

***"For a large class of cases – though not for all -  
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the meaning of a word is its use in the language". Discuss.***

### **Part Two: Later Wittgenstein**

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Word Count: 2459

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Wittgenstein focused a great deal of his attention to the problems of meaning within language. In the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, he asserts that words have meaning by virtue of their standing for things in the world, however his later thought turns its back on this view of meaning and presents us not only with a new 'ladder' to climb, but with a revolutionary view of language and its place in our world.

In discussing Wittgenstein's view of meaning and use, we must dissect the quoted passage and attempt to discern firstly what Wittgenstein meant by it, secondly how far we can abstract a general theory of meaning from it, and thirdly what conclusions could be drawn from our interpretation of it. Of primary importance will be a discussion of what Wittgenstein means by concepts such as 'language', 'use', 'meaning' and 'grammar', and coupled with this must be an investigation of the validity of the claim that "the meaning of a word is its use in the language"<sup>1</sup>. Specifically, then, we will be exploring the exact relationship between a word and its use, both in language and in the world, and on both a social and individual level.

The immediate problems with this passage can be split into two broad categories; problems of scope, and problems of definition. While intertwined, these areas are to be dealt with distinctly. Questions such as "Why only for a large class of cases?"<sup>2</sup> fall under the title of scope, while those such as "What is meant by 'use in language'?"<sup>3</sup> are problems of definition. Problems of scope deal with the limits of the passage; is this a universal principle, or does it only apply to a subset of cases? These questions would have definite answers if we had a precise definition of the key phrases of the passage, i.e. 'meaning', 'use' and 'language', yet such a concrete grounding we do not have; Wittgenstein himself accepts that "(I have) nowhere said what the essence of a language-game, and hence of language is"<sup>4</sup>. Hence we should expect to encounter more serious difficulties when trying to resolve problems of definition than those of scope.

Firstly, we cannot but notice Wittgenstein's initial disclaimer that the passage does not refer to *all* cases of meaning. He does not say 'though not necessarily all', nor 'though perhaps not for all', but is instead quite definite that not all cases can be defined as he does<sup>5</sup>. This qualification may cause us some problems, and distract us from the main force of the passage, until we delve deeper into the actual text. Wittgenstein does not mean to give us a *definition* of meaning, and nor does he promise to, for the German text reads "*erklären*"<sup>6</sup>, which literally translates not as 'define' (*definieren*<sup>7</sup>) but as 'explain'<sup>8</sup>. Wittgenstein is not making a broad statement about what the essence of meaning is, but rather is clarifying how we use the word 'meaning' in our everyday language. We now realise that the small number of cases which do not fit are not in direct contravention of a definition of meaning, but rather are cases where our use of the word meaning takes on a different sense. One could imagine, within Wittgenstein's

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1 PI: §43

2 Hanfling: 45

3 Hunter in Klemke: 379

4 PI: §65

5 Assuming that '*wenn auch nicht*' can be translated as 'though'; the literal translation reads 'if also not', which does not immediately give us 'though'. It is conceivable that what is actually meant is 'for a large class of cases, if not for all...', though I must leave this matter to someone more experienced in the German language.

6 PI: §43, German text

7 & 8: According to both <http://translate.google.com> and PI (Blackwell, 1958), but not PI (Blackwell, 2004).

8 I do not mean to insinuate that the translation is wrong here, rather that the word 'define' has certain connotations that Wittgenstein did not intend, which lead us to think of a definition of meaning rather than an explanation of our use of the word.

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description of our language as a city, that the "new boroughs with straight regular streets and uniform houses"<sup>9</sup> may represent such cases. For instance, within the field of physics, there is a very specialised vocabulary, where words do indeed stand in direct relation to objects in the world. In a mathematical context, words stand for abstract concepts and bear no relation to their use in whatever sense - 'four' in pure mathematics *is* 4, regardless of whether being multiplied, divided or subtracted. Further problems of scope are to be found in the two instances of the word 'meaning' in §43. There are three possible ways in which we could understand 'meaning' in these cases; as the word in itself, as the word when in use, or as "something the word is supposed to stand for"<sup>10</sup>, i.e. the 'essence' of meaning.

