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خودآگاهی به مثابه بازتاب زبان از خویشتن: از هگل تا ویتگنشتاین

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ماهیت خودآگاهی همچنان پرسشی بنیادین در فلسفه ذهن، پدیدارشناسی و فلسفه زبان باقی مانده است. اگرچه خودآگاهی معمولاً به عنوان آگاهی سوژه از خودش تعریف می‌شود، این مفهوم چالش‌های هستی‌شناختی و مفهومی عمیقی را در خود نهفته دارد که فیلسوفانی از هگل تا ویتگنشتاین را به خود مشغول کرده است. پرسش دیرپا این است که آیا خودآگاهی باید صرفاً نوعی بازتاب ذهنی به شمار آید، یا امری که در درون زبان و بواسطه زبان پدید می‌آید. این مقاله این گزاره را پیش مینهد که خودآگاهی نه صرفاً یک حالت ذهنی، بلکه یک رویداد زبانی است. آنچه خودآگاهی می‌نامیم، در سطحی عمیق‌تر، تجلی ظرفیت بازتابی زبان برای توصیف و تفسیر کارکردهای خودش است. از این منظر، خودآگاهی زمانی ظهور می‌یابد که زبان قادر می‌شود ساختار و کارکرد خود را به محتوای گفتمان تبدیل کند و بدین سان زبان از ابزاری ارتباطی به رسانه‌ای خودبنیان بدل گردد. در حالی که طیف گسترده‌ای از سنت‌های فلسفی - از دیالکتیک هگلی و قصدمندی هوسرلی گرفته تا عرفان اسلامی و نظریه‌های متأخر زبان‌شناختی - خودآگاهی را بررسی کرده‌اند، بیشتر آنها نقش زبان در ساخت خودبازتابی را نادیده گرفته‌اند. این پژوهش می‌کوشد تا از طریق گفت‌وگویی فلسفی و چندصدایی، این بُعد مغفول‌مانده را روشن سازد و نشان دهد که خودآگاهی را می‌توان کنش بازتابی زبان بر خودش تلقی کرد. علاوه بر این، این دیدگاه چارچوبی عینی برای پژوهش تجربی خودآگاهی ترسیم می‌کند و استدلال می‌نماید که با ریشه‌یابی این پدیده در سازوکارهای زبانی، مطالعه هوشیاری می‌تواند از قلمرویی ذهنی به حوزه‌های تجربی آزمون‌پذیر و عینی بدل شود.

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Self-awareness as the Reflection of Language on itself: From Hegel to Wittgenstein

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Abstract

The nature of self-awareness remains a fundamental question in philosophy of mind, phenomenology, and the philosophy of language. Although commonly defined as the subject's awareness of itself, this notion conceals profound conceptual and ontological challenges that have preoccupied philosophers from Hegel to Wittgenstein. The enduring question is whether self-awareness should be viewed as a purely mental reflection or as something that arises within and through language itself. This paper advances the thesis that self-awareness is not merely a mental state but a linguistic event. What we call the awareness of the self is, at a deeper level, the manifestation of language's reflexive capacity to describe and interpret its own operations. In this view, self-awareness emerges when language becomes capable of turning its own structure and function into the content of discourse, thus transforming language from a communicative tool into a self-reflective medium. While a wide range of philosophical traditions—from Hegelian dialectics and Husserlian intentionality to Islamic mysticism and later linguistic theories—have examined self-awareness, most have overlooked the constitutive role of language in enabling self-reflection. This study seeks to illuminate this neglected dimension through a polyphonic philosophical dialogue, demonstrating that self-awareness can be conceived as the reflexive act of language upon itself. Furthermore, this perspective outlines an objective framework for the experimental investigation of self-awareness, suggesting that by grounding the phenomenon in linguistic mechanisms, the study of consciousness may move from a subjective domain toward an empirically testable and objective field of inquiry.

Keywords:

Self-awareness, Philosophy of Language, Philosophy of Mind, Phenomenology, Islamic Mysticism

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1. Introduction

The nature of self-awareness remains one of the most enduring and controversial questions in contemporary philosophy. It lies at the intersection of philosophy of mind, phenomenology, and philosophy of language. In previous work (Farnam, 2025), I proposed that the “hard problem of consciousness” as articulated by David Chalmers — how physical brain-processes such as electron movements and chemical interactions give rise to subjective mental experiences — can be addressed by considering language, particularly inner speech, as a mediating mechanism linking material neural activity with mental phenomena through its regulatory effects on memory, arousal and internal narrative formation. Although self-awareness is often defined simply as “the subject’s awareness of itself,” such a definition conceals complex conceptual difficulties that have occupied philosophers for centuries (Zahavi, 2018). Central to these difficulties is the question: Can self-awareness be understood merely as a mental reflection, or must it be reconsidered within and through language itself?

