Gauker has written a very rich and ambitious book, developing a novel and challenging account of the relation between pre-linguistic thought, concepts and language.

The book, in brief, has two central strands of argument: First, there is a detailed examination of various attempts to account for concepts as arising out of experience, prior to language. This includes critical discussions of Locke’s theory of ideas, Kant’s theory of concepts and the Churchland/Gärdenfors construal of concepts as regions of similarity spaces, and it contains much of interest to those working on the nature of concepts. Gauker’s conclusion is that given certain natural assumptions about concepts (such as that concepts are components of judgments), there can be no account of concepts independently of language. I will call this the language dependency thesis of concepts, or the LD thesis for short. Second, there is the proposal that there is a kind of cognition or thought which is neither conceptual nor constructed out of bare sensory experiences, but is to be understood as a type of imaging: imagistic cognition, the IC thesis for short. Imagistic cognition, Gauker argues, involves various capacities to locate and track objects in a perceptual similarity space – capacities that are distinct from, but crucial for, the development of conceptual thought and language. These capacities, therefore, are what we have in common with animals and pre-linguistic children.

I am very sympathetic to Gauker’s overall project. In particular, I agree that learning a first language is not like learning a second language; it does not involve mapping words on to already existing concepts and thoughts. One could question the idea that there is a sharp cut-off point between pre-conceptual thought and having a language. I am inclined to think that when a child learns her first words she has already acquired some primitive concepts through the interaction with others – concepts that are transformed once she does learn a language, but which are there prior to the language nevertheless. This means that I would hesitate to endorse the LD thesis in the shape defended by Gauker, construed as the very strong thesis that concepts are identical to words. However, as I agree with Gauker’s basic approach, I will simply accept the strong LD thesis for the purposes of discussion.

My focus, instead, will be on something that I really do disagree with: Gauker’s claim that the LD thesis has radical implications for how we are to think about the nature of communication and linguistic practice. In particular, I worry about his proposal that we should give up the traditional model of linguistic communication as involving a form of transfer of
thoughts, what he calls the conveyance conception of communication, and replace it with an alternative, ‘cooperative model’ of communication. I shall be discussing two issues relating to this:

(1) Can we afford to give up the conveyance conception of linguistic communication?
(2) Does endorsing the LD thesis really require giving up this conception?

I shall suggest that the answer to the first question is no but, also, that the answer to the second question is no. In this sense, my main point is ultimately a friendly one: Although it would not be acceptable to give up the traditional conception of communication, Gauker’s account of concepts does not, contrary to what he himself suggests, require this.

1. Gauker on concepts and communication

Linguistic communication, in fact, stands at the centre of Gauker’s discussion. This may seem surprising in a book on pre-linguistic thought. However, Gauker stresses that the book is as much a book about language as a book about concepts, and argues that how one thinks about communication has profound implications for the relation between conceptual thought and language (14).

Gauker introduces the central notions of the book by appealing to the nature of linguistic communication – the notions of expression, judgment, content and concept. Indeed, he employs the traditional, ‘conveyance conception’ of communication to introduce these notions. On this conception, linguistic communication involves the speaker’s using words that enable the hearer to recognize that the speaker has in mind a certain thought – the thought that the words express – and communication succeeds when the content of the thought produced in the hearer stands in the proper relation to the content of the thought expressed by the speaker (2). For example, if speaker S asserts ‘Some mammals lay eggs’, the hearer H can infer that S judges that some mammals lay eggs. Judgments, thus, are what assertions express. When S judges that some mammals lay eggs, and H judges that some mammals lay eggs, there is a sense in which they make the same judgment: i.e. they each make a particular judgment that has the same content. This is so, even if H and S associate different conceptions with ‘mammal’, for instance, if they disagree on whether all mammals have hair. We must not conflate the speaker’s conceptions of a mammal (her associated beliefs and stereotypes) with her concept mammal: ‘In supposing that the judgment that all mammals have hair is in conflict with the judgment that some mammals do not have hair, one supposes that the concept mammal is the same in both judgments’ (6).

