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**Wittgenstein's category of use as a starting point for the theory of language<sup>1</sup>**

Abstract

*The author concentrates on the methodological aspects of a theory of language in which one could explain all basic problems related to natural language, especially such as the phenomenon of meaning, language acquisition, knowledge of language, the relation between natural language and the language of thought etc. She believes we should develop Wittgensteinian approach where the category of use plays the central role in explaining meaning. We should also reject double aspect theories of meaning and treat language as a natural phenomenon functioning in our daily life, and ontologically as an abstract object which has to be examined. Additionally, she claims that we should elaborate the ideas which are the underlying reasons for the three projects in philosophy: minimalism, naturalism and pragmatism. The author argues in favor of some given, previously elaborated and specified theses which she derives from each of them.*

**Use as an initial research category**

When we agree with a Wittgensteinian dictum according to which „meaning is use”, we do not make a simple theoretical manoeuvre of replacing the category of meaning with the category of use, but we change our investigative perspective in a fundamental way. The notion of meaning does not equal the notion of use. In the studies inspired by Wittgensteinian philosophy we are not looking for the answer to the question: *what is meaning (the idea, the concept, mental state?)*, but to the question *how is it possible that expressions of language are meaningful*. It involves certain ontological commitments to accept claims according to which there is no such entity as meaning, and there is not such thing as language in itself. We should rather speak about multiplicity of language games and about variety of functions of the language games which make language elements meaningful. We can describe meanings of

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language expressions and sentences (*Sätze*) describing their use. Treating use category as crucial in our theory lets us render the complexity of language functions because we are not trying to single out its essential, substantial function (the most fundamental and pivotal property which would make language language). In traditional accounts, especially in truth-conditional theories of meaning, there was such a property, namely, the referential character of language (aboutness in some views) and the possibility of asertoric discourse connected with that. In post-Wittgensteinian theories it is acknowledged that language functions are various and they depend on a certain language game in which language expressions are used. There are games in which the notion of reference (a cat means cat) plays the crucial role in explaining them. There are games in which the referent can be satisfied by any suitable object (e.g. in demonstratives), and games where the existence of objects to which we refer is not an important matter at all (e.g. „tralalala”). The meanings of language expressions in all language games can be described because they function within language practices and we can describe them exploring the category of language use.

### **The object of studies: language which is not only an empirical entity**

It is difficult for a philosopher of language to avoid answering the questions about the ontological status of the object of his studies. To put it another way, we can always ask what is that something we call a language in our investigations. There is no agreement within the theories of meaning about the way language should be treated and about the way it should be investigated. The ontological questions I raise here have a fundamental character. If we assume that language can be studied from different points of view (like in post-Wittgensteinian approaches), we have to decide what kind of properties make our object of studies the entity we in fact research. When we say ‘language’, do we mean the language of the individual, the unique idiolect or do we rather mean the abstract object which is idealized after studies of particular idiolects, a kind of common language? Is the possibility of communication the most important feature of human language? If there was a language without communicative function, would we call it language at all? Do we take into account a certain ethnic language – all examples used by us as philosophers basically come from standard European languages - or do we rather assume that there is such a thing as universal language? When we write ‘language’ do we mean the set of meaningful sounds or inscriptions, or rather the sounds or inscriptions itself that potentially can be meaningful? When we talk of sentences do we mean sentences-types or sentences-tokens and what is the ontological status of the types here? (Botterill, Carruthers 1999). Are we forced to follow the

post-Fregean tradition in which the notion of *Sinn* is introduced: objective, general, immaterial, abstract, constant entity, existing independently of language understood as a set of signs? The questions above, though detailed, are not insignificant. They all show us the basic problem of all language researchers, the problem of deciding on the status of the object of study. The dispute about language and the way we can treat it can be found in almost every discussion which is held among philosophers of language; especially when we use the notion of language as if it was an entity with indisputable features. We should find the middle ground between two radical views: between an extreme naturalistic account on the one side, where language is treated as a set of sounds and inscription tokens without semantics, and a Fregean view according to which language is a set of signs whose meanings are abstract, objective and exist in the third realm like Plato's ideas.

