

Slab!

Does a word mean itself or something else? In §19 of *Philosophical Investigations*, Ludwig Wittgenstein attempts to answer this question and outlines his Slab! thesis. The Slab! thesis entails words having meaning in reference to action. This theory is presented through a conversation with a fictional interlocutor. I have two major issues with Wittgenstein's thesis, one stemming from his use of the interlocutor and one concerning the thesis's interpretation of words' meanings. However, despite those criticisms, I ultimately agree with his premise, albeit with qualifications.

In analyzing the move Wittgenstein makes during their palaver, it is helpful to consider the interlocutor and Wittgenstein as teammates rather than adversaries. Given their dialogue is Wittgenstein's invention, it is evident that every aspect of the interlocutor¹ — from its objections to its word choice — was carefully curated by Wittgenstein in service of advancing his postulate. The Wittgenstein-interlocutor partnership entails the following: for me to adequately unpack the Slab! thesis, I must examine their discussion sequentially and closely consider the words of both Wittgenstein and his interlocutor.

The ideological differences between Wittgenstein and his fictional interlocutor stem from their disagreement over the relationship between 'Slab!'

- (1) Wittgenstein: Is the call "Slab!" in example 2 a sentence or a word?...
- (2) Interlocutor: "Slab!" is surely only a shortened form of the sentence "Bring me a slab".
- (3) Wittgenstein: But why should I not on the contrary have called the sentence "Bring me a slab" a lengthening of the sentence "Slab!"?
- (4) Interlocutor: Because if you shout "Slab!" you really mean: "Bring me a slab".
- (5) Wittgenstein: But how do you do this: how do you mean that while you say "Slab!"? Do you say the unshortened sentence to yourself? And why should I translate the call "Slab!" into a different expression in order to say what someone means by it? And if they mean the same thing—why should I not say: "When he says 'Slab' he means 'Slab!'"? Again, if you can mean "Bring me the slab", why should you not be able to mean "Slab!"?
- (6) Interlocutor: But when I call "Slab!", then what I want is, that he should bring me a slab.
- (7) Wittgenstein: Certainly, but does 'wanting this' consist in thinking in some form or other a different sentence from the one you utter?

Wittgenstein and the interlocutor's complete debate broken down into remarks.

¹ I refer to the interlocutor with pronouns it/its to better differentiate it from Wittgenstein.

and ‘Bring me a slab’. Wittgenstein presents the interlocutor as believing ‘Slab!’ is only meaningful² as the elliptical form of ‘Bring me a slab’ (remark2). This would indicate understanding ‘Bring me a slab’ is required for stating ‘Slab!’. Wittgenstein pushes against this distinction. He suggests one could just as easily consider ‘Bring me a slab’ in terms of ‘Slab!’ (r3). To Wittgenstein, the arbitrariness of the choice to define ‘Slab!’ in terms of ‘Bring me a slab’ indicates the terms’ meanings cannot be logically or empirically dependent. Therefore, ‘Slab!’ cannot solely be short for ‘Bring me a slab’.

Further supporting Wittgenstein’s distinction is the ‘primitive language’ he outlines in §2. This language’s speakers only use simple terms. When they say ‘Slab!’ they can only mean ‘Slab!’ because they have no conceptualization of ‘Bring me a slab’. For the primitive speakers ‘Slab!’ is in no way slang for ‘Bring me a slab’. This exception to the interlocutor’s comment proves its idea cannot be generally applied. In summary, Wittgenstein first engages the interlocutor through refusing its dependency thesis and then offers a counterproposal centering understanding one of the ‘Slab!’ ‘Bring me a slab’ pair as unnecessary in understanding the other.