From Hegel to Wittgenstein, this issue has been reformulated within markedly different philosophical frameworks. Hegel (1807/1977) conceives of self-awareness as a dialectical process in which the self comes to know itself only through recognition by another. In contrast, Wittgenstein relocates the discussion from metaphysical introspection to linguistic expression, emphasizing that the grammar of our language shapes the very possibility of self-knowledge (Wittgenstein, 1953/2009; Hacker, 2013). More recent Wittgensteinian readings, such as those by Bar-On (2019) and Finkelstein (2003), argue that first-person authority arises not from private access to inner states but from publicly rule-governed linguistic practices.

Phenomenological approaches, beginning with Husserl, provide another dimension by distinguishing between pre-reflective and reflective forms of self-awareness (Husserl, 1950/1999; Zahavi, 2005). According to this view, consciousness is inherently self-aware in its intentional structure, yet capable of turning upon itself in reflective awareness. This distinction underscores that self-awareness may not originate from introspection alone but is embedded in the very structure of experience and meaning.

Despite this philosophical richness, a gap persists in discussions of the linguistic constitution of self-awareness. Language, I argue, is not merely an instrument for expressing inner experiences but the medium through which the self emerges as self-reflective. What we call “awareness of the self” is, at a deeper level, the manifestation of language’s capacity to re-describe its own functioning. As Wittgenstein (1953/2009) suggests, “the limits of my language mean the limits of my world.” In this sense, self-awareness appears not as a purely mental phenomenon but as a linguistic event—a turning of language back upon itself (Taylor, 2016).

Within the linguistic paradigm, the problem of truth and justification becomes central to understanding the reflexive structure of self-awareness (Kowkab, 2010). If, as Rorty (1980) argues, we cannot step outside language to compare our propositions with a mind-independent reality, then truth collapses into justification within the limits of discursive practices. Rorty's pragmatist radicalization of the linguistic turn thus implies that self-knowledge and epistemic validity are internal to the web of language and belief, rendering the notion of an "extra-linguistic truth" redundant. In contrast, Habermas (2003) defends a dialogical conception of rationality that preserves the realist intuition within the linguistic paradigm. For him, the intersubjective structure of discourse allows for a distinction between context-bound justification and the regulative idea of truth. Truth, therefore, is not reducible to justification but emerges through the performative interplay between communicative action and rational discourse. This debate is crucial for the present argument, since understanding self-awareness as linguistically mediated reflection presupposes precisely such a balance between the immanence of language and the transcendence of truth (Brandt, 2019; Taylor, 2016).

As Habermas (1981, 2003) argues within his model of communicative rationality, language is no longer a mere instrument for the transmission of information but a medium for achieving intersubjective understanding. In a similar vein, this paper contends that language should not be conceived merely as a vehicle of transmission but as a medium for achieving self-understanding—that is, the reflective structure of self-consciousness itself.

In this study, I propose to examine self-awareness as a reflection of language upon itself, situating this idea within a broader philosophical dialogue that includes Hegelian dialectics, Husserlian phenomenology, Wittgensteinian linguistics, and aspects of Islamic mysticism. The latter offers a unique parallel tradition in which self-knowledge (*ma'rifat al-nafs*) is achieved through the reflexive and symbolic dimensions of language and revelation (Nasr, 2007). By engaging these traditions, this paper aims to illuminate the constitutive relationship between language and the emergence of the self, proposing that self-awareness arises only where language attains reflexivity.

In the first section, Hegel's interpretation of *Selbstbewusstsein* (self-awareness) is revisited, with particular attention to its relation to language. The second section introduces the central thesis of the paper—language as the constitutive ground of self-awareness. The third section undertakes a comparative examination of phenomenological perspectives (Husserl and Merleau-Ponty) and Islamic mystical thought (notably Ibn 'Arabi) concerning consciousness and language.

The fourth section analyzes Wittgenstein's transformation in his conception of language, exploring how the notion of the "self" can be

articulated within the framework of language-games. Finally, the fifth section discusses the theoretical and philosophical implications of this approach, including the relation between language and subjectivity and the place of first-person experience within a theory of meaning.

Thus, the present paper seeks to provide a conceptual possibility for rethinking self-awareness—not as a purely mental phenomenon, but as a linguistic manifestation that emerges within the reflexive structures of language itself.

2. Hegel's concept of *Selbstbewusstsein*: the return of consciousness to itself through the other

In Hegel's philosophical system, the concept of *Selbstbewusstsein*—self-awareness—occupies a foundational position. It represents not only the culmination of the dialectical progression of consciousness but also the necessary transition toward the realms of Reason (*Vernunft*) and Spirit (*Geist*). In the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807/1977), Hegel interprets self-awareness not as a pre-given attribute of the subject but as a historical and dialectical moment in the evolution of consciousness: the moment in which consciousness, through its encounter with the Other, returns to itself and recognizes itself as an autonomous subject (Pippin, 1989; Taylor, 1975).