Developing a theory of meaning as use allows us to describe language which functions in everyday life of humans. When we investigate meaning from use category perspective, we initially take for granted that basically language is something which is used. We assume the simple and obvious fact about language, namely the fact that people use it in their everyday practice. We assume also that the philosopher of language investigates a certain idealized object whose properties can be determined by the examination of actual uses. It can be said that we deal with language tokens (sentences and expressions accessible with the help of certain sounds and inscriptions), but they are not just sounds and inscriptions, because they are used in a restricted way in practice, which means that they are meaningful according to the elaborated view. It is a task for a theory of meaning to characterize their peculiarity.

### **Methodological aspects of the late Wittgensteinian approach to language**

There are few Wittgensteinian traces which I find important for the current study. I will enumerate them and shortly describe now.

Wittgenstein wants to take out the mystery of meaning which has always been connected with that notion in philosophical investigations. The mystery is understood here as the classic essence of meaning and the need of finding it in our research (Wittgenstein 1998, §92, p. 43/43e/66 and §371, p. 116/116e/166). He considers language which functions in natural situations in everyday human existence. We can understand that as a rejection of the Cartesian paradigm and its *res cogitans/res extensa* division, and the rejection of the double-aspect theories of meaning.

The notion of meaning is objective in the sense that the correctness of use of a given expression does not depend on the individual decision of a language user. Language is autonomous but also social. People can use language incorrectly because of the fact that the correctness of language use is conditioned by the normative rules. According to many contemporary theories of meaning, language is the effect of the biological evolution of the human species, hence it is given to the whole species, not to the individual human being (Pinker 1994, Pinker 1997). It is underlined there that there is an important relation between using language and the existence of personal identity. Subjectivity is constituted by the ability to make judgements, and that can be done because of the capacity for using language (Luntly 2003, p. 67). It is worth mentioning that it was Wittgenstein for whom exploring the notion of meaning was connected with some psychological investigations.

Wittgenstein in his late philosophy treats language as an element of natural history of humans. He points out also that we should analyse natural phenomena in philosophy, and language is one of them. However, there is a major difference between Wittgenstein's methodology and methodological recommendations which can be found in contemporary theories of meaning. It is an attitude towards scientific methods in formulating theories. Wittgenstein claims that the difference between philosophy and science is really fundamental, hence asking questions, raising problems, and fixing goals are different in both those domains. Consequently, we will not resolve philosophical problems within scientific theories as it is hoped today (pointing to the results in psychology and neurology for example) (Williams 1999, p. 240-259; Kelly 1984, p. vii.). It is important to add that the Wittgensteinian rejection of scientific methods in philosophy does not close the door for philosophical theorizing. He does not propose one single method in describing language facts, but several, interconnected methods which will make such description possible from different points of view. To make it clear, Wittgensteinian rejection of making philosophy scientific is not an attack on science per se, but it is rather the consequence of his views about the role of philosophy (Conway 1989, p. 33 and S. Shanker 1997, p. 9).

The main element of Wittgenstein's methodology concerning his account of language is the role of practice. This is the case for two reasons. Firstly, his view is that practice is something primary. Language games can be described because of certain language practices. Secondly, because he rejects double-aspect theories of meaning (Wittgenstein 1998, §120, p. 48-49/48e-49e/74-75 and §138, p. 53/53e/81). In double-aspect theories of meaning (animatory) one assumes that a symbol (a sign) is meaningful because of „something” which makes it „alive” (the content, sense etc.). The symbol itself is just a sound or inscription. The

main goal of such theories is to show the source of animation mentioned. According to many superficial interpretations of Wittgenstein's theory, the author of *Investigations* claims that practice is the source of animation of the symbol (the sign). As a result his theory is numbered among socio-functional and radically conventional theories of language. There is no justification for this in Wittgensteinian methodology. He does not explain the notion of meaning by appealing to the social character of language because he rejects double-aspects theories of meaning, hence 'the social' does not play an explanatory role in his work. The critique of double-aspect theories produces the effect of a unique - not traditional - treatment of the category of practice (Wittgenstein 1969, p. 24, 67). Wittgenstein opposes the view according to which there are two distinct elements of the symbol (the sign). On the contrary: he claims that the symbols (the signs) are something primary and simple, they cannot be divided into more simple elements. Both, *Zeichen* and *Satze* are signs and expressions in use. That being so, Wittgenstein is not obliged to answer the question about the source of animation of symbols (signs) – the source of their meaningfulness. In the process he could not say that practice is that source (Wittgenstein 1969, p.26).

