*Discuss Wittgenstein’s suggestion that “meaning is use”. How does the suggested view of language diﬀer from more traditional views? Can you think of some downsides or advantages of understanding meaning as use?*

Defending Wittgenstein’s suggestion that “meaning is use”, I will be making the case specifically for his view of language as fundamentally a “game” with the interpretation that this is also reconcilable with the more traditional views of language it’s often viewed as being opposed to.

Wittgenstein’s theory is best understood against the backdrop of the pervasive view in philosophy of language at the time—what we will call the referential view of language—centrally in the case of the ‘meaning’ of words/utterances. This essay will set out the referential view, then propose Wittgenstein’s theory of language in relation to it, specifically analyzing how Wittgenstein redefines the foundations of language, solves the puzzles of the referential approach and establishes a lasting philosophical perspective—all with the breadth and elegance to include the referential methodology within his theory.

Philosophy of language pre-Wittgenstein came in many flavours, but generally presumed a referential view[[1]](#footnote-1). The referential view claims that language primarily relates to objects. Utterances in language therefore have their meaning concretely grounded in the objects they refer to. Accordingly, philosophy of language was concerned with formalizing the meaning of utterances by semantically deconstructing language in mold of mathematical logic. “Understanding a sentence means knowing what is the case if the sentence is true”, Wittgenstein himself claimed, before disavowing this view (Wittgenstein, Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus, 1922).

This referentially grounded approach faced many challenges to its self-assigned goal to represent semantics formally, not limited to: 1) the vagueness paradox—how to partition the boundary of utterances like ‘is tall’ or ‘is a heap of sand’, 2) formal representation of concepts in cases where the predicates of ‘sufficient and necessary conditions’ are incapable of fully defining a concept such as a ‘game’, 3) the numerous words that don’t refer to something obvious, e.g. the number ‘5’ or word ‘the’, 4) the meaning of proper names, in the case of, a) null pointers—such as evaluating the truth condition of ‘Santa Clause is married to Mrs. Clause’ if Santa doesn’t exist, and b) equivalency of statements under false beliefs, e.g. does ‘Hesperus = Phosphorus’ in the case where someone falsely believes Hesperus and Phosphorus are different entities (Frege, 1948), and 5) the multiplicity of ways an utterance can be represented formally, in cases such as “water!”, or “I’m hot” to mean “open the window”. This essay does not intend to document all such puzzles nor have time to cover them in depth to determine whether they are intractable problems for referential theorists[[2]](#footnote-2). However, they’re all exemplar candidates to keep in mind under Wittgenstein’s view of language.



Wittgenstein’s work was critique of the old ways of thinking about language as dogmatic, having an overly formal obsession with reducing language to objects and their supposed important ‘meaning’. Though it’s the focal point of this essay, the phrase ‘meaning is use’ was for Wittgenstein, a radical deemphasis of meaning in language. The conclusion was rather a consequence of his wider theory of language which he describes as fundamentally taking the structure of a ‘game’. In this ‘game’, the goal is to communicate information. Words and sentences have ‘meaning’ only as a result of the ‘rules’ of the game. He argued simple such ‘rules’ are often doing the work we attribute to meaning. He gives the example of a shopkeeper being written a slip for ‘5 red apples.’ He argues that to process such an order, the shopkeeper could merely locate the draw with the matching symbols for ‘apples’, look up ‘red’ in a colour chart and repeat the series of number words removing apples until he reaches five, concluding: “But what is the meaning of the word "five"? - No such thing was in question here, only how the word "five" is used” (Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations, 1997).

This ‘game’ narrative is designed to make us look at language with fresh eyes, taking stock of language’s function in the world rather than its meaning internal to the communicator. The point is not that words like ‘red’ or ‘five’ have no meaning, but that such a linguistic interaction can take place without the shopper or shopkeeper needing to engage in the understanding of what these words refer to. Wittgenstein argues by describing many such games in an inductive narrative challenging the reader to construct a situation that cannot be expressed in such terms.