In other words, self-awareness for Hegel is inherently intersubjective—it appears only in relation to another consciousness. The paradigmatic manifestation of this process is found in the master–slave dialectic, where two self-conscious beings struggle for mutual recognition (*Anerkennung*). In this struggle, one achieves dominance and becomes the master, attaining a limited form of self-awareness through negation, while the other becomes the bondsman, who, through labor and engagement with the material world, attains a deeper and more mediated form of self-awareness (Hegel, 1977; Kojève, 1969). Thus, *Selbstbewusstsein* is not a static state but a dialectical process that traverses alienation to reach self-recognition.

Yet within this profound dialectical framework, the element of language remains notably absent. Hegel acknowledges language as a medium of Spirit's expression, but he never fully explores it as the ground of the self's return to itself. How does recognition occur in the encounter with the Other? How does the self grasp itself as itself? If recognition is mediated by negation, what is the role of language in this mediation? These questions remain at the margins of Hegel's system, revealing a silence concerning the linguistic conditions of self-awareness.

In fact, Hegel's account exhibits what may be called a “linguistic omission”: recognition presupposes articulation—even if pre-linguistic—and yet no systematic analysis is offered of how this articulation arises. Thus, Hegel's conception of *Selbstbewusstsein*, while historically and conceptually groundbreaking, still presupposes a mind-centered model of subjectivity,

overlooking the linguistic ground upon which self-reflection becomes possible (Habermas, 1987).

In the following sections, this conceptual gap will be examined further. The paper aims to reinterpret self-awareness not merely as a mental or dialectical event, but as a linguistic phenomenon—a reflection of language upon itself that constitutes the very possibility of the self.

2.1. Critical reflection: Is Selbstbewusstsein Possible Without Language?

Hegel's analysis of self-awareness, as shown above, relies on the dialectical structure through which the subject attains self-recognition via the Other. However, this process rests on a tacit presupposition: that the subject can recognize itself as itself. Yet how does such recognition occur? Can this return to the self be conceptualized without a system of signs—that is, without language?

From the perspectives of philosophy of language and psychoanalysis, the answer is largely negative. Jacques Lacan, in his psychoanalytic re-reading of Freud and Hegel, argues that the subject is born within language and that selfhood emerges only through entry into the Symbolic Order. As Lacan (1977) writes, “the I is born in the field of the Other's language.” Hence, self-awareness is not pre-linguistic but linguistically structured.

Similarly, Merleau-Ponty, in *Phenomenology of Perception* (1962) and *The Structure of Behavior* (1963), maintains that language is not a mere instrument of expression but the very form through which consciousness of the world—and of oneself—becomes possible. Language, he writes, is “the second body of the subject,” rendering lived experience shareable and intersubjectively meaningful.

Even in more recent accounts, such as Charles Taylor's notion of the self-interpreting subject, self-awareness entails a form of internal narration—and narration is impossible without linguistic form. For Taylor (1985), “it is only through language that we can make sense of what we experience and ascribe moral or personal meaning to it.”

Accordingly, one may argue that Selbstbewusstsein, as Hegel describes it, though appearing to be a purely dialectical and mental event, is in its very foundation dependent upon linguistic structures that enable the stabilization and reflection of selfhood. Without symbolic articulation, the return of consciousness to itself would remain a fleeting and unstable experience.

Thus, from both linguistic and psychoanalytic perspectives, self-awareness without language is not merely difficult but structurally impossible. It is precisely at this juncture—where Hegel's dialectical model falls silent—that a new conceptual possibility opens: to reconceive self-awareness as the reflection of language upon itself, rather than merely the return of awareness to itself.

In semiotics, language is often regarded as the most advanced and organized sign system, because, in addition to producing meaning, it possesses the capacity to represent and interpret other sign systems (Chandler, 2017, pp. 45-47). Thinkers such as Saussure (1916/1983) and Barthes (1964/1988) consider language as a central model for analyzing semiotic processes. Consequently, given the limitations of other semiotic systems, and the fact that within human inner language virtually all these systems are subsumed under language (for instance, when judging the specific abilities of two individuals, we might internally rely solely on the mathematical equals sign), it can therefore be asserted with certainty that among all semiotic systems, only language possesses complex abstract capabilities (such as reflexivity) and can serve as the foundation for a complex intra-psychic phenomenon like self-awareness (Winner, 1988; Vygotsky, 1962/1986).

3. Language as the ground of self-awareness: when language turns upon itself

Up to this point, we have seen that the classical conception of self-awareness—even within Hegel's dialectical theory—remains largely silent on the role of language. This section proposes an alternative hypothesis: self-awareness is not merely the return of awareness to itself but rather the return of language to itself—the moment in which language becomes capable of describing its own functioning.