Taking Wittgensteinian traces at their face value I additionally claim that we should elaborate the ideas which are the underlying reasons for three projects in philosophy: naturalism, minimalism and pragmatism. I argue in favor of some given, previously elaborated and specified theses which I derive from each of them. I am going to point out some of them, concentrating especially on the first one.

### **Naturalism as an appropriate philosophical perspective**

I support the naturalistic point of view according to which language is treated as a natural element of the world, an element of human biology and historically variable human culture. Language so described can be characterized from the different points of view and by different methods, including scientific ones (but they are not the only ones, and what is more, they are not the most important ones). First of all, our methods should be selected with a view to aims we are going to reach in our theory, hence it is not easy to decide in advance which methods would be the most appropriate. Secondly, there are many different methods in science and in order to choose one of them we need to know certain scientific solutions concerning the matter we are interested in, which requires suitable competence to value them. It does not mean that as philosophers we cannot use scientific answers for philosophical purposes, but it means that it is not possible to replace philosophical investigations with scientific ones. I

claim that philosophy has its own independent methods and that we should raise ontological and metaphysical matters in connection with language. It is especially promising to combine the Wittgensteinian requirement of characterizing the category of meaning in terms of the category of use with the methodological demand of treating meanings as abstract objects (à la Frege, though without Fregean ontological commitments). Formulating a theory of meaning does not consist in exploring empirical facts (like in the positivist vision of science), but in constructing a philosophical theory in which we describe actual language practice. We examine observable objects – written or spoken sentences and expressions – but we do raise general and metaphysical questions at the same time. It is rightly claimed in naturalism that language is not a mystery object with a hidden nature, but it is natural very sophisticated equipment of humans. The main difficulty in studying language appears when we want to describe the complexity of language in one unified theory. In the naturalistic approach as I understand it, language is treated as a historically changeable set of language games. I find it promising, although there is no hope of finding definitive and final answers here.

Let me explain a few things about the metaphysical research I have mentioned above. According to many Wittgensteinian experts, he rejects all forms of metaphysics (Hacker 1998, p. 13 and Putnam, H. 1995). If they are right, I claim that we should abandon this element of his philosophy. Conducting metaphysical analyses is a crucial component of research in philosophy of language as long as we understand them as investigating historically changeable human language, but language which cannot be treated only as an empirical object. Metaphysics is not understood traditionally here. So we do not look for the so called essence of language, and we do not reach one correct description or one possible theory. It was Wittgenstein who persuaded us to introduce a certain kind of order in our way of treating language, but he did not believe that it can be given once and for all. Hence, the aim of our theory is to gain full description of the phenomenon of language in its day-by-day use and I treat it as a research postulate. As a result, we will have many theories and many answers to the question of what language is, answers which are initially determined by the assumptions we already have taken. Studying the assumptions of theories is the most important part of metaphysical approach to language as I understand it.

It can be misleading to call the Wittgensteinian approach naturalistic without stating further reservations, especially taking into account the sheer number of different naturalistic theories we can find in contemporary philosophy of language. It is not easy to define naturalism. Let us assume that the most basic thesis of naturalism is that natural is everything which means that it belongs to the world of nature. This general statement will be explanatory