This picture, of course, is a very familiar one, not just of communication, but also of contents and concepts. Indeed, the picture is essentially that of
Frege: Two subjects can assert a sentence expressing the same thought, i.e. the same content, despite having very different ideas or images associated with the relevant words. However, Gauker quickly makes clear that he intends to throw away the ladder, as it were, and reject the very theory of communication by means of which he introduced these central notions. As he himself puts it, ‘that might look like cutting off the branch I’m sitting on’ (9), but he argues that this is not so since it is possible to assimilate the relevant semantic concepts into the new theory of linguistic communication that he proposes – the ‘cooperative’ conception of communication. Once it is recognized that concepts depend on language, Gauker argues, the idea that linguistic communication involves a ‘conveying’ of thoughts must be rejected:

A consequence of the conveyance conception of communication is that concepts, the building blocks of judgments, have to have a certain independence from spoken language. The need to understand what people are saying may still be the impetus to acquiring many concepts, and there may be many concepts that no one would have who did not speak a language.... But our account of what concepts are simply cannot be that they are words of a spoken language (understood as such), because then it would not make sense to explain linguistic communication as the conveying of thoughts composed of concepts (217).

On Gauker’s alternative conception of communication, the aim of the speaker is not to convey the contents of her mind, but to cooperate with other individuals. Cooperation requires that the participants in a linguistic interaction strive to create ‘a shared representation of a conversational context’, where this is to be understood as a linguistic representation (218). This means that the speaker and hearer need to think of the conversational context in the same way, allowing them to achieve their conversational goals. However, Gauker stresses, the process of creating a shared representation through linguistic interaction is not to be thought of as a process of expressing conceptual thoughts to one another. It is not as if the speaker has a certain thought about the context in mind, and then chooses certain words to try to convey this – that would lead right back to the conveyance conception. Rather, the linguistic interaction creates a shared representation. Moreover, the psychological mechanisms underlying this construction are to be understood in terms of imagistic thought – thought that causally explains the ‘production’ and ‘consumption’ of language, but is not expressed through language. To avoid reducing the cooperative conception to the conveyance conception, Gauker says, he will take ‘the process of thought underlying production and consumption of speech to be processes of imagistic cognition’ (218).

To illustrate how the sentences of a simple language might be produced and consumed by means of imagistic cognition, Gauker considers some very
primitive scenarios, the scenarios of prehistoric humans (223ff). These scenarios involve several people, engaged in a project where everybody needs to contribute in a certain way. For instance, it may involve people on an island trying to locate materials they can use and then returning to report these locations. Or it might involve a simple trading situation, where people converse about what they have to offer and what they are willing to take in return. In such situations, Gauker stresses, there is no presupposition that there is a fully developed language or that the participants are capable of conceptual thought: All that is presupposed is that they are able to think *imagistically* about the situation.

According to Gauker, therefore, the LD thesis, the IC thesis and the cooperative conception of communication are all closely interconnected: The LD thesis states that concepts are dependent on words, whereas the IC thesis allows for a kind of non-conceptual thought prior to language, and the cooperative conception provides an account of communication which does not require that conceptual thought is independent of language. This is not to say that the IC thesis *presupposes* the LD thesis. One could reject the thesis that concepts are words and still think that there is room for an account of pre-conceptual thought along the lines of the imagistic thesis. However, rejecting the LD thesis would of course make the IC thesis less motivated, as there would not be the same need for an account of non-conceptual, non-linguistic thought. On Gauker’s view, therefore, the two theses, together with the alternative conception of communication, constitute a closely knitted set of ideas about the relation between language and thought, challenging well-established assumptions about this relation, in philosophy as well as in psychology. The positive thesis about the nature of concepts as language dependent, Gauker stresses, ‘rests on a negative thesis against the traditional conception of linguistic communication’ (14). Next, I shall turn to this negative thesis.

