

# Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*

G. J. Matthey

Fall, 2005 / Philosophy 156

## **The New Wittgenstein**

- “It is not humanly possible to gather immediately from it what the logic of language is. . . . The tacit conventions on which the understanding of everyday language depends are enormously complicated” (*Tractatus*, 4.002).
- The *Philosophical Investigations* seeks to explain these tacit conventions.
- But it turns out that the explanation of the way language works shows that there is no such thing as “the logic of language.”
- The way language actually works undermines not only the logical language developed in the *Tractatus*, but also the activity of philosophizing itself.
- The basic technique is to examine small and highly constrained artificial languages and then generalize the results to natural language.

## **The Augustinian Account of Language**

- Augustine gives “a particular picture of the essence of human language” (1).
  - Individual words name objects.
  - Sentences are combinations of names which name objects.
- This picture of language is the “root” of the idea that every word has a meaning, the object for which it stands.
- The picture works best for nouns and proper names, less well for names of actions and properties, and not well for other words.

## **Language (2)**

- The first language, “language (2),” is found in Section 2.
- Its purpose is for communication between a builder A and a helper B.
- A is building with four kinds of stones, and B’s job is to pass the appropriate piece to A when asked for it by A.

- B learns to bring the appropriate piece when A calls out one of the words.
  - “Block”
  - “Pillar”
  - “Slab”
  - “Beam”
- Such a language works in the way Augustine described, due to its severe limitation.

### **Language Games**

- The process of using words as in language (2) is analogous to a game.
- The game consists of two items:
  - The language itself,
  - The activities involved in the use of language, including those involved in learning the language.
    - \* Pointing,
    - \* Repeating words.
- For example, ring-around-the-rosie: when we say “we all fall down,” everyone falls down.
- The game-like character of the use of language (2) is generalizable to all use of language.

### **Language (8)**

- An expansion of language (2), “language (8),” is found in Section 8.
- It contains a series of “numerals,” “a,” “b,” “c,” “d.”
- It also contains the words “this” and “there,” which are used in connection with a pointing gesture.
- There is a stock of color-samples nearby.
- A says “d—slab—there” while showing B a color-sample and pointing to a place at the building site.
  - B takes four slabs of the same color as the sample to the place to which A pointed.
- A says “this” when pointing to a piece and then “there” when pointing to a place.
  - B takes the indicated piece to the indicated place.

### **Language and Use**

- In learning language (8), we learn how to use words.
- Words are “taught ostensively” by showing situations in which they are used appropriately.
- The description of words as referring to their objects is only of limited application.
- For example, to correct errors:
  - “a” does not play the role that “slab” does.
  - “c” means this number and not that one.
- But the uses of the different types of words are very different and cannot be accounted for by appeal to their reference.
- Reference may best be described on the analogy of pasting labels on things.

### **Many Kinds of Language Use**

- We can imagine a variant of language game (2) where A asks the number of slabs in a pile and B replies.
- The sentence “Five slabs” is used differently in language game (2) and this game:
  - The number of slabs is five (in the variant game),
  - Bring me five slabs (in language game (2)).
- In part, the difference between the two utterances of “Five slabs” is the role they play in their respective language games.
- There are “countless” different kinds of sentences besides counting and ordering.
- Those who look for a logic of language (including Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus*) overlook most of the language games involved in them.

### **Some Examples of Language Use**

- 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 a joke; telling it,
- Play-acting,
- Solving a problem in practical arithmetic,
- Asking, thanking, cursing, greeting, praying.

### **The Relation Between Name and Thing Named**

- The relation between name and thing named is established by the language game in which the name is used.
  - Calling forth an action on the thing, as in language (2),
  - Generating a picture in our mind,
  - Writing the name on the thing as a label,
  - Pronouncing the name when the thing is pointed at.
- None of these apply to “this” and “that,” so they should not be called names.

### **Meaning is Use**

- Russell had called “this” and “that” the only genuine names (“logically proper” names).
- Treating these terms as names is the result of making the logic of our language “sublime” (as Wittgenstein himself had done in the *Tractatus*).
  - We often point to a thing and say “this” when giving ostensive definitions.
  - The word “this” and a name occur in the same positions of sentences.
  - It is thought that names should refer to something simple, and only “this” picks out something simple.
- The last reason is based on a faulty assumption that a word must refer in order to have meaning.
- But in fact, a word can be used in many ways although it does not refer.
- For a large class of cases, the meaning of the word is its use.

### **Language (48)**

- The third language, “language (48)” is found in Section 48.
- The purpose of the language is to describe colored squares on a surface.
- The squares are arranged in a matrix of three columns and three rows and are numbered as follows:

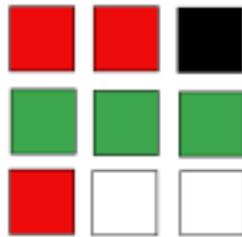
1 2 3  
4 5 6  
7 8 9

The words of the language are as follows:

- "R" for a red square
- "G" for a green square
- "W" for a white square
- "B" for a black square

**A Sentence of Language (48)**

- We can generate a sentence which describes the following arrangement:



- Such a sentence consists of a string of nine words whose order corresponds to the order of the squares.
  - "RRBGGGRWW"