In this view, self-awareness may be conceived as a linguistic phenomenon emerging at a certain level of linguistic complexity—one where language reflects upon its own operations and thereby constitutes the conditions for subjectivity. In other words, it is not mind that asks about itself, but language that questions and describes itself; and the "I" is the product of this self-reflexive inquiry.

Phenomenological self-awareness, defined in its simplest terms as "a being's experience of its own existence from within" (Zahavi, 2005, p. 15), is uniquely characteristic of human beings (Gallagher, 2000, p. 15). This entails not merely the display of intelligent behavior, but the first-person experience of emotions, perceptions, pain, thoughts, or one's own presence (Legrand, 2006, p. 94). The emergence of this type of self-awareness in children begins around the age of two, when the child starts using the word "I" and first-person pronouns to refer to herself and her actions (Coates, 1985, p. 660; Owens, 1996, p. 288), and continues to develop over the following decades (Kagan, 1991, p. 142).

However, the most rudimentary degree of self-awareness—which is measured by the "mirror test" (or "mark test"), assessing whether a particular being is capable of recognizing itself in a mirror (Gallup, 1970, p. 88)—is observed in children aged 18–24 months as well as in certain evolutionarily

advanced animals such as chimpanzees, orangutans, dolphins, elephants, and magpies (Gallup, 1970, p. 88; Plotnik et al., 2006, p. 217; Prior et al., 2008, p. 937). Nevertheless, it is certain that this degree of self-awareness is insufficient for the emergence of phenomena such as art, aesthetics, spirituality, and the like. Phenomenal self-awareness—the full, lived, first-person experience of the self—emerges only in mature human beings with developed linguistic capacity (Świerczyński, 2022, p. 48; Vygotsky, 1962/1986, p. 126).

Consider the following utterances:

“I’m thinking about the fact that I’m speaking—but what’s the point of my words?”

“I don’t know why I said that.”

“Have I really understood myself?”

At first glance, these sentences seem trivial, but structurally they reveal something profound: language re-describes its own linguistic acts. This level of reflexivity is akin to what the philosophy of language calls metalanguage (Tarski, 1933/1956), yet there is a crucial difference. In classical metalanguage, a second-order language is used to describe a first-order one. In human self-awareness, however, it is everyday language itself that bends inward, turning upon its own expressive activity.

This recursive linguistic movement, by which language narratively integrates sensory experience with memory and emotional tone, produces a coherent account of the self. In this sense, inner language continuously generates narratives that stabilize experience; and when this inner narrative becomes self-descriptive, the phenomenon of self-awareness arises.

3.1. Inner speech, representation, and the linguistic Phenomenon of the “I”

In cognitive psychology and philosophy of mind, the concept of inner speech has long been regarded as a crucial mechanism for thought and self-regulation. Classic formulations include Lev Vygotsky’s (1986) theory of internalized social speech and Noam Chomsky’s (1968, 2016) generative model of internal grammar—two approaches that, despite their divergent genealogies, both view language as constitutive of cognition.

The present argument takes a further step: language is not merely the medium for thought but the very horizon within which the subject emerges. In other words, self-awareness is the outcome of language’s capacity to re-describe its own functioning. Inner speech, while constantly shaping thoughts, emotions, and behaviors, can itself become the object of linguistic reflection—a higher-order “meta-inner speech” that describes the ongoing linguistic processes within the mind (Morin, 2005; Fernyhough, 2016).

Within this framework, the “I” is not an independent substance but a linguistic event that manifests in structures such as: self-reference, self-evaluation, and the representation of one’s own mental states.

The subject is thus born where language becomes entangled with itself. This perspective radically departs from mentalist traditions of analyzing self-awareness, situating it instead within the reflexive operations of language. From this standpoint, mentality is not the cause of language but its product; and self-awareness marks the moment when language attains the capacity for self-analysis and self-reflection.

Moreover, this perspective may open new avenues for experimental research on self-awareness, since no specific location or definitive mechanism for the emergence of self-awareness has yet been identified in contemporary neuroscience. However, if self-awareness is reconceptualized at the level of language, the vast body of knowledge regarding linguistic structures and their formation mechanisms would allow for experience-based objective experimentation, thereby transforming the study of self-awareness from a subjective discipline into one grounded in empirical objectivity.

4. Phenomenology and mysticism — inner awareness, language of the self

The central idea of this paper—that self-awareness is not merely the return of awareness to itself, but the return of language to itself—invites a rethinking of those philosophical and mystical traditions that grounded self-awareness in immediate experience, silence, or inner intuition. These traditions, though not denying the linguistic nature of awareness, have tended to treat language as secondary or external. Yet even within such frameworks, language implicitly structures the very horizon of self-awareness. To illustrate this claim, three parallel perspectives will be examined: Husserl’s phenomenology of intentionality, Merleau-Ponty’s embodied phenomenology, and Ibn Arabi’s ontological mysticism.

