



**THE CONTEMPORARY UNDERSTANDING OF LANGUAGE
AND MEANING IN WITTGENSTEIN'S PHILOSOPHY**

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Abstract:

Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889 –1951) was considered one of the 20th Century's most important philosophers. He was an Austrian-British philosopher who worked primarily in logic, the philosophy of mind, and the philosophy of language. Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* is regarded as a significant philosophical work of the twentieth century which identifies the relationship between language and reality. It is an attempt to state in a general way the essence of all languages and the essence of the relation between language and reality. He is not at all concerned with the language of daily life and its connections with the empirical world. His focal attention is on the underlying essence of language which has been covered by its superficial appearances. Essence therefore, is the logical structure of language. It is evident that search for something essential and search for something ideal are not different but same. For Wittgenstein, language is a practical human activity - a form of social practice. In this sense language has got some extra linguistic characteristics. The focal attention of the present discussion is to illustrate how these characteristics of language are ultimately determined by practice. The paper focuses to show language and meaning through language-game. Language practiced in different contexts, such as, story-telling, translating, quarreling, advising, ordering and so on are different from one another and none is identical with mere description. Explanations of one practice of language overlooking a whole host of other uses make our approach to language grossly one sided and highly unrealistic and artificial. According to Wittgenstein, the more narrowly we examine actual language; the sharper becomes the conflict between it and our requirement. To consider that language has only one use seems to be a myth if we look at the various uses of language. Language performs innumerable functions which cannot be accommodated into one category of any kind.

Introduction:

The primary thrust of this article is to explain the significance of Ludwig Wittgenstein's idea of language and game, that it is not just a concept but an expression, which summarizes the later concept of language and meaning. Central to this conception is his idea of language which is to be understood as practice. It gives a philosophical justification to the view as to why language is necessary as practice. From the conception of ideal language, Wittgenstein now arrives to praxis oriented concept of language. The main objective of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* is to construct an ideal language with a view to describe the world. To this effect, Wittgenstein's argument is that the world consists of a multitude of empirical facts and state of affairs and the function of language is to copy, mirror or represent these facts and state of affairs in the same way as a picture or a photograph is said to be representing something in the world. However, language fails to function in this way because of its inherent ambiguities and vagueness. In order to remove these defects the only option left is to construct ideal language to be governed by logical grammar and syntax. Language has many other uses apart from its naming objects. Similarly, meaning cannot be a mere correspondence with the world. Wittgenstein proposed a new theory of meaning where the meaning of a word is understood in terms of use in the language.

Approach to Language:

The article brings out the concept of Language as praxis - a kind of activity. Wittgenstein advocated an activity-oriented concept of language. Language, for him, is thus an endless series of games or language-games. Wittgenstein's philosophy of language cannot be adequately studied without understanding language as a form of practice. The notion of language and meaning are based on the concept of practice. Wittgenstein was preoccupied with the dissolution of philosophical puzzles through the analysis of language. Language is a social and practical phenomena determined by the collective activities of man. He did not have any intrinsic concern for the study of language. He was not interested in the study of language from the standpoint of linguistics. The study of language, for him, is a means and not an end in itself. It is directed towards the dissolution of the philosophical problems by conceiving language as practice in its proper context, i.e., the social context. Here an attempt will be made to give an idea of language conceived as practice.

Names correspond to object. These objects, for Wittgenstein, constitute the essence of reality. According to his picture theory, "In a picture the elements of the picture are the representatives of objects".¹ ontologically speaking, these objects constitute the unchangeable essence of reality. If the objects change, then the elementary propositions cannot have a definite sense and the proposition which is a picture of reality would

be just impossible. For a changeable thing (object) there cannot be any picture. Therefore, in order that a proposition may have sense, Wittgenstein's objects must be unchangeable, constant and permanent. This position is clearly embodied in the following assertions.

"Objects make up the substance of the world"

There must be objects, if the world is to have an unalterable form"²

"Objects are what is unalterable and subsistent".³

These statements of *Tractatus* suggest the metaphysical position that the essence of reality is something unchangeable. In the language of a metaphysician, he can announce that the idea of 'fruit' is the substance of different fruits, because, for example, to be an apple is not essential to appeal. What is essential to different fruits is not their real existence, but the essence that is abstracted from them.

It is this new socially oriented epistemology that serves as the foundation of Wittgenstein's later philosophy of language. In *Philosophical Investigation* he came to locate the meaning of words in their use rather than in their correlation or correspondence to reality. All his previous attempts to construct an ideal language have been replaced by a new method of enquiry, aimed at understanding language where, to put it Wittgenstein's words "...everything lie open to view there is nothing to explain. For what is hidden, for example is of no interest to us".⁴ This remark of Wittgenstein exhibits his change of position from ideal language to ordinary language or from essence to practice. The concept of practice is the cornerstone of Later Wittgenstein's theory of meaning in *Tractatus*. By replacing an unchangeable essence with element of practice, in the theory of meaning, Wittgenstein has started a revolution in the field of linguistic philosophy, - a revolution both destructive and constructive. It is destructive in the essence that it rejects essentialism in the theory of meaning. It is constructive in the sense that it develops a new theory of meaning, that is, the use of theory built upon the concept of practice.

