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TIP-OF-THE-TONGUE EXPERIENCES. A MODEST PROPOSAL ON COGNITIVE PHENOMENOLOGY

abstract

The experience of having a name on the tip of one's tongue is often considered as evidence either in favor of pure cognitive phenomenology or against it. Yet the question of what kind of experience it is, is barely addressed. My task is to address this preliminary question. After discussing some answers to this question, I argue in favor of a pluralist account of TOTs, according to which they are second order beliefs about our knowledge of words, perceptions or bodily feelings.

keywords

tip-of-the-tongue experience, metacognitive feeling, cognitive phenomenology, phonological information

1. TOTs: sensuous or not-sensuous?

Cognitive phenomenology contends that mental states and events such as having a belief, entertaining an idea and understanding an argument, when they are occurring, have a phenomenology. In other words, it contends that there is something it is like to have thoughts of such kinds. Pure cognitive phenomenology further claims that this something is non-sensuous, that is, that the phenomenology of thought is unlike the phenomenology of perceptual experience¹.

With regard to the hypothesis that there is a cognitive phenomenology (pure or impure), one issue in the current debate is whether the phenomenology of thoughts is structured in terms of propositional attitudes alone (the mode of thoughts), or also in terms of their contents. Some philosophers insist that since belief and doubt are different mental states, believing that *p* and doubting whether *p* have different phenomenologies; other philosophers claim that what we believe and what we doubt, that is, the contents of our cognitive states, have a direct impact on their phenomenology. The discussion on this latter issue is complicated by the fact that theorists hold different views on content.

The experience of having a name on the tip of one's tongue (from now on: TOT) is often considered as evidence either in favor of pure cognitive phenomenology or against it. Yet the question of what kind of experience it is, is barely addressed. For example, Alvin Goldman contends, with no supporting argument, that TOT experiences are clearly examples of a non-sensory phenomenology:

When one tries to say something but cannot think of the word, one is phenomenologically aware of having requisite conceptual structure, that is, of having definite ...content one seeks to articulate. What is missing is the phenomenological form: the sound of the sought-for word. The absence of this sensory quality, however, does not imply that nothing (relevant) is in awareness. Entertaining a conceptual unity has a phenomenology, not just a sensory phenomenology (1993, p. 24).

On the contrary, Eric Lormand (1996), who identifies the TOT with the experience of a sense

¹ The claim that cognitive states have a pure phenomenology is unlike the claim that cognitive states have a proprietary phenomenology. Pure cognitive phenomenologists claim that cognitive states may have phenomenal properties even in absence of sensory phenomenal properties.

of effort together with the experience of the absence of phonological representation, claims that TOTs have a sensory phenomenology. Tim Bayne and Michelle Montague, while reporting Goldman's and Lormand's opposite views, comment that the question remains "as to whether tip-of-the-tongue-experiences ... are states with a distinctive cognitively-structured phenomenology" (Bayne & Montague 2011, p. 19). An answer to this question, however, would require knowledge of what kind of states TOTs are. Only once we know this, can the issue of their phenomenology be raised. Take the case of belief. We know more or less what a belief is, and it makes sense to ask whether there is something that it is like to believe that *p* and, if there is something, what it is. It may be that there is something it is like to have a word on the tip of the tongue. However, if we wish to rely on more than introspection alone before establishing whether this something is sensuous or non-sensuous, we need to know what kind of experience is involved: that is, its mode and content. My task is to address this preliminary question, hoping to reach a significant conclusion. I shall discuss three answers. The first is that this experience is a *sui generis* feeling; the second is that it is a second order belief; the third is that it is a perception.

I can have on the tip of my tongue the beginning of a poem, the title of a novel, the words of a song. I can also have a melody, someone's look, a color or a perfume on the tip of my tongue (perhaps I should say that I have these latter things on the tip of my eyes and on the tip of my nose). I shall focus on lexical items, and particularly on names. Whatever the TOT is, it is a state occurring after a *failed retrieval* of the name. In the literature, there is often reference to William James' description of such a state:

2. Feelings

Suppose we try to recall a forgotten name. The state of our consciousness is peculiar. There is a gap therein; but no mere gap. It is a gap that is intensely active. A sort of wraith of the name is in it, beckoning us in a given direction, making us at moments tingle with the sense of our closeness and then letting it sink back without the longed-for term. If wrong names are proposed to us, this singularly definite gap acts immediately so as to negate them. They do not fit into its mould. And the gap of one word does not feel like the gap of another, all empty of content, as both might seem necessarily to be when described as gaps (James 1890/1950, p. 251)

James is not providing a definition of TOT. He is tentatively describing its phenomenology – he says that the TOT is awareness of a lexical gap that needs to be filled.