In phenomenological philosophy, pre-linguistic intentionality is a kind of orientation, meaning, or “aboutness” of the mind that exists prior to the formation of language and words, and encompasses all of our automatic behaviors and unconscious dispositions (including skills or phobias, among others) (Husserl, 1901/2001, p. 105; Gallagher & Zahavi, 2021, p. 78). It is obvious that an individual’s being conscious does not mean that human beings are always and everywhere conscious. Sigmund Freud emphasized the existence of unconscious processes in humans (Freud, 1915/1957, p. 172), and the discovery of non-declarative or procedural memory (which underlies skills and phobias) and unconscious processes are facts that attest to the existence of unconscious processes—the psychological equivalent of pre-linguistic intentionality—in the conscious human being (Schacter, 1987, p. 501; Squire, 2004, p. 174).

On the other hand, in order to be "conscious," we must be able to distinguish between things, to refer to something or identify it in our mind, and to think about ourselves (Zahavi, 2005, p. 92). Zahavi (2005, p. 93) states that these abilities resemble what language does. Thus, perhaps even completely inner and silent experiences are, at their core, dependent on a kind of linguistic structure. A simple example: when we feel sadness, perhaps no words are present in our mind at that moment. However, the fact that we understand "this feeling is different from joy," know that "I am experiencing this," and can later refer to it, all indicate that our mind employs a structure that operates like language (Gallagher, 2005, p. 72; Dennett, 1991, p. 280).

4.1. Husserl: the silence of consciousness or a hidden language?

In Edmund Husserl's phenomenology, self-awareness is defined through intentionality: every consciousness is consciousness of something (Husserl, 1913/1982). His project seeks to ground the sciences in "pure intuition" rather than linguistic mediation or interpretation. Language, in this sense, is secondary to the givenness of experience.

However, this very assumption raises a paradox: can consciousness truly intuit itself without being, at least potentially, expressible in language? Even if awareness occurs in silence, its very structure presupposes differentiation, reference, and self-reflection—all linguistic functions (Zahavi, 2014). Thus, Husserl's "silence" is not pre-linguistic but proto-linguistic: a suspended form of language that still carries its semantic potential. In this sense, silence is meaningful only within the horizon of language; it is, paradoxically, the inverse form of speech.

The very act of epoché—the bracketing of presuppositions to return to pure phenomena—is itself a linguistic act, a performative move of consciousness that depends on the internal logic of meaning (Derrida, 1967).

4.2. Merleau-Ponty: the speaking body and embodied self-awareness

Maurice Merleau-Ponty extends and transforms Husserl's project by situating self-awareness within the lived body (*le corps propre*). In *Phenomenology of Perception* (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2012), he argues that language is not a mere instrument of thought but the very becoming of thought itself: "We think only when we begin to speak."

For Merleau-Ponty, the body is not simply the locus of perception—it is the first language of the subject. Gestures, movements, silences, and gazes are linguistic in structure, forming a pre-reflective discourse between the self and the world (Gallagher & Zahavi, 2012). Thus, self-awareness emerges only where embodiment and language intersect. The "return of language to itself" in Merleau-Ponty's framework becomes the self's reflection through its bodily expression.

4.3. Ibn Arabi: the mirror of humanity and the language of the divine names

In Islamic mysticism, particularly in Ibn Arabi's metaphysical vision, self-awareness is grounded in the divine reflection within the human being. In *al-Futuhāt al-Makkiyya* and *Fusus al-Hikam*, Ibn Arabi (1205/1980) describes humanity as the mirror through which God contemplates Himself: "God sees Himself in the mirror of human attributes."

Here, language is not a medium of expression but the very form of divine manifestation. The Names of God (*Asma' al-Husna*) are linguistic expressions of Being, and the human self is their existential locus (Chittick, 1989). Awareness of the self is thus an awareness of the divine language resonating within the human form. From this standpoint, "self-awareness is the speech of God heard within the mirror of the human soul."

Spiritual transformation, in Ibn Arabi's framework, unfolds through the progressive realization of divine Names within the self—each a linguistic-ontological event that reveals consciousness as a dialogical process between God and man.

4.4. Synthesis: reflection in silence, language in intuition

All three traditions—Husserl's transcendental phenomenology, Merleau-Ponty's embodied expressivity, and Ibn Arabi's mystical ontology—appear to distance themselves from language. Yet, upon closer examination, each presupposes it as the condition of possibility for self-awareness. Even in silence and intuition, consciousness depends on the reflective potential of language.

Thus, the guiding thesis of this study is reinforced: Self-awareness, even in its most silent and mystical forms, relies on the reflexive capacity of language. Awareness of the self, ultimately, does not remain speechless.

