

It's all Fun and Language-games: On Wittgenstein and Word Meaning

In his work, *Philosophical Investigations*, Ludwig Wittgenstein posits a seemingly innocuous question: What is a game? One will quickly find that to conjure up a comprehensive definition of the word *game* is impossible, for not only is it likely that one would unintentionally leave out stipulations necessary for many widely accepted games, but between individuals there is dispute about whether many activities count as a game at all. To make the term too broad would frustrate the purpose of its use, and to make it too narrow will undoubtedly leave people dissatisfied. It seems that with this example we quickly approach the limits of meaning. For the question, “What is a game?” is synonymous with the question, “What is the word *game* mean?”.

Wittgenstein subverts this question and suggests that we should not ask, “What do words mean?” but rather, “What do words do?”. Instead of approaching word meaning in isolation, Wittgenstein would argue that one must understand words with a kinetic ontology; a word never *is*, but rather a word is *doing*. It cannot exist without performing some type of action. In order to see what words do, how they function in the real world, Wittgenstein creates a series of what he calls “language-games”. In this paper I will explore one of Wittgenstein’s language-games and how it relates to his conception of word meaning. I will also evaluate his proposal that the classical question of word meaning is ill formed and see how the Wittgensteinian model of word meaning can remedy semantic misunderstandings.

A language game can be likened to a universe constructed in such a way that highlights and/or isolates one particular use of language. The language in a language-game may only follow one or two rules and have a handful of functions. Wittgenstein crafts a primitive language-game

largely inspired by Saint Augustine's conception of language acquisition. In this game, there is a builder and an assistant. The four words in the lexical universe of this game are *blocks*, *pillars*, *slabs*, and *beams*. In Wittgenstein's words, "The language is meant to serve for communication between builder A and assistant B" [PI, 3], where the builder will call out one of the words and the assistant will bring the item that corresponds with the word. Upon learning about this game, many questions naturally come to mind: What is being built? Wouldn't their language necessarily be more extensive to contain ideas of buildings or ideas or assistants? How could they conceptualize work? While these concerns are intuitive, it is important to note that the purpose of the game is to isolate one particular aspect of language. It is not necessary to attempt to pack our universe into any one game, because the purpose of the game is to disentangle particular operations of language from the rest, or in Wittgenstein's words, "[T]he 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" [PI, 11].

It is clear that this particular game of slabs and beams does not exhaust the use of language. Wittgenstein provides a list of commonly used language-games including: Giving and obeying orders, describing an object's appearance, reporting or speculating about an event, making and telling jokes, crafting a story, and so on [PI, 11]. How do these seemingly isolated language-games relate to our grounded conception and use of language? Put simply, these games are already in constant use within language. The context of a word function is established by a community of users of that word. This is made clear when Wittgenstein speaks of exactness. One can intuit that the word *exact* has different meanings and does different things, in different settings. In a nanotechnology laboratory, "exactly twelve micrometers" has a radically different

meaning, or function, from being picked up “exactly at this spot” by a taxi, but one does not need to ask about the exactness of the word *exact* every time it is implemented. Furthermore, the greek language has four different words for *love*, whereas the english language only has one, but again, this does not mean that english language users are unfamiliar with these different types of love.

This is how the definitional idea of language meaning can become frustrated. As Wittgenstein says, “Any definition can be misunderstood” [PI, 14]. Words can be operationally different but structurally identical. The word *game* is an isomorph of *game*, but each meaning can only be made intelligible within its own contexts. Even within the same game (such as giving an order, or describing an object) it still appears, however, that a word can be interpreted differently or hold a different meaning. With the game of giving orders one person may say to another, “Stand there,” but *there* could still be indeterminate. The game still shows what the word *there* does by demarcating a particular space, but without

To reiterate, Wittgenstein finds typical questions of word meaning useless. In his words, “We must do away with all *explanation*, and description alone must take its place. And this description gets its light, that is to say its purpose, from the philosophical problems” [PI, 47]. To relate this back to the primitive language-game of builders and assistants, one can see how description provides a better understanding of words than explanation. To explain what the word *slab* is instantly causes confusion. *Slab* could be the desired material the builder wants, or the act of bringing a slab, or an expression of the builder’s desire to use a slab. A description of *slab*, however, may prove more insightful. Instead of limiting the word to one explanation, one could comfortably say that *slab* describes the process of an assistant bringing a builder the material they have both ordained with the label *slab*. What the word *does* is prompt the exchange of

material from an assistant to a builder. In short, to understand a word, “[D]on’t think, but look!” [PI, 31].