In any possible case, the first interpretation is surely senseless for Wittgenstein; a word can mean nothing when not in use. One could say that a word has meaning only by virtue of having a place in a language-game. In the first instance of 'meaning', Wittgenstein clearly means our use of the word rather than the essence of what it stands for. The real difficulties arise when trying to untangle his second mention of 'meaning'. If the sense is that it means 'the word when in use', that would render the latter part of §43 tautological, which though saying nothing beyond "the use of a word is its use", may be an attempt to dissuade readers from looking somewhere other than in use for meaning. This is a re-iteration of the central notion that there is no essence to meaning, that only in social interaction does anything 'have' meaning. Having now examined the two senses in which Wittgenstein employs the word 'meaning', we can now look back at the three possible interpretations and realise that only the second has any sense within the context of the Philosophical Investigations.

What then, does Wittgenstein mean by use? Kenny notes two ways in which we could understand 'use', by asking "Does a word have a use provided that it can fit into acceptable sentences, or does its use have to make some difference in the world?"<sup>11</sup>. The first suggestion links very closely with Frege's notion that "Only in a proposition have the words really a meaning"<sup>12</sup>, and it is clear that this context principle held a large amount of influence over Wittgenstein's statements about meaning and use. However the notion that "words (have) meaning only as part of a sentence"<sup>13</sup> is not entirely compliant with Wittgenstein's idea of meaning. Although Frege's statement quite correctly precludes any definition of meaning that points to internal processes, or any inherent attribute of the words themselves, Wittgenstein would not look solely to the linguistic context for meaning, but more to the social context. Thus, we cannot accept Kenny's first suggestion. Neither can we fully accept the second possible interpretation without some clarification of what could be meant by 'some difference in the world'. A precursory examination seems to indicate that the suggestion is that for words to have meaning, they must interact with the world in some way. However this now appears to be far too close to the view held in the Tractatus that words stand in direct relation to objects in the world, that "the proposition is a picture of reality"<sup>14</sup>, and so we must seek alternative conclusions. It seems reasonable to say that use is found in interaction with the world, only when 'the world' is understood to include, and perhaps comprise mainly of, the social context that a proposition is used in. Once again, the concept and exact nature of language-games hold a primary role in our understanding of Wittgenstein.

We now must ask what qualifies as 'language', for the precise sense in which Wittgenstein

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9 PI: §18

10 Hunter in Klemke: 378

11 Kenny: 167

12 Frege: §60

13 PI: §49

14 TLP: §4.021

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intends 'meaning' and 'use' to be read is inextricably tied in with his definition of language. It is imperative to note that §43 ends by stating that 'the meaning of a word is its use *in the language*'. Hunter assumes that meaning and use are interchangeable; "I am suggesting §43 holds that in sentences in which we use any form of the word 'mean' ... we can substitute 'use'"<sup>15</sup>. Given this, he seems unsure that the addition of 'in the language' is at all relevant; "The words 'in the language' seem idle on *any* line of interpretation"<sup>16</sup> - on his reading of §43, these words simply have no place, they are redundant. Hunter's only suggestion is that 'in the language' is intended to "steer us away from the idea that it is the use in our lives"<sup>17</sup>. However, 'use in our lives' seems to be *exactly* what Wittgenstein means to say; we have already dismissed the idea that Wittgenstein can mean language in the Fregean sense of being words bound by lexical rules, that language can be confined to a "mere noise or scribble"<sup>18</sup>, nor even a system of noises and scribbles with logical rules of grammar. Wittgenstein's view of language goes far beyond this, an allusion to this being found in the Brown Book when he talks of accurate translation of a word into English, that the ability to do so "depends upon the role it is used, the expressions of emotion by which it is generally accompanied, the ideas which it generally awakens or which prompt its saying, etc etc..."<sup>19</sup>. If all these factors must be known in order to accurately translate the word, then these factors must at least be linked with the language, and one is tempted to say that they are as much a part of the language as the words themselves.

Given this view, we can see that in adding 'in the language', Wittgenstein is giving us a clue as to his concept of what classes as 'language'. His 'language' is not an abstract metaphysical concept which stands apart from the people who use it, but rather a social phenomenon, a game that people play, a human activity - and as such is very much to be found 'in our lives'.