2. *Can the conveyance conception be given up?*

How, precisely, is the traditional conception of communication to be understood? Gauker, again, characterizes it as the view that ‘linguistic communication is basically a matter of a speaker’s speaking words that will enable the hearer to recognize that the speaker has in mind a certain thought’ (2). The essential elements, here, include the idea of a speaker (‘sender’) who utters certain words to express a particular thought, and a hearer (‘receiver’) who, as a result of hearing (or otherwise perceiving) those words, comes to have another thought. Communication succeeds when the contents of the two thoughts stand in the proper relation, typically assumed to be that of

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1 The classic formulation of this conception of communication is in Shannon & Weaver 1949.
According to many philosophers, further requirements need to be added to this minimal, ‘coding’ conception of communication, such that successful communication involves the recognition of the sender’s communicative intentions, where this recognition typically goes beyond mere conventional meaning. This, also, seems to be Gauker’s assumption, as he describes the traditional view as involving the idea that the speaker chooses certain words because she intends that the hearer will recognize that she makes a certain judgment (8). His prime target, however, is the very idea that communication involves a form of transfer of thoughts, along the lines of the sender-receiver model.

Now, I do not think this is some crazy picture cooked up by the philosophers, but that it is perfectly intuitive, part and parcel of our ordinary ideas about linguistic interaction: We use language to express our thoughts to others and there is failure of communication when there is a discrepancy between the thought expressed and the thought received. More importantly, it is a conception of communication that seems to do important theoretical work. I shall stress two such important theoretical tasks. First, the conveyance conception provides a plausible account of what it means for a communicative act to succeed. Second, and relatedly, the conveyance conception plays an important role in the account of how language is used to transmit knowledge: It allows us to explain how, as Frege puts it, it can be the case that ‘mankind possesses a common treasure of thoughts which is transmitted from generation to generation’ (Frege 1892: 201). I shall discuss these points in turn.

If we reject the conveyance conception of communication, and the idea that communication succeeds when the content of the message sent stands in the right relation to that of the content received, what alternative account of communicative success can be given? Gauker’s appeal to coordination and cooperation suggests that perhaps the traditional conception of successful communication could be replaced by the idea that communicative success consists in coordination of actions. If I utter ‘Let’s meet in my office at noon tomorrow’, and you hear what I say and we both converge on my office at noon tomorrow, then communication succeeds. However, a moment’s reflection makes clear that this cannot be right. The need to communicate with language might indeed have arisen out of the need to coordinate and cooperate, but successful linguistic communication is not the same as coordination: There may be successful communication without coordination, and there

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2 Although identity of content is standardly assumed to be necessary to successful communication, this has been disputed and it has been suggested that something weaker will do, such as sufficient similarity in content (see Pagin 2006). It should be stressed that opting for something weaker is perfectly compatible with the traditional conception of communication as involving a conveying of thoughts.

3 See, for instance, Grice (1975).
may be coordination without successful communication. For example: I may agree to meet my French friend at ‘onze’, and we may successfully meet even though I think ‘onze’ means noon, simply because I have failed to realize that daylight savings time ended overnight. Intuitively, in such a situation, communication fails despite successful coordination. And communication might have succeeded, we might both have thought that ‘onze’ means eleven, and still coordination would have failed because I did not realize there had been a time change.

As it turns out, Gauker does not actually say that communication succeeds when coordination succeeds (as a behaviouristically inclined philosopher would). Indeed, he seems quite aware that an appeal to cooperation does not provide an alternative account of communicative success. Thus, he considers the proposal that successful communication could be seen as a matter of achieving the goals of conversation, but rejects it since, he writes, ‘it will often be hard to attribute the success to any particular utterance, and if interlocutors fail to achieve their goals, their failure may not impugn any given utterance’ (220). As noted earlier, Gauker also stresses that the appeal to shared linguistic representations of the conversational context should not be understood as a process of conveying conceptual thoughts: The shared representation is what we strive for and what makes cooperation possible, but it is not what is being communicated (2). However, this means that we are left without an account of communicative success. Gauker explicitly endorses this conclusion and suggests that on the cooperative conception of communication there is no definition of successful communication for particular acts of speech, but he does not think that this is very problematic: ‘My only excuse for failing to define success for particular acts of speech is that I am not sure there is any good reason to define it. I concede that if there is not, then I ought to be able to provide an independent ‘deconstruction’ of the concept successful act of speech, but I will not pause to undertake such a deconstruction here’ (220).

