clear when Aquinas considers in detail the activity of composition and division, during his commentary on the third book of the *De anima*. First, he says, "there is one operation of intellect in which it understands indivisibles—e.g., when it understands human being, or cow, or anything else that is uncombined."³¹ In its second operation, "intellect compounds many uncombined things that were previously separated." What is of most interest here is how he goes on: he says that intellect "makes of them a *single intellectual object*."³² So while the activity of composition actually is a matter of putting several concepts together, the result is a single conceptual object. He restates this claim a few lines later, taking as his example the diagonal of a square and the property of being symmetric (i.e., commensurable with its side):

Intellect sometimes understands the symmetric and the diagonal separately and distinctly, in which case there are two intelligible things; but when it compounds them, a *single intelligible thing* is formed and is understood at one and the same time by intellect.³³

This is where Aquinas's advocacy of the syntactic-likeness thesis begins to give out. Single words signify single intellectual concepts, and those single concepts get put together so as to form complex thoughts. But these complex thoughts are not themselves linguistic-like structures which intellect

reads like a sentence; they themselves are single things, understood at an instant—"at one and the same time."

There is a close connection between the last two claims of the above passage: that the complex thought is (a) produced by a single intellectual concept, and (b) understood at an instant. Aquinas makes it clear in a number of places that (b) entails (a). He says, for instance, that "our intellect cannot have an actual intellectual cognition of many things at the same time."³⁴ Or, as the *Summa theologiae* puts it, "any things that intellect cognizes through different forms (*species*) it does not understand at one and the same time."³⁵ Because intellectual cognition occurs when intellect *takes on the form of its object*, and because intellect can take on only one form of this sort at a time, it must be the case that *when intellect has cognition of a complex thought all at once, it has it through a single form or concept. This is so in the case of understanding a continuous object, like a line: "one intellectually cognizes the whole continuum at one and the same time, not part after part."* And the same holds for understanding propositions:

*One understands a proposition at one and the same time, not first the subject and later the predicate. For one has cognition of all the parts in virtue of one form (*species*) of the whole.³⁶*

It seems that our ability to grasp a whole proposition at one and the same time is in fact some of the best evidence for Aquinas's claim that we have complex thoughts in virtue of a single concept. For it seems evident from experience that we can grasp a complex thought all at once, just as we can think about a line or a shape all at once. In order for this to be so, however, such complex cognition must be the product of a single concept that contains both subject and predicate.

The structural parallel with language seems to have failed at this point, inasmuch as complex propositions are grasped through a single concept. But these considerations are not quite as decisive as they might seem. For while the object of intellect is always a single thing, it is by no means always a single, simple thing. God's understanding is simple in this way (see note 30), but human understanding is not. So while the above remarks seem to discourage the thought that intellectual concepts have a linguistic structure, they do not positively preclude such structure. It may be that while only a single concept can inform intellect at any one time, that concept nevertheless will have a complex linguistic structure. And

indeed the *De interpretatione* Commentary suggests as much at one point, when it claims that “a spoken phrase (*oratio*) signifies a composite concept, and hence *part* of that expression signifies *part* of the composite concept.”³⁷ This passage is by far the clearest indication that Aquinas defends the syntactic-likeness thesis. The passage suggests that intellectual concepts do have a structure parallel to the structure of linguistic utterances. A single complex concept would have a noun part, verb part, etc., and the parallel with language would once again be very much alive.

Even so, however, we can now see where the parallel runs out. Although mental concepts might have a linguistic structure, they are not apprehended in the way that a spoken or written sentence is apprehended. The understanding of a proposition comes all at once; we grasp the thought as a whole, not part after part. As Aquinas says in his most detailed discussion of whether intellect cognizes more than one thing at the same time (*Quodlibet* 7.1.2), we understand the whole individual first, and only “as a consequence” understand the various parts. This is how “when intellect understands a proposition it understands at the same time the subject and predicate.”³⁸ We understand the subject and predicate secondarily, as a consequence.

It is true that this second operation of intellect is based upon a prior operation, the first operation of intellect, by means of which individual concepts are grasped. Complex thoughts are built (“composed”) out of those simpler thoughts. But a complex thought, once composed, is grasped all at once, as a whole. We do not “read” propositional thoughts in linear fashion, concept after concept. If a parallel were wanted, we might think of conceptual understanding as visual rather than linguistic. Just as we see some object as a whole, without building up the image part by part, so intellect grasps even a complex thought all at once, without need of putting the pieces together. Aquinas makes the analogy himself:

When the whole is sensed, the various parts are sensed at the same time, as a consequence. At that time the sense's attention is not principally drawn to any one of the parts, but to the whole.³⁹

Intellect, Aquinas explicitly says, works in just the same way.

It is not surprising, then, that Aquinas does not customarily analyze mental concepts into the various parts of speech—noun, verb, etc.—in the way that we have seen Ockham do.⁴⁰ The structure of thought may mirror the structure of language in important respects. But the processes of con-

ceptual thought are so different from those of language that comparison is misleading.