5. Wittgenstein — from the limits of language to the games of the self

If, up to this point, the notion of self-awareness as the reflection of language upon itself has been traced through dialectical, phenomenological, and mystical traditions, it now undergoes its most rigorous philosophical testing in Wittgenstein. This test unfolds in two phases: first, in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921), where language appears as the logical map of the world and the limit of thought; and second, in the *Philosophical Investigations* (1953), where language is recognized as a form of life, enacted through social practices. In their apparent opposition, these two Wittgensteinian moments reveal a single underlying truth: the self does not exist outside language but emerges within its structures of meaning.

5.1. The tractatus: language, world, and the silence of the subject

In the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein begins with his famous assertion:

“The world is the totality of facts, not of things.” (TLP 1.1)

Language, in this framework, is a logical picture (Abbild) of the world; it mirrors reality through its propositional form. As he states elsewhere:

“The limits of my language mean the limits of my world.” (TLP 5.6)

Here, self-awareness manifests only as silence. The “I” or the “thinking subject” cannot appear within the world it describes, for it is not an object among objects:

“The thinking, representing subject does not belong to the world.” (TLP 5.633)

Hence, as Wittgenstein concludes,

“What we cannot speak about, we must pass over in silence.” (TLP 7)

As scholars such as Zahavi (2014) and Hacker (1996) observe, this silence is not epistemological but grammatical: the self marks the boundary condition of representation—it is what enables the picture, yet cannot itself be pictured. The linguistic mirror cannot reflect its own frame. Thus, in the *Tractatus*, the “reflection of language upon itself” reaches its aporia: the self is the silent condition of language’s very possibility.

5.2. Philosophical investigations: language games and the self as a role

In his later work, Wittgenstein reverses his early model of representation. Language is no longer a static map but a living practice. Meaning arises not from correspondence but from use: “For a large class of cases—the meaning of a word is its use in the language” (PI §43).

Within this pragmatic turn, the self is no longer excluded; it participates in language as one of its many functions. Wittgenstein dismantles the notion of a private language, arguing that sensations, thoughts, and even self-reports derive their meaning from shared linguistic practices (PI §§243–258).

When we say,

“I don’t know why I said that,”

or,

“I think I’m thinking wrongly,”

we engage in a meta-linguistic act where language turns back upon itself. These utterances enact precisely the structure of self-reflective awareness*—language questioning its own operations. In this sense, self-awareness emerges as a linguistic performance rather than a pre-linguistic mental state (Baker & Hacker, 2009; Glock, 1996).

5.3. The later wittgenstein and the formation of the “I”

From within the dynamics of language games, a phenomenon traditionally

called “the self” arises—but not as an inner metaphysical entity. Rather, it is a grammatical function, a linguistic role embedded in the logic of our practices. As Hacker succinctly puts it:

“The self is a grammatical role, not a metaphysical substance.” (Hacker, 1990, p. 147)

The “I” emerges only where language is capable of reflexivity—where it can make itself its own topic. To be self-aware, then, is to be capable of participating in those games where language mirrors its own use. The self is not an antecedent to language; it is one of language’s higher-order effects.

5.4. Synthesis: Boundary, Silence, and Reflection

From the silence of the *Tractatus* to the dialogical multiplicity of the *Investigations*, Wittgenstein traverses a path from the limits of language to its self-reflective play. The subject, once silent and external to the world, reappears as a participant in the grammar of experience.

In this view, self-awareness is not a metaphysical essence but a linguistic event—an emergent property of our capacity to speak about speaking. The “return of language upon itself” becomes, therefore, the condition for any form of selfhood.

Language is not a mere instrument of thought; it is the medium in which thought and self alike occur.

6. Reflective Language and the Redefinition of Self-awareness

The comparative analysis presented in Table 1 highlights the evolution of philosophical perspectives on the interrelation between self-awareness and language, tracing a conceptual trajectory from Hegelian dialectics to contemporary linguistic and phenomenological thought. As shown, each framework redefines the locus of “the self” by situating it within different modes of mediation. For Hegel (1807/1977), *Selbstbewusstsein* emerges through recognition by the Other, implying that selfhood is fundamentally intersubjective. Phenomenology, particularly in Husserl (1913/1982) and Merleau-Ponty (1945/2012), grounds self-awareness in pre-linguistic experience, where language merely articulates intentional consciousness rather than constituting it. In contrast, Islamic mysticism (Ibn Arabi; Chittick, 1989) interprets self-awareness as a divine reflection — the unveiling of the unity of being through symbolic and spiritual language.

Wittgenstein’s later philosophy (1953/2009) introduces a decisive shift by identifying self-reference as a grammatical function within language-games, dissolving the metaphysical notion of an inner self. Habermas (1987, 2003) extends this turn by embedding self-understanding within the framework of communicative rationality, where language is no longer a mere instrument for transmitting information but a medium for

intersubjective understanding. Building on this communicative paradigm, the present article proposes that language functions not only as a means of understanding others but as a medium for self-understanding — a reflexive structure through which consciousness returns to itself. Thus, the self is reconceived as a linguistic event, an occurrence in which language becomes aware of itself through reflective articulation.