Amidst continued pushback from the interlocutor, Wittgenstein reveals ‘Slab!’ and ‘Bring me a slab’ share a meaning. Following Wittgenstein’s dismissal, the unconvinced interlocutor emphasizes its point: “If you shout “Slab!” you *really* [emphasis added] mean: “Bring me a slab” (r4). It is clear the interlocutor is adamant that ‘Slab!’ means ‘Bring me a slab’. In turn, Wittgenstein questions this justification (r5). ‘Slab!’ (like any other term) has, and indicates, its

² Technically, the interlocutor only accuses ‘Slab’ of being the shortened form of ‘Bring me a slab’. However, in §43, Wittgenstein asserts “The meaning of a word is its use in the language”. The interlocutor is suggesting that ‘Slab’ can only be used only as a shortening of ‘Bring me a slab’. Thus, in the Wittgensteinian sense he is making a statement regarding ‘Slab’s’ meaning.

specific meaning. To Wittgenstein, translating ‘Slab!’ into ‘Bring me a slab’ to reference ‘Slab!’s’ meaning is circuitous. Furthermore, if — despite being superfluous — one can discern ‘Slab!’s’ meaning through translating it into ‘Bring me a slab’ as the interlocutor does, it is implied that ‘Slab!’ and ‘Bring me a slab’ have the same meaning in the context³ Wittgenstein and the interlocutor refer to.

To Wittgenstein, the shared, albeit unrevealed, meanings of ‘Slab!’ and ‘Bring me a slab’ further disproves the interlocutor’s idea. In *On Certainty*, Wittgenstein states, “It is not single axioms that strike me as obvious, it is a system in which consequences and premises give one another mutual support,” (*On Certainty* §142). This proposition rejects the practice of defining a term’s meaning solely in relation to the term itself. Instead, it suggests the synonymy of ‘Slab!’ and “Bring me a slab” proves that ‘Slab!’ cannot be explained solely in reference to ‘Bring me a Slab’.

Given that Wittgenstein suggests its claim false in r3 and r5, it appears curious that he begins his response to the interlocutor’s final protest “Certainly...” (r7). Clarity is found in the interlocutor’s final words: “But when I call “Slab!”, then what I want is, that he should bring me a slab”. In its previous statements, Wittgenstein had the interlocutor refer explicitly to the statement ‘Bring me a slab’. However, in r6 quotations are noticeably absent. This indicates Wittgenstein intends the interlocutor’s new bring me a slab reference to not be linguistic.

³ Wittgenstein formally defines these contexts as “language games” in §8 of *Philosophical Investigations*.

Contextualizing their exchange with Wittgenstein's other writings, it becomes clear Wittgenstein intended the interlocutor's words to reference an action. In his *Lecture on Aesthetics*, Wittgenstein outlines taking physical action as the best way to be exact, flexible, and chiefly show approval (Section II §6; Section I §13). He also states: "We don't start from certain words, but from certain occasions or activities," (I §6). In conjunction, these statements define everyday language as existing a layer above and serving to describe actions. More plainly, to Wittgenstein, actions predicate the language game's framework. Sentences — such as 'Slab!' and 'Bring me a slab' — are moves within that language game. Therefore, to Wittgenstein, in §19 the interlocutor is confusing a move in a language game ('Bring me a slab') with the language game itself (the direct action of bringing a slab).



A visual distinction of the 'Slab' 'Bring me a slab' relationship in the eyes of Wittgenstein and the interlocutor.

The Slab! thesis (finally) outlined, let's begin my analysis! In §19, Wittgenstein presents his Slab! thesis without making a single statement. He only asks questions meant to challenge the interlocutor's words. This allows Wittgenstein to present his Slab! thesis as soundly defended against a coherent attack. However, this is problematic. Far from building off each other, the interlocutor's statements in §19 present entirely different ideas. This calls into question the justification and legitimacy of the Slab! thesis. To emphasize this point, let's directly compare the interlocutor's statements:

- 'Slab!' is surely only a shortened form of the sentence 'Bring me a slab'. (r2)
- Because if you shout "Slab!" you really mean: "Bring me a slab". (r4)
- But when I call 'Slab!', then what I want is, that he should bring me a slab. (r6)

The first sentence presents a linguistic absolute. There is no mention of intentions, thoughts, or other psychological processes. The second abandons this framework and makes a different statement regarding what an individual means when they say 'Slab!'. The third further deviates from both the previous remarks and instead concerns the desires associated with exclaiming 'Slab!'. Subtly, the interlocutor's argument shifts from r2 to r4 to r6. The claims appear connected to the reader because they have been presented sequentially. That intertwined framework serves as our anchor point for analyzing the claims, but ultimately there is no reason why r2 necessarily leads to r4 and r4 to r6.