only when we specify what 'nature' and 'natural' mean (Feldman 1999, p. 170-186; Kim 1998, p. 381-406 Quine, p. 20-43 Guttenplan 1994, p. 449). There are two consequences for philosophical investigations which we can derive from that thesis. First: the Quine'ian postulate to study everything which we decide is worth studying using scientific, empirical methods. Second: the demand of treating all entities of the human world as natural 'effects' of human history and human development. Taking these consequences for granted, we claim that there are no supernatural entities which philosophy has a privilege to study (Wittgenstein 1969, p.29)<sup>2</sup>. In other words, philosophy is not the so called first science, and there are no such entities as Plato's ideas, Descartes' *res cogitans* or Kant's noumena. Hence, philosophy is not a base for natural science, as it has been treated in some philosophical views. It is important to realize that Quine'ian postulate of naturalising epistemology has several consequences for doing philosophy. Quine claims for example that while doing ontology we should inspect the idea of wide-spread acceptance of the domain of physical objects in all areas of studies. We should do that in order to examine the implicit underlying assumptions which are taken for granted together with the idea above-mentioned. Philosophers are interested in the ontological status of language, in the way we treat such expressions like *x exist* and in all following consequences. Scientists do not openly deal with such problems, but they tacitly use ontological and metaphysical assumptions in their theories. It counts also for language investigations in linguistics, psycholinguistics, psychology and evolutionary biology. Philosopher's task is to analyse these assumptions and make them explicit. We can develop naturalistic account without excluding the importance of philosophical questions and philosophical answers to them. Let me repeat myself, in order to be a naturalist we do not have to exchange all philosophical matters for scientific ones (Quine 1969, p. 69-90).

Wittgenstein's theory can be interpreted as a naturalistic account only in an anti-scientific sense. Wittgenstein opposes scientism in philosophy and he rejects the traditional metaphysics with its requirement of looking for deeply hidden essences. His unique naturalism consists in several tightly connected claims which I have already mentioned. Let me enumerate some of them again: He underlines the need for idiosyncratic attitudes in philosophy (instead of construing general theories) (Wittgenstein 1969, p.67). He treats meanings, thoughts, mental processes, logic as common phenomena which can be studied in practice. The social context is for him an important factor in describing them, and he does not look for hidden essences or fundamentals. Philosophy in his view is a kind of therapy and a

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<sup>2</sup> Such approaches can be also called *strong* and *weak* naturalism (Cechetto, Rizzi 2000, p. 117) or *tough-minded* and *soft-minded* naturalism (Luntley 1999, p. 175).

special kind of description. In Wittgensteinian naturalism there is no place for the enthusiasm about scientific methods incorporated into philosophy, and there is no idea of progress which should be applied to the philosophical theories (unlike in natural sciences). To sum up, the aim of philosophy is to establish an order in knowledge we already have, not extending it (Wittgenstein 1998, §128, p. 50/50e/76).

### **Few words about minimalism**

If we initially agree with Wittgenstein that in order to know something about meaning of language expressions we have to study their use, and if we think that the aim of the theory of meaning is *to take the mystery out of meaning*, we will become adherents of a special kind of minimalism in the theory of meaning<sup>3</sup>. The best known philosopher who supports semantic deflationism as a kind of minimalism in the theory of meaning is Paul Horwich. Let me just briefly sum up his view. He claims that *meaning is use*, he accepts deflationism in the theory of truth according to which we are inclined to accept the instances of the schema *p is true iff p*; and he insists that meanings are concepts and that we are able to describe the total use of an expression by studying the acceptance property it has (Horwich 1998, p. 46)<sup>4</sup>.

Minimalism can be also characterized in another way. Let us have a look at Tim Thornton's description from his book devoted to Wittgensteinian philosophy. First of all, in all minimalist theories it is underlined that the individuation of meanings is possible because of language practice and the techniques of use of language expressions. Secondly, the capacity of understanding language is treated as a primary and simple one. That capacity can be characterized by describing use in which it is manifested. In other words, when we explain language understanding, the only category we need is the category of use. Pointing to practice as an explanatory category does not mean that the explanation is a kind of reductive one, hence it does not mean that the category of understanding can be reduced to some more simple categories. It does not mean, either, that we can develop a double-aspect theory of language meaning (Thornton 1998, p. 92). Such a minimalism is a kind of view that opposes essentialism and scepticism concerning meaning, and it is also connected with naturalism, for as H. Putnam claims the best description of naturalization is deflation. (Putnam 1995, p. 62-63).