V

I have argued that there are two principal ways in which thought might be language-like. First, thought might mirror the content of language. It has emerged that, for Aquinas, this holds true in a limited way. For every significant utterance we make, we have a thought that corresponds in content; the utterance, in fact, signifies that thought. We found no guarantee, however, that all of one's thoughts, even one's unexpressed thoughts, correspond in content with a sentence from one's own spoken language. Aquinas postulates a gap between conceptual thought and speech: to give voice to our conceptual thoughts we must first form an intellectual "exemplar" of the words to be spoken. Our concepts, as they stand, are not ready to be articulated.

The second principal way in which thought might be language-like is syntactically. Aquinas defends a limited version of the syntactic-likeness thesis. Single words correspond to single concepts; just as complex sentences are put together from single words, so complex concepts are put together from simple concepts. But the parallel does not go very far. Intellect grasps concepts, even complex ones, as a whole and at a single instant. If there is any structure at this level, that structure does not play a role like that of nouns and verbs in spoken/written language. Viewed at this level, the notion of a mental language seems largely metaphorical.⁴¹

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NOTES

1. *De trinitate* XV.10.19 (Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina 50, Turnhout: Brepols, 1968). See also *Sermo* 288 (*Patrologia Latina* 38, pp. 1302 ff.).

2. *De int.* 1 (16a3–4). Aristotle's text, interestingly, offers very little encouragement for taking these "affections of the soul" as in any way linguistic. (On this point see Gabriel Nuchelmans, *Theories of the Proposition: Ancient and Medieval Conceptions of the Bearers of Truth and Falsity* [Amsterdam: North-Holland, 1973], p. 37.) But later readers—Aquinas for instance (see n.40)—often understood the text in just that way.

3. As recounted in Daniel Dennett, *Consciousness Explained* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1991), p. 303.

4. One classic discussion is Jerry Fodor's *The Language of Thought* (New York: Thomas Crowell, 1975). For an introductory treatment see J. Christopher Maloney, *The Mundane Matter of the Mental Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

5. For a more detailed description of this process, see Norman Kretzmann, "Philosophy of Mind," in *The Cambridge Companion to Aquinas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 128–59.

6. *Quaestiones disputatae de potentia* [=QDP] (Marietti, 1953) 9.9c. See *De rationibus fidei* (Leonine, v.40) ch.3.: "Quandocumque autem actu intelligit, quoddam intelligibile format, quod . . . mentis conceptus nominatur." See also *Lectura super Evangelium S. Ioannis* (Marietti, 1952) I.1.25

7. On the way in which intellect performs this operation, starting out with very crude abstract characterizations and moving toward a detailed theoretical account, see Norman Kretzmann, "Infallibility, Error, and Ignorance" in *Aristotle and His Medieval Interpreters* (*Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, supp. vol. 17, 1992), Calgary, pp. 159–94.

8. On these operations see, in particular, *Quaestiones disputatae de veritate* [=QDV] (Leonine v.22) 14.1c; *Expositio libri Posteriorum* [=InPA] (Leonine v.1*,2) I.1.32–50; *Expositio libri Peryermenias* [=InPH] (Leonine v.1*,1) I.1.1–14, 3.39–78; *Sententia libri De anima* [=InDA] (Leonine v.45,1) III.11.

9. On these first two operations as two ways of forming a mental word, see QDV 4.2c; *Summa theologiae* [=ST] (Marietti, 1950–53) 1a 85.2 ad 3.

10. See *In duodecim libros Metaphysicorum Aristotelis expositio* (Marietti, 1971), IX.11.1898.

11. *InPH* I.2.109–112. This is something of an extrapolation from Aristotle's own compressed claim. Aquinas is careful to say that spoken words *signify* or are *signs* of concepts. For a discussion of the medieval conception of signification, and how it differs from other medieval semantic concepts, see L. M. De Rijk, "Origins of the theory of the properties of terms" in Kretzmann, *et al.* (eds.) *The Cambridge History of Later Medieval Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), ch. 7; Umberto Eco, "Denotation" in U. Eco and C. Marmo (eds.), *On the Medieval Theory of Signs* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1989).

12. See, e.g., *De rationibus fidei* ch. 3; *ST* 1a 85.2 ad 3; QDV 4.1c, 4.2c; *Summa contra gentiles* [=SCG] (Marietti, 1961–67) IV.11.3466.

13. Beyond its implausibility, such a view would clash with Aristotle's claim, just a few lines later in the *De interpretatione*, that intellect's concepts are the same for everyone (16a6–7). Differences in language, then, don't preclude sameness of concepts.

14. *InPH* I.2.65–74, 97–100, 156–58.

15. QDV 4.1c.

16. *ST* 1a 58.4 obj.3.

17. *SCG* IV.41.3799.