This comparative overview underscores the continuity and transformation of the problem of self-awareness from metaphysical and phenomenological traditions to a distinctly linguistic conception of subjectivity. As summarized in Table 1, the transition from recognition (Hegel) to expression (phenomenology), revelation (mysticism), and reflexivity (Wittgenstein and Habermas) culminates in the present thesis: that self-awareness is the reflexivity of language itself, rather than a mental representation of an inner subject.

Table 1. Comparative Overview of Theories of Self-Awareness and Language

Philosophical Tradition / Thinker	Core View of Self-Awareness	Role of Language	Relation Between Self and Other	Implication for the Concept of “Self”
Hegel (1807)	Selbstbewusstsein as the self’s return to itself through the recognition of the Other.	Implicit medium of recognition and mediation of Spirit.	The self becomes itself only through the dialectical relation with the Other.	The self is intersubjectively constituted.
Phenomenology (Husserl, Merleau-Ponty)	Consciousness as intentionality directed toward phenomena.	Language expresses but does not constitute experience.	The Other is a horizon within lived experience.	The self is embodied and experiential.
Islamic Mysticism (Ibn Arabi)	Self-awareness as divine reflection knowing oneself through knowing God.	Language is symbolic and revelatory (logos-like).	The Other is the mirror of divine manifestation.	The self dissolves into the unity of Being (wahdat al-wujūd).
Wittgenstein (1953, 2009)	The “I” is not an object but a grammatical function within language-games.	Language constitutes meaning and the boundaries of sense.	Understanding the Other occurs within shared linguistic practices.	The self is a linguistic position within rule-governed practices.
Habermas (1987, 2003)	Self-understanding emerges through communicative rationality.	Language is a medium for intersubjective understanding, not a tool for transmission.	The Other is a participant in discourse aimed at mutual comprehension.	The self is dialogically formed.
This Article’s Thesis	Self-awareness as linguistic reflexivity—the self’s return to itself through language.	Language is not a tool for expression but the very medium of self-reflection.	The Other (and the self) emerge within the reflexive loops of linguistic activity.	The self is the event of language becoming self-aware.

In this section, moving beyond the traditional conception of self-awareness as the subject's awareness of itself, it is argued that self-awareness is fundamentally a linguistic phenomenon—not pre-linguistic or intuitive, but a construction that arises within language and returns to itself through language. This perspective allows for the examination of three levels of theoretical implications emerging from this idea.

6.1. Language as Reflexive Mediation

If *Selbstbewusstsein* designates the mind's turning back upon itself, then language is not merely a neutral medium of expression but the very structure that makes reflection possible. The utterance of "I" presupposes a linguistic field in which the self and its reflection are co-constituted. As Taylor (2016) observes, language forms "a horizon of articulation" through which selfhood becomes intelligible. Likewise, Habermas (2003) contends that the intersubjective structure of linguistic communication underlies the reflexive constitution of subjectivity.

From this standpoint, the I is not a pre-linguistic given but a linguistic event. The act of self-reflection unfolds through the dialogical nature of language, wherein the self appears simultaneously as speaker and listener. Hegel (1807/1977) had already demonstrated that consciousness "becomes for itself only through another" (p. 112), a principle that recurs in linguistic interaction: meaning arises through difference, and selfhood is constituted in its self-differentiation through linguistic mediation (Pippin, 2019).

6.2. Language and Being: The Ontological Horizon

If consciousness is always already linguistic, then Being itself must be conceived within the horizon of language. Heidegger (1959/2025) famously described language as "the house of Being," the locus where Being is disclosed. Language does not merely represent an external world but rather opens a space of manifestation where phenomena acquire meaning. The "said being" (*das Gesagte*) thus precedes the "experienced being," since lived experience attains intelligibility only through linguistic disclosure (Esfandiar, 2024).

This ontological perspective dissolves the classical division between inner experience and outer expression. As Gadamer (2004) argued, understanding is not a subsequent interpretation of a pre-given world but the very event in which the world comes into understanding through language. Accordingly, self-awareness emerges not as an act of private introspection but as a shared linguistic occurrence—a manifestation within the intersubjective field of meaning.

6.3. Inner Speech and the First-Person Perspective

A key question is whether self-awareness can exist apart from language.

Recent cognitive research suggests that it cannot. Studies on inner speech indicate that even silent thought relies on linguistic mechanisms structuring self-awareness (Alderson-Day & Fernyhough, 2023). Inner speech is not merely a muted echo of outer speech but a dynamic process enabling meta-cognition and reflexivity (Borghi & Fernyhough, 2023).