Where many thinkers before him often sought clarity on issues of language, Wittgenstein purposefully throws a wrench into the conversation. The dissection and isolation of words from their natural habitat often produces confusion and deemphasizes the intuitive nature of language and how it is used. Despite this, it seems that Wittgenstein did want to move the conversation further and does so by not elaborating on the question of word meaning, but rather reframing it. Wittgenstein’s conception of language is actually very similar to human understandings of neuroscience. The exchange and formation of words and their respective meanings occurs in a manner similar to that of neural networks being established in the brain. As synapses fire, particular associations within the brain are strengthened, resulting in a potential increase of frequency as well as decreased chance of dissociation or atrophy. Language-games can be thought of as isolating word uses in a way comparable to the observation of specific neural pathways. If one language-game is implemented in real life, a stronger context is established, much how synaptic connections get reinforced the more frequently they occur.

Wittgenstein’s upheaval of questions about word meaning provides many valuable insights. The doing and observation of language proves to be far more insightful than armchair philosophy and speculation, and as a result of championing this idea, Wittgenstein has been called both a philosopher and an anti-philosopher. This being said, Wittgenstein deserves credit for both asking and dismantling questions, a philosophical tradition that is still alive and well today.

References:

Wittgenstein, Ludwig, *Philosophische Untersuchungen* = *Philosophical investigations*.

Chichester (West Sussex): Wiley-Blackwell, 2009.

- 1) Wittgenstein says that in many cases the meaning of a word is its use in the language game. What does he mean by this? Illuminate your discussion by considering the language game of 2 and some of its extensions! To what extent does he answer the question "What is the meaning of a word?" and to what extent does he reject the question as ill formed? Explain.

"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" [PI, 11].

"We must do away with all *explanation*, and description alone must take its place. And this description gets its light, that is to say its purpose, from the philosophical problems" [PI, 47].

"Is it only other people whom we cannot tell exactly what a game is?- But this is not ignorance. We do not know the boundaries because none have been drawn. To repeat, we can draw a boundary- for a special purpose. Does it take that to make the concept usable? Not at all!" [PI, 33].

"[T]he individual words in language name objects- sentences are combinations of such names" [PI, 2].

"But what is the meaning of the word 'five'?- No such thing was in question here, only how the word 'five' is used" [PI, 3].

"[The] teaching of words can be said to establish an association between the word and the thing. But what does this mean?" [PI, 4].

"Uttering a word is like striking a note on the keyboard of the imagination" [PI, 4].

"In the language of §2 it is *not* the purpose of the words to evoke images" [PI, 4]. *This statement is in direct contradiction to his previous work, Tractatus Logico Philosophicus. Purpose of the word is action oriented.*

"I will call these games 'language games' and will sometimes speak of a primitive language as a language game" [PI, 5].

"And the processes of naming the stones and of repeating words after someone might also be called language-games" [PI, 5].

"For [words'] *application* is not presented to us so clearly. Especially not, when we are doing philosophy!" [PI, 6].

"Naming something is like attaching a label to a thing" [PI, 7].

"[T]o imagine a language is to imagine a form of life" [PI, 8].

"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" [PI, 11].

"Think of exclamations alone, with their completely different functions. Water! Away! Ow!...Are you inclined still to call these words 'names of objects'?" [PI, 13].

"Any definition can be misunderstood" [PI, 14].

"[T]he *meaning* of a name is sometimes explained by pointing to its *bearer*" [PI, 21].

"[D]on't think, but look!" [PI, 31].

"Is it only other people whom we cannot tell exactly what a game is?- But this is not ignorance. We do not know the boundaries because none have been drawn. To repeat, we can draw a boundary- for a special purpose. Does it take that to make the concept usable? Not at all!" [PI, 33].

"One gives examples and intends them to be taken in a particular way.- I do not, however, mean by this that he is supposed to see in those examples that common thing which I- for some reason- was unable to express; but that he is now to *employ* those examples in a particular way. Here giving examples is not an *indirect* means of explaining- in default of a better. For any general definition can be misunderstood too. The point is that *this* is how we play the game" [PI, 34].

"Has the name 'Moses' got a fixed and unequivocal use for me in all possible cases?...And this can be expressed like this: I use the name 'N' without a *fixed* meaning. (But that detracts as little from its usefulness, as it detracts from that of a table that it stands on four legs instead of three and so sometimes wobbles)" [PI, 37].

"[A] sign-post is in order- if, under normal circumstances, it fulfils its purpose" [PI, 41].

"We must do away with all *explanation*, and description alone must take its place. And this description gets its light, that is to say its purpose, from the philosophical problems" [PI, 47].

"Philosophy is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language" [PI, 47].