18. Nuchelmans, writing in *The Cambridge History* (p. 198), downplays the significance of the alternative semantic accounts described in this paragraph. These issues, he says are "relatively uncontroversial," because all parties to the debate agreed that spoken propositions are given their meaning in virtue of a corresponding mental proposition, which is always "immediately directed towards the outside world."

It is obviously beyond the scope of this paper to evaluate, or even describe in detail, these competing semantic theories. Throughout the Middle Ages, semantics were one of

the most hotly disputed philosophical questions. See *The Cambridge History*, Part IV; Nuchelmans, *Theories of the Proposition*; Jan Pinborg, *Logik und Semantik im Mittelalter—Ein Überblick* (Problemata, 10), (Stuttgart: Frommann-Holzboog, 1972).

19. *ST* 1a 13.1c.

20. So the question is phrased in the prologue to question 13: “Utrum Deus sit nominabilis a nobis.” Modern editions, following the first line of article one, give that article a more opaque title: “Utrum aliquod nomen Deo conveniat.” But the issue is clearly whether any name *we* can specify applies to God.

21. The Latin ‘*nomen*’ has a much wider meaning than ‘name’; for one thing, it covers both nouns and adjectives. For this reason we might speak of the divine predicates rather than the divine names.

22. *ST* 1a 13.10 ad sc 2.

23. *QDV* 4.1c. As Nuchelmans points out (*Theories of the proposition*, pp. 193–4), Anselm puts forward much the same account in *Monologion*, ch. 10.

24. *QDV* 4.1c. Aquinas has in mind here the *De anima*’s claim that speech occurs “with some kind of imagination” (II 8, 420b32). (At *ST* 34.1c this connection is made explicit.) Evidently Aquinas does not understand Aristotle’s claim in such a way that the inner sense of phantasia or imagination is involved: the operation Aquinas describes seems to be wholly intellectual.

25. *Quodlibeta Septem* V.8 (*Opera Theologica* [St. Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute Press, 1980] IX, p. 509). Keep in mind that ‘names’ here refers to both nouns and adjectives (cf. n. 21, above).

A number of worthwhile papers on Ockham’s theory of mental language have been published: John Trentman, “Ockham on Mental,” *Mind* 79 (1970), 586–90; Paul V. Spade, “Synonymy and Equivocation in Ockham’s Mental Language,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 18 (1980), 9–22; Hester Gelber, “I Cannot Tell A Lie: Hugh of Lawton’s Critique of William Ockham on Mental Language,” *Franciscan Studies* 44 (1984), 141–79; Calvin Normore, “Ockham on Mental Language,” *Historical Foundations of Cognitive Science* J. C. Smith (ed.), (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1990), pp. 53–70.

26. *Quodlibeta Septem* V.8. Cf. *Summa Logicae* I.3 (*Opera Philosophica* I, p. 14), which makes a nearly identical argument.

27. See, e.g., *Summa Logicae* I.1 (pp. 7–8).

28. *InPH* I.4.137–8. Cf. *InPH* I.2.223–4: “. . . simplices conceptiones intellectus quas voces incomplexae significant.” Here, as in all the passages I use from Aquinas’s Aristotelian commentaries, he seems not to be paraphrasing Aristotle but to be giving his own exposition of the philosophical issues. Such passages, I take it, constitute some of our best evidence for Aquinas’s own views.

29. “Voces significant conceptiones intellectus, ut dicit Philosophus in *I Perihermenias*. Sed in vocibus est compositio et divisio, ut patet in propositionibus affirmativis et negativis. Ergo intellectus componit et dividit” (*ST* 1a 85.5sc).

30. *InPH* I.3.189–97. See also *ST* 1a 58.4c, ad 3.

31. *InDA* III.11.7–10.

32. *Ibid.*, 38–39.

33. *Ibid.*, 50–53. For some of Ockham’s views on how intellect will grasp complex thoughts see *Quaestiones in librum secundum Sententiarum*, qq. 12–13 (*Opera Theologica* V, pp. 279–81).

34. *SCG* I.55.456.

35. *ST* 1a 85.4c. Here Aquinas is thinking of the *species intelligibilis*, which comes earlier in our cognitive processes than does the mental concept or *verbum*. But much the same point holds for each sort of form.

36. *SCG* I.55.456.

37. *InPH* I.4.147–8.

38. *Quaestiones Quodlibetales* [=Quod.] [Marietti, 1956], 7.1.2c. cf. *ST* 1a 58.2c.

39. *Quod.* 7.1.2 ad 1.

40. I have found just one exception to this claim. Aquinas reads the beginning of *De interpretatione* as maintaining that “nouns and verbs and others of this sort have three kinds of existence”—viz., in intellect, voice, and writing (*InPH* I.2.68–72).

41. This paper has been greatly improved, in many places, because of comments from Tom Bennigson, Norman Kretzmann, and Eleonore Stump.