We may be aware of a lexical gap in many different situations, and it is not obvious which of them are TOTs. Take the following case. I try to recall the names of the kids who were in my third grade school class. Alas, too many years have passed, and I remember only two of them; the rest of those names have vanished. There is a large lexical gap that I am aware of. Is this a TOT? The answer is probably no.

One suggestion is that in the school case, I make a cold judgment about my knowledge. I judge that (I know that) some of the names are A, B, C... and that I do not know the other names. Instead, in the TOT I *feel* that I know a certain name, although I cannot immediately say what that name is. This suggestion leads us to the hypothesis that the TOT is a feeling.

This feeling hypothesis is attractive, and appears consistent with James' description of the phenomenon. Yet it raises the following objection. The expression "feeling" is an umbrella term for many different things: there are feelings of pleasure/pain, feelings of heat/cold, feelings of easiness/uneasiness, affective feelings and, as in the case under scrutiny, feelings of knowledge. The problem is that we need a substantial enough theory of feelings to explain what feelings of knowledge are and how they differ from other feelings. In addition, we need to know what differentiates the feeling of knowing a name from other feelings of knowledge, such as the feeling

of uncertainty. Jérôme Dokic (2012) acknowledges that “in advance absence of a substantial theory of feeling it is difficult to classify certain feelings as ‘noetic feelings’”, but according to Dokic there are feelings that are clearly noetic, and TOTs are among them². Similarly, Bruce Mangan (2000) and Santiago Arañgo-Munoz (2014) accept the hypothesis that TOTs are noetic feelings, and that since noetic feelings are *sui generis* experiences, TOTs are *sui generis* experiences. The problem with this proposal is not only its vagueness. More seriously, it amounts to putting the cart in front of the horse. By definition, feelings have a phenomenology. Thus, if TOTs are a typical example of cognitive state, and we claim that they are feelings, we claim ipso facto that (some) cognitive states have a phenomenology. A more promising path is to reduce TOT to another state and argue that its phenomenology is the phenomenology of that state (if there is one).

3. Beliefs Famously, David Rosenthal proposes a reductionist account according to which the TOT is a conscious occurrent belief, and elaborates this within the context of his HOT (higher order thought) theory of consciousness³. Briefly, for Rosenthal, a mental state M is conscious if it is accompanied by a simultaneous higher-order (i.e., meta-mental) state whose content is that one is now in M. M can be a belief, a desire or an emotion, and the higher order thought has as its object that state *with its intentional content*. The mode of this thought is one of assertion, that is, the metacognitive state is a judgment on one’s first-order mental state. Rosenthal further contends that HOT about M occurs simultaneously with M and there are no intermediaries between them such as sense data, other judgments, images or feelings.

For Rosenthal TOTs, too, are HOTs – that is, metacognitive judgments. Yet, they are metacognitive judgments of a peculiar kind. Despite the fact that their content is one’s first order state of knowledge, the content of that first-order knowledge is not part of their content. This means that if I have a name on the tip of my tongue, I am conscious *that* I know the name, but I am not conscious of *what* name it is.

When I have Mark Twain’s real name on the tip of my tongue, I must be conscious of the particular state that carries that information. But I am not conscious of that state in respect of the specific information the state carries; rather, I am conscious of the state only as a state that carries that information (Rosenthal 2000a, p. 204).

As we may put it, to be in a TOT state is to make a higher order judgment representing a state of knowledge as the state that has the appropriate intentional content, without representing that content. This is Rosenthal’s general idea. I shall now give more details by comparing TOTs with some neighbouring mental states.

Consider the following case. I distinctly remember that one day I told my teacher Mark Twain’s real name and she gave me a good mark. That is, I remember that I remembered that name at that time, although I do not remember it now. Remembering is a factive state. Hence, it is an instance of knowledge. In this case, I am conscious of a state (remembering) as a state that carried that information, but I am not conscious of that state with respect to the specific information the state carried. Is my remembering a TOT? Intuitively, it is not. Rosenthal can reply that my example misses an important feature of TOTs: to be in a TOT state is to be in a state that *presently* carries

² Dokic, (2012), p. 303; see also Arañgo-Munoz, (2014): “‘Feeling’ will be used to refer to the conscious, phenomenal, or qualitative experience that a subject undergoes when faced with a given stimulus or a given circumstance” (p. 3).

³ Rosenthal (2000a), Rosenthal (2000b).

the information about the name, without my having access to the information the state carries. And yet, this is not the end of the story, because we have another troubling case.

CHARADE. Mary loves charades and she loves mischievous Jane even more. She comes across one from *Emma*:

My first doth affliction denote
Which my second is destin'd to feel.
And my whole is the best antidote
That affliction to soften and heal.

She has read the novel several times, and she is aware that she knows the word, but cannot currently recall it. She ponders the cues – “my whole” refers to the word to be guessed, “my first” is its first syllable, and “my second” its second syllable. At this point the word “woman” comes to her mind, and it clicks (1. “woe”, 2. “man”).

