

Ludwig Wittgenstein

Communication as a language game

The work of Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951) is commonly divided into two phases: the early one of *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1961[1921]), which prolongs the investigation of logicians of the Vienna circle around Carnap. Their objective was to discover a pure logical language devoid of ambivalence and imprecision. The Wittgenstein of the second phase, by contrast, which has become central to discourse research, stands for the opposite idea: that there can be no pure language because we cannot use language without engaging in some sort of action. In the passage selected from his posthumously published *Philosophical Investigations* (1997[1953]), Wittgenstein starts with a critical interrogation of the idea that language describes the world. Opposing the view that words have meaning that refers to something out there, such as a name that is attached to an object, Wittgenstein points out that language in many cases implies that we do something to make sense of words. Therefore, he introduced the term 'language game', which is meant to 'bring into prominence the fact that the speaking of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life' (§23). As a consequence, philosophy can no longer claim privileged access to meaning; the source of meaning is ordinary speech.

References

- Wittgenstein, Ludwig. 1961[1921]. *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. London: Routledge.
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The Discourse Studies Reader

Main currents in theory and analysis

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001503599

John Benjamins Publishing Company

Ludwig Wittgenstein. 1997. *Philosophische Untersuchungen / Philosophical Investigations*, selected remarks (*Bemerkungen*) 1–6, 10, 11, 23–26, 29, 30, 43. Oxford: Blackwell.

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§1 'When they (my elders) named some object, and accordingly moved towards it, I saw this and I grasped that the thing was called by the sound they uttered when they meant to point *it* out. Their intention was shown by their bodily movements, as it were the natural language of all peoples: the expression of the face, the play of the eyes, the movement of other parts of the body, and the tone of voice which expresses our state of mind in seeking, having, rejecting, or avoiding something. Thus, as I heard words repeatedly used in their proper places in various sentences, I gradually learnt to understand what objects they signified; and after I had trained my mouth to form these signs, I used them to express my desires.' (Augustine, *Confessions*, I. 8.)

These words, it seems to me, give us a particular picture of the essence of human language. It is this: the individual words in language name objects; sentences are combinations of such names. In this picture of language, we find the roots of the following idea: Every word has a meaning. This meaning is correlated with the word. It is the object for which the word stands.

Augustine does not mention any difference between kinds of word. If you describe the learning of language in this way you are, I believe, thinking primarily of nouns like 'table', 'chair', 'bread', and of people's names, and only secondarily of the names of certain actions and properties; and of the remaining kinds of word as something that will take care of itself.

Now think of the following use of language: I send someone shopping. I give him a slip marked 'five red apples'. He takes the slip to the shopkeeper, who opens the drawer marked 'apples'; then he looks up the word 'red' in a table and finds a colour sample opposite it; then he says the series of cardinal numbers – I assume that he knows them by heart – up to the word 'five' and for each number he takes an apple of the same colour as the sample out of the drawer. It is in this and similar ways that one operates with words. 'But how does he know where and how he is to look up the word 'red' and what he is to do with the word 'five'?' Well, I assume that he *acts* as I have described. Explanations come to an end somewhere. But what is the meaning of the word 'five'? No such thing was in question here, only how the word 'five' *is* used.

§2 That philosophical concept of meaning has its place in a primitive idea of the way language functions. But one can also say that it is the idea of a language more primitive than ours.

Let us imagine a language for which the description given by Augustine is right. The language is meant to serve for communication between a builder A and an assistant B.

A is building with building-stones: there are blocks, pillars, slabs and beams. B has to pass the stones, and that in the order in which A needs them. For this purpose they use a language consisting of the words 'block', 'pillar', 'slab', 'beam'. A calls them out; B brings the stone which he has learnt to bring at such-and-such a call. Conceive this as a complete primitive language.

§3 Augustine, we might say, does describe a system of communication; only not everything that we call language is this system. And one has to say this in many cases where the question arises 'Will this description do or not?' The answer is: 'Yes, it will, but only for this narrowly circumscribed region, not for the whole of what you were claiming to describe.'