Moreover, debates concerning “pure thought” emphasize that attempts to separate cognition from linguistic form neglect how deeply linguistic structures permeate self-related awareness. The Review of Philosophy and Psychology article *Inner Speech and “Pure” Thought – Do We Think in Language?* (2024) concludes that the boundaries between thought and language are porous, making inner speech a constitutive element of self-awareness. The “inner voice” is thus both a cognitive and ontological mode through which language reflects upon itself and gives rise to the I.

In short, first-person experience (*Erlebnis*) is not an ineffable remnant beyond language but the interior dimension of linguistic reflection. The “I” is an event in language: a reflexive moment where expression becomes self-awareness.

7. Implications and Open Horizons

The findings indicate that conceptualizing self-awareness at the linguistic level provides an objective basis for experimental inquiry, enabling measurable and reproducible approaches that bridge the gap between subjective experience and empirical and objective analysis.

7.1. Reframing the Question of Self-awareness

The inquiry that guided this paper—What is self-awareness?—finds a revised answer in the idea that self-awareness is not merely the awareness of a self but the reflexive activity of language itself. When language becomes capable of describing its own operation, the phenomenon of selfhood arises. This move shifts the ontological burden from a metaphysical subject to a linguistic event. As Ricoeur (1992) asserts, “the self is not given but narrated” (p. 114); the reflexivity of language constitutes the temporal and narrative coherence of the self.

This reconceptualization thus aligns with contemporary thought in phenomenology and philosophy of mind: consciousness is not an isolated Cartesian domain but a dialogical and interpretive field structured by linguistic mediation (Zahavi, 2014). Consequently, self-awareness becomes a linguistic reflexivity phenomenon, appearing whenever language turns toward itself to re-describe its own functioning.

7.2. From Dialectic to Linguistic Play

Tracing the path from Hegel’s dialectic to Wittgenstein’s language games clarifies the conceptual shift. For Hegel (1807/1977), *Selbstbewusstsein*

emerges through recognition—consciousness finds itself through the mediation of another. In Wittgenstein’s (1953/2009) view, meaning is use; thus, selfhood arises not from metaphysical introspection but from participation in rule-governed linguistic practices. As Brandom (2019) explains, “to be a self is to be a player in the game of giving and asking for reasons” (p. 52). Language thereby becomes both the stage and the actor of reflexivity.

In this progression, the notion of “the self that speaks” transforms into “the language that speaks itself.” The philosophical focus thus moves from the subject of consciousness to the medium of articulation that gives rise to that subject.

7.3. Defending the Linguistic View of Self-Awareness

The proposed model situates self-awareness entirely within linguistic and social frameworks. McDowell (1994) has emphasized that our conceptual capacities are “unbounded by the given,” meaning that language mediates even our perceptual experience. This view supports the idea that consciousness and language are coextensive phenomena—each presupposes and sustains the other.

Empirical and theoretical studies in cognitive science reinforce this philosophical claim. Carruthers (2023) argues that self-knowledge depends on internal linguistic models that simulate external dialogue. Similarly, Clark (2024) suggests that the “extended mind” includes linguistic structures as constitutive scaffolding for reflective awareness. Thus, self-awareness arises wherever language loops back upon itself through communicative or introspective articulation.

7.4. Interdisciplinary Extensions

The conception of self-awareness as linguistic reflexivity opens new pathways for research across several domains:

a. Psychoanalysis

In Freudian and Lacanian traditions, speech already mediates the unconscious. Lacan (1977) viewed the unconscious as “structured like a language,” implying that self-awareness arises only in moments when one’s speech rearticulates its own prior narrative. The therapeutic act, therefore, involves enabling language to reflect upon its repressed layers (Fink, 2023).

b. Cognitive Linguistics

Recent studies explore how meta-linguistic verbs—such as say, think, hear oneself—enable higher-order linguistic representation (Langacker, 2021). These verbs delineate the linguistic architecture that makes self-reference

possible, showing that only certain syntactic structures can model recursive self-reflection.

c. Artificial Intelligence

The question of whether large language models might develop artificial self-awareness depends on whether linguistic recursion alone can produce reflexivity. As Bender and Koller (2020) caution, linguistic output without embodiment or affect remains simulation, not awareness. Yet, as Gunkel (2023) argues, this tension itself deepens our understanding of what “linguistic selfhood” entails: the capacity of a system to describe and modify its own operations in linguistic form.

7.5. Toward an Open Conclusion

Ultimately, the problem of self-awareness might not concern who is conscious, but what kind of language is capable of reflecting upon itself. When language folds inward—when it becomes both the mirror and the image—the event of self-awareness occurs.

In this light, the self is not the origin of speech but its consequence. Consciousness is not a substance but a linguistic relation: the ongoing dialogue through which language interrogates itself and, in doing so, creates the space of subjectivity.

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