In all his later works especially in *Philosophical Investigations*, we find Wittgenstein revolting against the universal and necessary elements in the Kantian and Platonic theory of Meaning. He discarded the very possibility of the question what is essential or what is common to all. The meaning of beauty for Wittgenstein is not the essence. Its meaning is determined by aesthetic situations. The main mistakes the metaphysicians have committed is that they have tried to describe beauty as something common to all situations and contexts. Instead of doing this, Wittgenstein lays emphasis on the particular situations of aesthetic activity. As he says:

"Perhaps the most important thing in connection with aesthetic is what may be called, the aesthetic reacting example, discontent, disgust, discomfort....etc"⁵

The sum and substance of Wittgenstein's anti-essentialist theory of meaning is that, for understanding language, it is necessary to be aware of the contexts of daily living-forms of life in which the expressions of language find their use. Hence, in view of the findings of the preceding discussions, it can very well be maintained that practice is the central concept in Wittgenstein's philosophical system. In the following discussion the task will be to show, how the notion of practice forms the basis of later Wittgenstein's concept of language.

Language as Practice:

In the previous discussion it is obvious that the foundation of Later Wittgenstein's Philosophy is the concept of practice. An understanding of Wittgenstein's theory of language is not possible without this notion of practice. This discussion will be focused on developing Wittgensteinian theory of language - a theory which propounds that language is a product of practice and that language is essentially a social phenomena. It arises from the social necessity, that is, the necessity of interaction or communication among people. Language exists also for other men and for that reason alone it exists for me. Language is a practical phenomena. It is a practical form of consciousness. It is the immediate actuality of thought or idea. The term 'practice' generally refers to activity. Every object exists independently. In this way there exists an active relationship between man and objects. An active relationship between man and objects becomes essential for his understanding. To say human beings are using the language means that they are practicing that language. Using language means, practicing the language. So this is one kind of activity. Language is an activity upon the natural objects. However, this activity takes place only in collaboration with the fellow men. Therefore, language is essentially social in nature. Language arose from the need - the necessity of social interaction in the day to day activities of man. Language originated as a system of communication because of his social necessity. Language therefore, is essentially a social product. The problem of meaning cannot be discussed apart from the practice of the society. The meaning of the words in language is not predetermined. They acquire meaning through different contexts of social practice. As the contexts of social practice change, the linguistic components also change accordingly. Hence, it can be maintained that Wittgenstein's theory of meaning is anti-essentialistic. This is to say that the content of the language is ultimately determined by social practice. This practice determined ideas, which are in turn actualized in words.

4. Meaning and Practice/Use:

Wittgenstein wants to solve some of the problems raised in *Tractatus* regarding colour predicates. This realization brings a new change in Wittgenstein's approach to language and meaning. This middle phase

subsequently leads him to his final phase where meaning is identified with practice, to which Wittgenstein gives a technical name called "language-game". In the final phase, Wittgenstein retains some of the ideas of the middle phase. The basic approach to language or utterance is never changed, that is, language is viewed as it is actually employed. In the final phase, although Wittgenstein takes of sensory evidence in the context of meaning, it is not, however, the deciding element in the explanation of meaning. By Wittgenstein admission, along with sensory evidence there are certain linguistic or grammatical considerations that do mother in the explanation of meaning. In this connection the notion of 'criteria' and practice play a very important role. This offers a new perspective which will reveal what is involved in Wittgenstein's use theory of meaning.

The discussion moves towards interpreting few issues pertaining to Wittgenstein's theory of meaning. First, I will discuss Wittgenstein's idea of meaning in terms of language-game or practice. Second, I will show that the notion of language-game involves a practice oriented conception of language and meaning, which involves holding operationalism. Beside these, I will discuss some other points relating to the main issue. In *Philosophical Remarks*, the transition from system of propositions to language-games is brought about. Because even if the systems of propositions are conceived as ultimate units of meaning, it makes meaning dependent upon a wider range of propositions. Instead of comparing a proposition, he compares a system of proposition to a ruler or yardstick and "the fact that one measurement is right excludes all other automatically".⁶ 'P is white' excludes automatically 'P is yellow', 'P is black' and so on. The answer is "The meaning of a word is its use in the language", the conventional agreement in practice and the practice we make of a word conforming to this general agreement. What makes the varieties of practice more than descriptions is the situation, or circumstances, or activities in which they are practiced. This has been neglected by the philosophers of ideal language. But ordinary language philosophers take into account both the linguistic and non-linguistic activities in their study of language, and infact, for them, the semantic aspect is more important than the syntactic or graphic aspect of a sentence.