For CHARADE, like for TOTs, Mary has a word that is “in there”, and she knows that the word is in there. Interestingly enough, for Rosenthal CHARADE is unlike TOT, and the reason is the following. An important element of his HOT theory of consciousness is that if a state is conscious, its owner is non inferentially conscious of being in that state. He contrasts immediate awareness and awareness as the result of a conscious inference:

Not every way of being conscious even of our own states makes those states conscious. I may be conscious of being in a state by applying a theory to myself or because somebody whose judgment I trust tells me. We can, however, readily, rule out such counterexamples by positing that a HOT results in the target state’s being conscious only when the HOT is not based on any conscious inference, that is, not based on any inference *of which* one is conscious. This does not mean that a state being’s conscious hinges on a HOT’s having some particular etiology... It is only *apparent* aetiology that counts: if it subjectively seems that we are conscious of a state *only* by inference, that state is not a conscious state (Rosenthal 2000, p. 207).

Whereas in CHARADE, Mary is not conscious of knowing the answer (given Rosenthal’s constraint on inference), if I am in a TOT state, I am conscious that I possess a piece of knowledge, because when I am in a TOT state I am not conscious of making any inference. This idea may reflect the following intuition. For CHARADE Mary has to consider cues that are not already in her possession. They are, so to speak, external with respect to her. Instead, for TOTs cues already belong to the subject – they are, so to speak, internal to him. This is why TOTs have a more intimate relation with cues than CHARADE does, and is this more intimate relation that justifies the idea that for TOTs there is no conscious inference at work⁴.

Here is the definition of TOT that we may extrapolate from Rosenthal’s account:

(R) X has a word on the tip of her tongue iff (a) X is non inferentially conscious that X presently knows the word, but (b) X is not conscious of what the word is⁵.

⁴ Thanks to Elisabetta Sacchi for suggesting me this point.

⁵ Rosenthal concedes that unconscious inferences may occur also in the TOT case, but their premises must be unconscious.

Is the difference between CHARADE and TOT as substantial as Rosenthal would claim? We should notice that sometimes, when a name is on the tip of my tongue I have cues which concern the name itself (its gender, the initial letter, the number of syllables, the syllabic stress), its bearer or the context in which I acquired it, and in the presence of cues, it appears to me that I know the name, on the basis of this initial knowledge. Here is an example of a TOT resulting from pre-existing cues. I try to recall the name of the author of *Huckleberry Finn*, but I fail. I recall that it rhymes with “rain”. “Brain”? No, it starts with “T”. “Train”? I ponder. I would not have these cues unless I knew the name... I know it!

In this example, it appears to me that I am making some kind of inference, an inference to the best explanation of why I have that information. The conclusion of the inference is my awareness that I know the name, and this awareness is a TOT. This is not to say that in presence of cues, it always appears to me that I know the name on the basis of my awareness of cues. It may happen that I simply believe that I know the name, and *then* I find reasons that ground my knowledge claim. In such case I become aware of reasons after being aware that I know the name. In fact, both situations are possible – sometimes there are pre-existing cues of which I am conscious; other times I find reasons that justify my being in a TOT state. In the former case, but not in the latter my TOT is the result of a conscious inference, and it provides a counterexample to the claim that condition (a) in (R) is a necessary condition.

Rosenthal’s reply to the counterexample is as follows. Of course, when armed with information that the name rhymes with “rain” and starts with the letter “T”, I still do not become conscious of the thought that the name is “Twain”. Once this fact is acknowledged, my awareness that the name rhymes with “rain” and starts with “T” is a TOT, and it is only at the moment in which the name comes to me that my thought about it stops being a TOT. But until the cues have done their work, we have a TOT. In other words, the additional conscious information providing cues to the name could be no less TOT than the standard case with the absence of cues (Rosenthal, *private correspondence*).

Rosenthal’s move involves the claim that any time we are conscious of a cue and we believe that we know the name, our consciousness of the cue is itself the belief that we know the name (and hence the TOT). If consciousness of the initial letter or of any other information about the name is the TOT state itself (that is, being aware of cues is identical to being aware that one knows the name), it *cannot* appear to us that those cues consciously guide us to the awareness that we know the name. In other words, it cannot be that consciousness of the cue and awareness that one knows the name are different states, one serving as guidance for the other – in this and in other similar cases awareness of cues is identical to being in a TOT state.

The problem with his reply is that if awareness of cues and awareness that one knows the name are belief states and beliefs are identified by their content, these beliefs have different content. Thus they cannot be one belief. In particular, if the awareness that the name rhymes with “train” is a belief state, it cannot be a TOT, and if we have two beliefs, then the question arises about their relation⁶.