The question is whether we can give up on the notion of communicative success that easily. Prima facie, doing so is unacceptably revisionary since the notion seems to play a central role in our ordinary linguistic practices. We regularly distinguish between cases of failed and successful communication, between misunderstanding and understanding and we clarify our expressions to avoid merely verbal disagreements (i.e. disagreements resulting from miscommunication). Moreover, the notion of successful communication has an important explanatory value. Consider cooperation and coordination again. Although we cannot appeal to these notions to define communicative success, it should be clear that communicative success (or failure) plays an important role in explaining why coordination and cooperation succeeds (or fails). You and I managed to meet at noon in my office, because my utterance of ‘Let’s

4 This point is made very clearly in Pagin (2008: 101).
meet at noon in my office’ caused you to think a thought (and form a belief) with a content that stood in the right relation to the content of my thought expressed. Again, sometimes we manage to cooperate without there being a shared content, because of further differences in our beliefs and attitudes, but it is very difficult to see how we could explain the fact that language in general can be used for the purposes of cooperation and coordination if not because language can be used to convey our thoughts (and propositional attitudes) to each other. By rejecting the conveyance conception of communication, Gauker gives up on this kind of explanation.

Gauker’s idea, again, is that we can achieve a similar form of explanation by appealing to the idea that linguistic interaction yields a shared linguistic representation of the context relevant to the conversation, explaining the successful cooperation. However, it is unclear what role linguistic communication plays in this account. No doubt, if the interlocutors manage to construct a shared linguistic representation of the context, then cooperation will succeed. But how does the use of language help them do that? Not by expressing their thoughts about the context – after all, the conceptual thoughts are not expressed by this use but constructed out of it, and the imagistic thoughts are certainly not expressed through the use of language. How, then, could the use of language facilitate the process of constructing the shared representation required for cooperation? In Chapter 7, Gauker provides a detailed, and intriguing account of how an appeal to imagistic cognition could help explain the ‘production’ and ‘consumption’ of the sentences of a simple language (including negations, disjunctions, conditionals and simple quantifiers) – an account I cannot do justice to here. However, even if one accepts the picture presented there, I am still left wondering how it helps with my question: If imagistic thought just underlies the use of language causally, and is not in any way what is communicated or expressed through the use of language, then precisely how can the use of language help explain cooperation?

This is closely related to the second point, that we need the conveyance conception of communication to provide a plausible account of how language can be used for the transmission of knowledge. Much (most?) of what we know, we know on the basis of testimony, rather than on the basis of first-hand experience or theorizing – that is, we know it as a result of what someone else said or wrote. Recently, testimonial knowledge has received much attention in the literature, and there is an on-going debate concerning its nature. What is of interest from the point of view of communication is that it is agreed on all sides that testimonial knowledge necessarily involves a transmission of content: It involves, as Jennifer Lackey puts it, a learning from words, where the hearer comes to believe that p on the basis of A’s testimony that p (Lackey 2008, 2011). What is of importance, she stresses, is that the hearer acquires the new belief on the basis of the content of the speaker’s testimony, and not on other features of the testimony. This, in turn, requires that there is successful communication in the traditional sense: The
speaker’s verbal testimony (written or spoken) expresses the belief that \( p \), and the hearer, as a result of the testimony, comes to have the belief that \( p \). Consequently, giving up on the conveyance conception of communication would seem to require giving up on the very idea that there is testimonial knowledge. Of course, Gauker may suggest that the traditional conception of testimonial knowledge is to be ‘deconstructed’ too, and fitted into the new system of ideas. However, it is not easy to see what would be left of testimonial knowledge without the assumption that it involves a transmission of thoughts.

At points, Gauker also speaks as if he shares the assumptions of those defending the traditional conception of communication. As noted already, it is by means of the traditional model that he introduces the central semantic notions. For instance, the claim that there need be a distinction between concepts and conceptions, is based on the idea that successful communication requires that two people can share the same concept despite big differences in their beliefs. What is more, this line of reasoning is not merely employed when introducing the central semantic notions; it is also employed later in the book, when Gauker argues against various theories of concepts. Thus, when discussing the Churchland/Gärdenfors theory of concepts as a kind of similarity space, Gauker objects that ‘concepts have to be things that people frequently possess in common’, that my concept \( \text{mammal} \) must in some respect be the very same as your concept \( \text{mammal} \) (89–90). Why is it of importance that people can have shared concepts? Well, it would seem, precisely because this is required for successful communication (understood traditionally) and the transmission of knowledge. Indeed, as Gauker points out, his objection to the similarity space theory, is reminiscent of Fodor and LePore’s objection to holistic theories of content which is based precisely on considerations having to do with communication: as holism fails to account for the possibility of sharing thoughts, Fodor and LePore argue, it undermines the possibility of linguistic communication and disagreement in belief (Fodor and LePore 1992).