Wittgenstein’s view redefines the foundations of language. One advantage this has over traditional approaches is entropy maximization. This is the idea that good theories should i) try to explain the widest range of phenomena with, ii) the smallest set of assumptions. On (i), Wittgenstein’s view of language covers a far broader range of phenomenon we might like to call language. In the referential approach, it’s somehow assumed that most words and communications are non-foundational and in the service of nouns. I feel it would be fair to reverse the burden of proof to referetialists to show why all word classes shouldn’t be assumed to be equally foundational to language. Broadening the view of language, Wittgenstein can include things such as non-verbal communication weaving language into a wider account of communication and action.

On the case of Occam’s razor (ii), rendering language as a game immediately allows an infinite degree of freedom for how language can be expressed, as there are no bounds on the rules. Traditional views are more closed, cases such as the five discussed in the introduction require unintuitive special rules to solve. This results in complicated logic that rarely feels representative of how we internally experience ourselves to be communicating[[3]](#footnote-3). Wittgenstein circumvents the entire problem of inconsistencies in formal logic, as meaning is not foundational to his approach. If utterances are enough to communicate, the formalization can wait. For example, the inability to prove that there is any real person Santa who resides in Lapland is secondary to the game of ‘corporate capitalism’ which only requires parents to buy presents. Wittgenstein’s broadening of the foundations of language moved philosophy of language to study language in use rather than being constrained to language in essence. This might be one reason his legacy persists today, as his disavowing of theoretical purity, brings phillosophy back to reality.

One objection to Wittgenstein’s theory is that it throws out the functional and intuitive referential approach. It seems sensible that words refer to objects with universal properties, constituting ‘meaning’. And analyzing some statements rigorously for the conditions under which they are true has proven sensible. It was certainly viewed by early interpretations of Wittgenstein that his theory is incompatible with preceding approaches entirely. However, I argue Wittgenstein’s theory is broad enough to account for the referential ‘game’ within it.

Firstly, I think it’s important to disambiguate ‘meaning’ in ‘meaning is use’ and its use in wider context. Wittgenstein is refuting that utterances have a meaning intrinsically, not that the utterance is meaningless in the environment of its use. Secondly, if functionality from the referential view was to be retained within the bounds of Wittgenstein, the sole condition would be that it formed as a game. Perhaps the simple ‘rule’ of this game is that, where advantageous, disambiguate the ‘reference’ of words. It’s easy to see why this would be highly adaptive to communicative efficiency and lead to a world where utterances regularly had a direct reference. However, viewing this as one game amongst many would predict tradeoffs between this and other considerations in language. For example, playing the game of communitive efficiency, you would expect language to evolve to ignore formalisms beyond the essential. This would create a strong pulling factor, away from language being mathematically formal and strictly referential by extension. For example, it’s not unambiguous to say ‘open the window’ in a room with multiple windows, but the rules of the ‘I’m trying to communicate my hyperventilation’ game mean that it doesn’t matter, as long your intention is communicated. The referential claim to legitimacy within the Wittgensteinian view is to ask the question: To what extent can formal mathematical logic relating to things be used as an effective tool in the analysis of language? I will leave this question open.

In conclusion, Wittgenstein’s idea to formulate language as essentially taking the structure of a ‘game’ is an incredibly powerful insight, that has flourished coherence widely. It can also be concluded that referential theories are strictly weaker, not asserting as much as Wittgenstein does, with many more and complicated assumptions. Yet, while we view Wittgenstein’s landscape fundamentally more foundational to language, the referential view and its methodology can be encapsulated by Wittgenstein fundamental structure of a rule-based game. What changed is thus—Russell, typically of the referential era, hoped formalization would ultimately eliminate the confusions caused by ordinary language. Wittgenstein is ready to own this as feature of the system, not a bug.

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1. The ‘ideas’ theory of reference/meaning, in which utterances refer to ideas in our minds rather than objective reality is a variation we will include under the referential umbrella [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Who employed a wide variety philosophy to fix such issues (Kripke, 1980) (Strawson, 1950) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Russell suggests a form of fuzzy logic to confront the vagueness paradox (Russell, 1923), and Frege splits semantic content into sense and reference, to confront the ambiguous meaning of proper names (Frege, 1948) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)