I think that the main motivation for Rosenthal’s constraint on inference expressed in (R) is that immediacy is a proprietary feature of TOTs (and more generally, of consciousness). But I have pointed out that the idea that awareness of cues is the premise of a conscious inference

⁶ I raise other objections to Rosenthal’s account of TOTs in Calabi (2016).

to the effect that I know the name runs against such immediacy. Yet a different hypothesis is also available, which nicely combines awareness of cues and immediacy and is perfectly suitable to my Twain case. The hypothesis, which has not been addressed in the literature on TOTs, is that in the presence of conscious phonological cues, TOTs are perceptions of words. This means renouncing to give a uniform account of TOTs – since the perceptual hypothesis applies to cases like my Twain case only.

Here is the general idea. If in a TOT experience there is phonological information about the word to be retrieved, this information guides us in some way to the discovery that we know the word. To say that it guides us is not to say that we are making some conscious inference. It is to say that the information we possess is sufficient to become aware of the word. This information supports both the claim that we are perceptually acquainted with the name itself, without having full access to it, and the claim that its full recognition is imminent. As we already know, these two features are essential properties of TOTs.

4. Perceptions, and a modest proposal

The perception hypothesis is justified by some obvious analogies between TOT states and perceptual states, particularly visual states. Consider the following. I look at a window and it seems to me as if there is a moving body behind the curtains. I see *something*, but the curtains hide it so well that I do not see what it is. In some way, however, I visually differentiate it from its background. Suppose further that it is very windy, and I am expecting that a gust will blow the window open. In fact, I am expecting that the object's recognition is imminent. More generally:

- 1) When I look at an F, even very limited visual information allows me to become visually aware of the object itself.
- 2) Visual information about F grounds both the perceptual judgment that there is an F, despite the fact that I do not have full access to it and – at least in some cases – the judgment that its recognition is imminent.

In addition to (1) and (2), we should also note that perceptual experience allows us to keep track of external objects. Similarly, TOT states allow us to keep track of words stored in our memory. Moreover, if there is representation, misrepresentation is also possible. In the case of perceptual experiences, failure amounts to illusion and hallucination. In presence of conscious phonological cues, veridical TOTs are experiences that represent a word stored in memory. In an illusory TOT it is as if the target word is there, despite the fact that there is no such word. In such cases (again, in presence of conscious phonological cues), TOTs are sensuous imaginings⁷.

I am not arguing that the perceptual account of TOTs applies to all TOTs – I introduced it as the best explanation for my Twain case and any other similar to it. Yet, there are TOTs with no cues at all and TOTs with semantic cues, and they require an explanation also. (R) may fit the bill for TOTs with no cues, but not for TOTs with conscious semantic cues for already given reasons. Thus either we analyze TOTs with semantic cues as involving two beliefs (a first order belief about the semantic cues, and a second order belief about one's state of knowledge),

⁷ From the first person point of view, there is no difference between veridical perception and hallucination. How to account for the fact that they are different mental states depends on one's preferred theory of perceptual experience. I said that TOTs with phonological cues represent words stored in memory. Hence, I am implicitly endorsing an intentionalist theory.

with obvious loss of immediacy, or we analyze them as involving a first order belief about the semantic cue and a (bodily) feeling. Whatever way we go, it is a significant departure from Rosenthal.

Eventually I endorse a pluralist account of TOTs, according to which they are second order beliefs about our knowledge of words, perceptions or bodily feelings, as in Normand's analysis. They are not *sui generis* experiences.

How does my conclusion impinge on the debate on cognitive phenomenology? One might think that if there is no reason to consider TOTs as *sui generis* experiences, there is no reason to claim that they enjoy a proprietary phenomenology, let alone a pure phenomenology. However, this inference would require the further assumption that if a state has a proprietary phenomenology, then it is a *sui generis* experience⁸. I am not sure that this is a plausible assumption. Emotions such as fear have a proprietary phenomenology, but they are not *sui generis* experiences – at least according to many theories of emotions. In the end, I am unsure how strong a case may be made with regard to TOTs either in favour of or against pure cognitive phenomenology. The question remains to be settled, even after establishing what kind of states TOTs are⁹.

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⁸ It could be objected that by definition a state with a proprietary phenomenology is a *sui generis* experience because to have a proprietary phenomenology is to have a phenomenology that only that state has. In response to this objection, I contend that at least for some theorists, there are states that result from the combination of other states and yet qua resulting states, have a phenomenology that is not shared by any other state. Emotions are typical examples. Thanks to Alberto Voltolini for the objection.

⁹ I would like to thank Davide Bordini, Elisabetta Sacchi e Alberto Voltolini for their useful comments. I am very grateful to David Rosenthal for his enlightening remarks in the correspondence we had on tip-of-the-tongue experiences.