As I have mentioned before, the interlocutor is Wittgenstein's creation. Thus, it words are his words. More generally, its argumentative pivots are Wittgenstein's argumentative pivots. Wittgenstein presents himself as addressing three layers of a single argument in §19. However, he actually frames and then responds to three different arguments. This raises serious questions to the legitimacy of how Wittgenstein predicates his ideas.

My second critique of Wittgenstein's Slab! thesis stems from its conflict with my interpretation of his theory of meaning. To Wittgenstein, a word's meaning is its use in a specific language game (§43). Since language requires at least two parties, if I intend to communicate clearly, I cannot use term 'X' if the counterparty has no understanding of the corresponding use of 'X'. Both parties must believe the terms we use reference the same move. Only once we reach a perceived linguistic common ground can we move forward in conversation. In this vein, language is only meaningful if the engaged parties agree on its use.

This law of shared meaning forces parties hoping to communicate to acquire terms whose uses they previous did not know. To incorporate foreign terms into their vocabulary, one must find a use for it in the language game they currently participate in. This three step translation

process entails anchoring a foreign term ‘X’ with unknown definition {‘X’: } in relation to understood term ‘Y’ with definition {‘Y’: Z}.⁴

- 1) I define unknown term ‘X’ in relation to known term ‘Y’ — {‘X’: ‘Y’}.
- 2) I anchor the unknown term to the known term’s definition — {‘X’: {‘Y’: Z}}.
- 3) Now understanding what move ‘X’ makes in the language game I directly call {‘X’: Z}.

Under this framework we can understand the mistake Wittgenstein makes in §19.

Wittgenstein’s Slab! thesis is predicated on ‘Slab!’ and ‘Bring me a slab’ both referencing the action of bringing me a slab. He is adamant that this distinction holds true because he can call both {‘Slab’: bring me a slab} and {‘Slab’: bring me a slab}. However, just as the primitive language speakers in §2 don’t understand {‘Bring me a slab’: bring me a slab}, someone may not have {‘Slab!’: bring me a slab} in their linguistic rolodex. When they hear ‘Slab!’ they must undertake the translation process.

- (1) {‘Slab!’: } to {‘Slab!’: ‘Bring me a slab’}.
- (2) {‘Slab!’: ‘Bring me a slab’} to {‘Slab!’: {‘Bring me a slab’: bring me a slab}}.
- (3) {‘Slab!’: {‘Bring me a slab’: bring me a slab}} to {‘Slab!’: bring me a slab}.

Although his use of the interlocutor undermines the Slab! thesis’s foundations and he doesn’t account entirely for translation, Wittgenstein’s Slab! thesis is correct in suggesting a sentence’s core meaning is an action and cannot be not defined solely by another linguistic move. This is due to the ultimate result of translation being the direct definition of both sentences ‘X’ and ‘Y’ in terms of action Z. The Slab! thesis falls short as a general metric because it doesn’t account for the second step of translation. In §19, Wittgenstein addresses linguistic meaning with the perspective of having traversed all three translation steps. This explains his incredulity at the interlocutor’s argument that “‘Slab!’ is surely only a shortened form of the sentence ‘Bring me a

⁴ I put ‘ ’ around a term to indicate a sentence and leave a term without ‘ ’ to indicate an action.

slab''' (r2). However, to Wittgenstein, and anyone who has completed the translation journey for a given word, it is impossible to conceive of that word in relation to anything other than the action it defines. Similarly, the person still in translation purgatory can only think {'X'; {'Y'; Z}} or the initial {'X'; 'Y'}. Both parties are pulling from their individual linguistic rolodexes, but they can only perceive of terms in the definitions that they understand at a given moment.

In conclusion — and at the risk of embracing subjectivism even more than this paper already has — 'Slab!' means 'Slab!', or any other term for that matter, if one understands it to be so. However, as evident by Wittgenstein's disagreement with the interlocutor, my understanding of a term, no matter how apparently correct, is no guarantee another will understand it the same way. Perhaps, the greatest linguistic struggle is successfully traversing that complicated web of conflicting, overlapping, and sometimes diametrically opposed definitions.