Conversely, I find it hard to see why it should matter whether concepts are shared if communication is just a matter of cooperation and there is no such thing as expressing and transmitting contents through language. Consider Brandom’s picture of communication that is also set against the conveyance conception of communication. Discussing Brandom’s reaction to the Fodor and LePore line of argument against holistic theories Gauker writes: ‘[I]n his defense of himself against Fodor and LePore, Brandom explicitly repudiates, as I do, the Lockean conception of communication as sharing of ideas, or meanings, or contents. . . . He compares communication to a dance. Each interlocutor has to do his or her part, but there need not be any respect in which what they do is the same; they need not grasp a content in common’ (140). This seems right. If linguistic communication is to be understood as the form of coordination involved in a dance, then there is no need for shared
concepts or shared contents. But if that is so, if the Lockean conception is rejected, why is it an objection to a theory of concepts (such as the similarity space theory) that concepts will not be shared?

It should be noted that Gauker also appeals to intrasubjective considerations in his criticisms of the similarity space theory, not just to intersubjective ones. Thus, he criticizes the theory on the grounds that it cannot account for ordinary revisions in beliefs about properties and kinds, such as the belief that dogs bark: Since the theory simply identifies concepts with regions of similarity spaces, it cannot happen that two different regions are the same concepts, and so it cannot happen that one changes one’s views about dogs without the concept changing. The basic problem, Gauker suggests, is that the identity of concepts is a matter of what they represent, but what they represent is not completely determined by what the subject thinks (103–104). I agree with this. Concepts cannot be identified with similarity spaces (or some such) since it would make it impossible to share concepts and would not allow for the very important distinction between change in belief and change in content. However, it would be very strange to apply this point only to the intrasubjective case (and, again, Gauker does not seem to confine himself to this case). Just as we want to secure the possibility that an individual can revise her beliefs without a change in content, so we want to secure the possibility that two individuals can disagree in belief without it following that there is a difference in content. In both cases, it seems to me, the motivation is the same: We need a notion of thought content that is stable enough to allow for the possibility of sameness in content coupled with difference in belief (whether the difference is across persons or, as in the intrasubjective case, just across time). Moreover, once we grant that there is a distinction between concepts and conceptions, as Gauker does, we seem to have all that is needed for the traditional account of communicative success – communication succeeds when the content expressed by the speaker stands in the right relation to the content grasped by the hearer. This is so, even if the reason to distinguish conceptions and concepts does not primarily derive from considerations concerning linguistic communication.

3. Is the LD thesis incompatible with the conveyance conception of communication?

According to Gauker, again, the LD thesis stands or falls with the conveyance conception of communication: If concepts are words, then linguistic communication cannot be understood as involving a form of transmission of thoughts from speaker to hearer. If I am right, and we cannot afford to give up the conveyance conception of communication, it therefore seems as if we have reason to reject the central thesis of the book, i.e. the LD thesis. The question is whether Gauker is right in his claim that the LD thesis is incompatible with the conveyance conception of meaning. Prima facie, the
claim seems implausible since there are a number of philosophers who take mental content to require language (Burge, Davidson and Dummett come to mind), and yet endorse the traditional view of communication. Either, therefore, these people are all wrong, or Gauker is overly pessimistic about the possibility of combining the traditional conception of communication with the LD thesis.  