It is as if someone were to say: 'A game consists in moving objects about on a surface according to certain rules...' – and we replied: You seem to be thinking of board games, but there are others. You can make your definition correct by expressly restricting it to those games.

§4 Imagine a script in which the letters were used to stand for sounds, and also as signs of emphasis and punctuation. (A script can be conceived as a language for describing sound-patterns.) Now imagine someone interpreting that script as if there were simply a correspondence of letters to sounds and as if the letters had not also completely different functions. Augustine's conception of language is like such an over-simple conception of the script.

§5 If we look at the example in §1, we may perhaps get an inkling how much this general notion of the meaning of a word surrounds the working of language with a haze which makes clear vision impossible. It disperses the fog to study the phenomena of language in primitive kinds of application in which one can command a clear view of the aim and functioning of the words.

A child uses such primitive forms of language when it learns to talk. Here the teaching of language is not explanation, but training.

§6 We could imagine that the language of §2 was the *whole* language of A and B; even the whole language of a tribe. The children are brought up to perform *these* actions, to use *these* words as they do so, and to react in *this* way to the words of others.

An important part of the training will consist in the teacher's pointing to the objects, directing the child's attention to them, and at the same time uttering a word; for instance, the word 'slab' as he points to that shape. (I do not want to call this 'ostensive definition', because the child cannot as yet *ask* what the name is. I will call it 'ostensive teaching of words'. I say that it will form an important part of the training, because it is so with human beings; not because it could not be imagined otherwise.) This ostensive teaching of words can be said to establish an association between the word and the thing. But what does this mean? Well, it can mean various things; but one very likely

thinks first of all that a picture of the object comes before the child's mind when it hears the word. But now, if this does happen is it the purpose of the word? Yes, it *may* be the purpose. I can imagine such a use of words (of series of sounds). (Uttering a word is like striking a note on the keyboard of the imagination.) But in the language of §2 it is *not* the purpose of the words to evoke images. (It may, of course, be discovered that that helps to attain the actual purpose.)

But if the ostensive teaching has this effect, am I to say that it effects an understanding of the word? Don't you understand the call 'slab!' if you act upon it in such-and-such a way? No doubt the ostensive teaching helped to bring this about; but only together with a particular instruction. With a different instruction the same ostensive teaching of numerals would have effected a quite different understanding. (...)

§9 (...) Are 'there' and 'this' also taught ostensively? Imagine how one might perhaps teach their use. One will point to places and things but in this case the pointing occurs in the *use* of the words too and not merely in learning the use. (...)

§10 Now what do the words of this language *signify*? What is supposed to show what they signify, if not the kind of use they have? And we have already described that. So we are asking for the expression 'This word signifies *this*' to be made a part of the description. In other words the description ought to take the form: 'The word ... signifies...'

Well, one can reduce the description of the use of the word 'slab' to the statement that this word signifies this object. This will be done when, for example, it is merely a matter of removing the mistaken idea that the word 'slab' refers to the shape of building-stone that we in fact call a 'block' – but the kind of '*referring*' this is, that is to say the use of these words for the rest, is already known.

Equally one can say that the signs 'a', 'b', etc. signify numbers; when for example this removes the mistaken idea that 'a', 'b', 'c', play the part actually played in language by 'block', 'slab', 'pillar'. And one can also say that 'c' means this number and not that one; when for example this serves to explain that the letters are to be used in the order a, b, c, d, etc. and not in the order a, b, d, c.

But assimilating the descriptions of the uses of words in this way cannot make the uses themselves any more like one another. For, as we see, they are absolutely unlike.

§11 Think of the tools in a toolbox: there is a hammer, pliers, a saw, a screw-driver, a rule, a glue-pot, glue, nails and screws. The functions of words are as diverse as the functions of these objects. (And in both cases there are similarities.)

Of course, what confuses us is the uniform appearance of words when we hear them spoken or meet them written or in print. For their *application* is not presented to us so clearly. Especially when we are doing philosophy! (...)