Having now clarified what Wittgenstein means by 'meaning', 'use' and 'language', and identified the scope of the assertion in §43, we can start to draw some conclusions, and perhaps even extrapolate a broader view of Wittgenstein's philosophy, and some implications it may have. The essential conclusion we have reached is that Wittgenstein sees language as an interactive phenomenon. From this, we can see that meaning is not inherent in a word, nor does it come about due to grammatical context, nor even due to an internal mental process. Instead, meaning is attributed to a word by way of having a place in a situation. The question that naturally comes, then, is that as situations change, do meanings? In order to approach this question, we must consider what types of situation may be covered. It seems irrefutable that meanings can be radically different across cultures, both in time and space; what 'slavery' meant to the ancient Greeks is almost entirely different to what it means in Greece today<sup>20</sup>. Likewise, what 'rain' means to Western cultures today is likely to be very different to what it means to the inhabitants of Western Sahara today.

Meaning then is not universal, but localised, and this localisation is evident not only when vast separations of time or space are involved, but also, fundamentally, on a *much* smaller scale. An oft-cited example of intra-culture difference in meaning is to be found in the word 'bad'; to the majority it will represent something negative, but certain sub-cultures describe admirable

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15 Hunter in Klemke: 382

16 Hunter in Klemke: 379

17 Hunter in Klemke: 388

18 Nagel: 40

19 BB: §48, p103

20 The ancient Greek concept of slavery included the notion that slaves were inhuman; a man who murdered another's slave would be taken to court not for murder, but damage to property.

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things in this way. It is even common for one person, meaning the same thing, to use different senses of 'bad' in different situations; a teenage boy may say that the latest game is 'bad' to his friends, and yet describe it as 'good' to his mother! Such an extreme polarity of meaning within such close social proximity only serves to give more weight to the notion that in our use of language there are no defining boundaries. Meaning is fluid and polymorphic at every level. It is not static in any way, though that is not at all to say that it does not exist. We do not see distinct groups or classes of things, but "a complicated network of similarities"<sup>21</sup>, which describe our view of the world.

It seems clear that each language-game must have its own unique network of interrelated similarities of meaning; each game has a different set of family resemblances. In order for different language-games to co-exist within one language, there can be no one set of definitions which covers the entire language, but there must instead be many differently constructed networks which players switch between depending on which language-game they are playing. Otherwise, it would be impossible for our teenager to use the word 'bad' in two different senses within *one* language-game; he cannot think that 'bad' simultaneously means both 'positive' and 'negative', unless he recognises that it has a different meaning dependant on use, and hence has two meanings in two language-games.

If we agree that there must be many co-existent language-games, the question arises, "Which definitions does the player *really* agree with?". If I play a game one day where 'slab' means 'brick' but not 'tile', and then I play the opposite game another time, where 'slab' means 'tile' but not 'brick', what do I really believe a 'slab' to be? One could imagine that the player may form his own 'master' network, which is to used in case a language-game does not have a definition – when playing a game which has nothing to do with building materials, the player simply uses the default meaning from the master. If it turns out that the definition is flawed in some way, it is modified to accommodate the particular use. It seems from this that the actual links in each network are unconsciously 'decided upon' by group agreement, if as you are learning a language-game, you are creating a new network of definitions based on your master, relationships in the new network will start to reflect the collective consensus of the players. Given this, it would seem reasonable to say that our language collectively describes, but individually *defines* our view of a particular state of affairs, and hence plays a pivotal role in our understanding of the world around us.

In conclusion, we have seen how this particular passage suffers from loosely defined terminology and does not explicitly set forth its intentions. With this in mind, we can see how the interpretation of the extract can differ vastly between readings. Regardless of this, it has been illustrated how it may be possible to extract a definite philosophical direction from it. This interpretation not only sits well in the broader context of later Wittgensteinian thought, but through its interpretation of the terminology, allows us to better understand a wide range of related issues, including language-games and the more sociological implications of Wittgenstein's philosophy. There has also been a focus on Frege's context principle and the degree to which it influenced Wittgenstein's own ideas. Additionally, there has been a brief discussion of family resemblance, and some possible implications that the concept of 'a complicated network of similarities' may have on our entire conception of the world.

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21 PI: 66

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### **Bibliography**

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