No doubt, the LD thesis is a strong thesis and it is clearly incompatible with several well-known theories about language, in particular about language development (phylogenetic and ontogenetic). For instance, there is a certain story of how language first arose that is incompatible with the LD thesis: It cannot be that one of our forefathers suddenly struck on the idea that perhaps sounds and gestures could be used to express his thoughts about the world and perhaps there would be some coordination advantages in doing so. To the extent that one thinks of the function of linguistic communication in evolutionary terms, therefore, it is quite correct that the function of linguistic communication cannot have been to express thoughts: This is not why language first developed. Most likely, language developed precisely because it allowed our forefathers to gain evolutionary advantages through cooperation, illustrated by the types of pre-historic scenarios that Gauker considers. However, the question is why this evolutionary story should teach us much about the nature of linguistic communication. Once language has developed, and with it the capacity for conceptual thought, why could we not say that linguistic communication is a matter of using words to express thoughts, and that communication succeeds when the content expressed by the speaker stands in the right relation to the content grasped by the hearer? Indeed, Gauker himself disavows any ambition to explain how concepts and language first arose in a society or in a species: ‘My topic is only how concepts arise in minds embedded in societies where other people already have them’ (15).

Similarly, as noted earlier, the LD thesis is incompatible with a certain view of how children learn a first language, the so-called ‘Augustinian picture’ of language learning. According to this view, widely shared by psychologists, learning a first language involves mapping words into pre-existing concepts. If concepts are words, clearly, this cannot be how a child learns a first language. However, again, the question is why a rejection of the Augustinian picture of language learning, should imply that the conveyance conception of communication is false. Assuming that the child has learned her first language, and therefore is capable of conceptual thought, why could it not be said that she uses language to express her thoughts? After all, even if concepts are words it does not follow that the uttered words are identical to the ‘inner’ ones. Indeed, Gauker grants that there is such a thing as thinking without

5 Gauker is quite aware of this, and in Gauker (2003) he argues that Burge ought to give up his adherence to the conveyance conception of communication (or what he there calls ‘the expressive theory of communication’).
speaking, i.e. a type of ‘silent speech’ (257–258), and he stresses that he does not wish to deny the truism that there may be differences between what we think and what we say (269). One example Gauker mentions is when the speaker thinks more to herself than she expresses, but there is of course a multitude of cases of this sort: There is saying one thing while thinking another (as in the use of irony), or failing to say what one intended to say (as in a slip of a tongue or a Spoonerism), or choosing one’s words carefully because of the social context, etc. Why, then, could we not simply say that the speaker thinks a thought (in language), desires to communicate it to the hearer, uses her language to express the thought, and communication succeeds insofar as the hearer comes to have the right (language dependent) thought? At no point does it seem as if we need to presuppose that there could be concepts without language.

In addition, there are semantic theses that are clearly incompatible with the LD thesis. In particular, if concepts are just words, if there can be no conceptual thought without language, then certain metasemantic projects are ruled out: It cannot be that the meanings of linguistic expressions are determined in virtue of the speaker associating these expressions with certain independently existing concepts. For instance, the claim cannot be that the meaning of my word ‘horse’ is determined by its being associated with my concept horse. Instead, we need a metasemantic theory that applies jointly to linguistic meaning and to thought content, and that appeals to non-intentional, non-semantic facts (such as facts about use and dispositions to use). However, the same retort holds here too: Even if the LD thesis is compatible with certain types of metasemantic theories, it does not seem to follow that it is incompatible with the conveyance conception of communication.

My question, therefore, is why we could not accept both the LD thesis and the traditional conception of communication. And if not, why is this not a very serious problem for the LD thesis? Can we really afford to reject the idea that language is used to transmit thoughts and that successful communication requires that the content expressed and the content received stand in the right relation? Replacing this notion of successful communication with that of successful coordination seems unacceptably revisionary, but at the same time it is very difficult to see how we could manage without the notion of communicative success and its corollaries, such as the notions of understanding and misunderstanding.

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6 In (Gauker 2003), Gauker also says that the anti-expressivist can allow that ‘people sometimes choose their words with the specific intent of instilling a certain mental state in another’ (13).
References


Replies to Matthen, Weiskopf and Wikforss

Christopher Gauker

I am delighted, flattered and grateful that my book has been subjected to such close scrutiny by three such highly talented philosophers. Conveniently, each of them concentrates his or her attention on a different, broad aspect of my book. So it will make sense for me just to reply to each of them in turn (in alphabetical order).¹

1. Reply to Mohan Matthen

The focus of Matthen’s commentary is the early chapters of my book, where I argue that theories of concepts that divorce concept formation from language

¹ This present exchange of views originates in a symposium at the April 2014 meeting of the American Philosophical Association, featuring me and these same three critics.