§23 But how many kinds of sentence are there? Say assertion, question, and command? There are *countless* kinds: countless different kinds of use of what we call 'symbols', 'words', 'sentences'. And this multiplicity is not something fixed, given once for all; but new types of language, new language-games, as we may say, come into existence, and others become obsolete and get forgotten. (We can get a *rough picture* of this from the changes in mathematics.)

Here the term 'language-game' is meant to bring into prominence the fact that the *speaking* of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life.

Review the multiplicity of language-games in the following examples, and in others:

Giving orders, and obeying them; describing the appearance of an object, or giving its measurements;

constructing an object from a description (a drawing); reporting an event; speculating about an event;

(...) forming and testing a hypothesis; presenting the results of an experiment in tables and diagrams;

making up a story; and reading it; (...) translating from one language into another; asking, thanking, cursing, greeting, praying.

It is interesting to compare the multiplicity of the tools in language and of the ways they are used, the multiplicity of kinds of word and sentence, with what logicians have said about the structure of language. (Including the author of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*.)

§24 If you do not keep the multiplicity of language-games in view you will perhaps be inclined to ask questions like: 'What is a question?' Is it the statement that I do not know such-and-such, or the statement that I wish the other person would tell me...? Or is it the description of my mental state of uncertainty? And is the cry 'Help!' such a description?

Think of how many different kinds of thing are called 'description': description of a body's position by means of its co-ordinates; description of a facial expression; description of a sensation of touch; of a mood.

Of course it is possible to substitute the form of statement or description for the usual form of question: 'I want to know whether...' or 'I am in doubt whether...' but this does not bring the different language-games any closer together.

(...)

§25 It is sometimes said that animals do not talk because they lack the mental capacity. And this means: 'they do not think, and that is why they do not talk.' But – they simply do not talk. Or to put it better: they do not use language – if we except the most primitive forms of language. Commanding, questioning, recounting, chatting, are as much a part of our natural history as walking, eating, drinking, playing.

§26 One thinks that learning language consists in giving names to objects, viz. to human beings, to shapes, to colours, to pains, to moods, to numbers. To repeat – naming is something like attaching a name tag to a thing. One can call this a preparation for the use of a word. But *what* is it a preparation *for*?
(...)

§29 Perhaps you say: two can only be ostensively defined in this way: ‘This *number* is called ‘two.’ For the word ‘number’ here shows what place in language, in grammar, we assign to the word. But this means that the word ‘number’ must be explained before the ostensive definition can be understood. The word ‘number’ in the definition does indeed show this place; does show the post at which we station the word. And we can prevent misunderstandings by saying: ‘This *colour* is called so-and-so’, ‘This *length* is called so-and-so’, and so on. That is to say: misunderstandings are sometimes averted in this way. But is there only *one* way of taking the word ‘colour’ or ‘length’? Well, they just need defining. Defining, then, by means of other words! And what about the last definition in this chain? (Do not say: ‘There isn’t a ‘last’ definition.’ That is just as if you chose to say: ‘There isn’t a last house in this road; one can always build an additional one.’)

Whether the word ‘number’ is necessary in the ostensive definition depends on whether without it the other person takes the definition otherwise than I wish. And that will depend on the circumstances under which it is given, and on the person I give it to.

And how he ‘takes’ the definition is seen in the use that he makes of the word defined.

§30 So one might say: the ostensive definition explains the use – the meaning – of the word when the overall role of the word in language is clear. Thus if I know that someone means to explain a colour-word to me the ostensive definition ‘That is called ‘sepia’’ will help me to understand the word. And you can say this, as long as (...) you do not forget that all sorts of problems are tied to the words ‘to know’ or ‘to be clear’.

One has already to know (or be able to do) something in order to be capable of asking a thing’s name. But what does one have to know? (...)

§43 For a *large* class of cases – though not for all – in which we employ the word ‘meaning’ it can be defined thus: the meaning of a word is its use in the language.

And the *meaning* of a name is sometimes explained by pointing to its *bearer*.