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<sup>3</sup> See Horwich's semantic deflationism and use theory of meaning (Horwich 1998).

<sup>4</sup> The following constraints of the theory of meaning have been abandoned in Horwich's view: *The Understanding Constraint, The Relationality Constraint, The Representation Constraint, The Apriority Constraint, The Compositionality Constraint, The Normativity Constraint*. And the only one is in fact counted as a real one, namely *The Use Constraint* (Horwich 1998, p. 13 and 39).



## **Pragmatism and its important points**

The ideas which are the underlying reasons for pragmatism help us to realize why we do philosophy at all. I see pragmatism as Putnam does, namely as a metaphilosophical approach according to which philosophy is the domain of knowledge and the domain of culture, and its theories are the result of a commitment to important human matters. What is more, a philosophers themselves cannot avoid answering the question about their own point of view and about the values and assumptions which they take<sup>5</sup>. Generally speaking, according to pragmatism as a certain way of reasoning, all philosophical solutions have given practical results. Philosophy is an important human activity because of these practical results. It is worth doing philosophy only when philosophical solutions influence practice. Philosophy can be influential because it forms certain ways of reasoning, it preserves certain ideas, it gives them importance, hence it affects various areas of human life. One of the crucial aims of philosophy is a critical analysis of the foundations of philosophical theories themselves, and the views of the philosopher who tries to understand himself and world phenomena. It applies to a philosopher of language as well.

The therapeutic character of Wittgensteinian philosophy can be interpreted as a postulate of doing critical metatheoretical considerations in philosophy (metaphilosophy). It would mean that as philosophers we do not propose alternative theories, but we are trying to show what kind of reasoning shapes the theories which already exist, what kind of questions and why, we raise in those theories, what kind of methods we are ready to employ. Such an attitude would result for Wittgenstein in gaining a theoretical peace, the state in which we will stop raising questions, not because they will be solved, but because we will realize they are not real ones (Putnam 1995, p.92).

It seems to me that the metaphilosophical perspective has been for a while the distinctive feature of analytic philosophy (Hacker 1998, p. 3-34). From such a perspective, you have to be careful about your own assumptions, about the status of the object of your studies and the methods which you use. As a result of such an attitude, we can raise the most important matters: such as the problem of what philosophy is, what kind of problems should be called philosophical ones, and what kind of philosophical notions are the proper ones. Somehow we have forgotten about the perspective I have described here. We develop such branches of philosophy as philosophy of psychology, philosophy of mind, philosophy of language, copying the methods of science in the process. And like in science, there is no place

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<sup>5</sup> When we define pragmatism in this way it will be close to Wittgensteinian ideas of doing philosophy.

for critical thoughts about the status of the theories themselves. Philosophers have started answering the questions about the world itself (about natural language, mental processes, cognitive processes etc.) but they have stopped investigating the assumptions which have to be taken in order to raise those questions. The importance of the analysis of notions (concepts) is not a crucial factor of analytic philosophy as it used to be, which is a pity (hacker 1998, p. 30).

I claim that we can be meta-philosophically careful and develop theories in philosophy at the same time. We do not have to take for granted the Wittgensteinian requirement of not building philosophical theories. It is enough to agree with him about their special status. I think that the solutions from our theories cannot be treated as absolute, timeless, totally autonomous. In opposition to Wittgenstein, we can do philosophy in which descriptions help to answer the questions we have raised, descriptions which are not only tools for challenging these questions. It is worth describing the functions of natural language by studying language use. In other words, it is worth to do what has not been done by Wittgenstein, i.e. to develop use theories of meaning. Wittgenstein's works should not be just a source of attractive quotations, which help to illustrate almost every thought and every theory. I claim that there are many theoretical traces and important philosophical issues developed in his books which can be starting points for an interesting philosophical theory of language. We just have to learn how to derive conclusions from them for our own philosophical works.

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