The category-difference between two expressions cannot be known without the 'contextual setting'. Mere observance of logical syntax never suffices for the correct use of language. 'April is on the table', 'K.R.Narayana is American's President', 'I drink Abids' can conform a logical syntax but they can never be the correct use of our language. For the correct use of language logical syntax is not alone sufficient. A correct use of language must satisfy the contextual requirement. The way the transition forms ideal language to ordinary language becomes inevitable and is also justified.

The formal approach to language presupposes a general theory of meaning in terms of an ideal language that embodies logical ideas of absolute precision and unambiguity. As Strawson observes the formalistic approach at most equates meaning with references. But meaning of a sentence is independent of its references. Meaning is dependent upon the conventions governing the uses of expression. These uses are too complex to be accommodated into any single formal model of logic. Thus the idea of the establishment of an ideal language reconstructing ordinary language remains a utopian one and has failed to succeed in its enterprise to find the proper logic of our language. Its failure gives way to the ordinary language which accepts that language in part of the stream of life - a living, concrete, unsystematic, social, public and natural phenomenon. As Wittgenstein puts it: "commanding, questioning, recounting, chatting, as much a part of our natural history - as walking, eating, drinking, playing."⁷ Rejecting the idea of common essence Wittgenstein goes further and says that the general terms do not have any such unitary meaning. Wittgenstein also shows that there is nothing like fixed meaning. He rejects the view according to which there is one pre-eminent way in which words means. As a matter of fact, he rejected his earlier view of meaning because he thought that it was a result of an obsession that some unified omniscient theory of meaning is possible. The notion of practice is one of the centrally important notions in the *Investigations* but it is at the same time the least clear notion. There are two most important reasons among several others reasons that led Wittgenstein to identify meaning of the words with their senses. According to Wittgenstein, any attempt to understand the meaning of words in isolation or in abstraction from the actual situation is inadequate. Such abstraction will invariably lead to philosophical puzzlement. In order to understand the meaning of words what we need is to consider the words that occur in specific contexts. Wittgenstein thinks that the question, 'what is meaning' is the question that 'what is it that makes an expression meaningful'. Thus the question, 'what is time', is not important but 'what is it that makes temporal?' To quote Wittgenstein,

"The meaning of a word is what is explained by the explanation of the meaning", i.e., if you want to understand the use of the word 'Meaning', look for what are called "explanations of meaning".¹¹

The second important reason that led Wittgenstein to identify the meaning with use is that he tries to establish that a sign assumes conventional meaning when it is used in a certain way. For example, if on the wall of a corridor in a college written 'Library' with arrow sign at the right side of, the word, this means that the library is to the right. But the arrow sign itself does not mean anything, it is a dead sign. It gets definite meaning only when it is practiced by human beings in certain direction, or in a specific language-game.

"Every sign by itself seems dead. What gives it life? - In use it is alive, Is life breathed into it there? Or is the use its life?"¹²

Wittgenstein in his *Investigations* has already shown least interest in the grammatical aspect of language. Wittgenstein has expressed his idea that grammatical behaviour of words and grammatical structure of sentences could lead to a misleading result. Grammar will mislead us so that we have to avoid grammar.

"Our Investigation is therefore grammatical one, such an Investigation sheds light on our problem by clearing misunderstanding away".¹³

Grammar' here is used in a very broad sense. What is meant here is simply linguistic investigation, that is, the Investigation of the practice of words. Wittgenstein's idea of practice is largely concerned with this aspect. Even the semantic questions are explained in the framework of speech activities. The another name for speech activity is the language-game. Language-game, of course, has wider implications than speech activity. In Wittgenstein's philosophy, there could be pure language-games which involve speech activities only such as reporting a dream, telling joke, etc.¹⁴ impure language-games, on the other hand, involve non-linguistic behavior. For Wittgenstein, both linguistic and non-linguistic behavior form the language-games. "I shall also call the whole, consisting of language and the actions into which it is woven, the 'language-game'".¹⁵

Wittgenstein thinks that to speak of language means to behave according to a certain pattern for which one requires a skill. Speaking of a language means mastering certain techniques. Thus linguistic and non-linguistic behaviours are not two isolated aspects but they form a complex whole, - a behavioural pattern. "Commanding, questioning, recounting, chatting are as much a part of our natural history as walking, eating, drinking, playing".¹⁶

The rule is a customary practice and the customary practice implies receiving certain training. Obeying a rule is confirming to an agreed practice, "It is not possible to obey a rule 'privately'".¹⁷ If we consider that the meaning of a sentence is the way in which it is used and this way of being used is determined by rules, then these rules are to be explicitly put together both to get the meaning. When there is a question of 'meaning' there are no fixed rules, but different rules that govern in different practices of a sentence.

5. Conclusion:

The new understanding of language and meaning indicates language-games. Language is primarily a matter of practice or praxis. This is radical departure from his earlier theory of meaning which offers a completely new understanding of language and meaning. The article thus shows that the notion of practice occupies a central position Wittgenstein's language-game.

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