The importance of nonsense - Some Remarks on the Notion of Secondary Use of Words

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In part II of *Philosophical Investigations* and in *Last Writings on the Philosophy of Psychology* Wittgenstein suggests a distinction between a word's primary and secondary meaning. A natural response to Wittgenstein's account of the phenomenon might be to take secondary uses of words as *live* metaphors. On such a reading, though, the interesting contrast is the one between dead metaphors and secondary uses. Wittgenstein's own example of a metaphoric use seems in effect to support this line of reasoning. In his view, it might be pertinent to describe secondary uses as a kind of metaphorical expression. But the relationship between primary and secondary uses is not like the one between expressions such as "cutting of a thread" and "cutting of someone's speech". Here one can obviously do without the figurative expression. (Wittgenstein 1982, § 798-99) However, this remark is anything but controversial. Hardly anyone would claim that one would sustain a loss of expressive aptness by being denied this kind of figurative expression.

The common inclination taking secondary uses of words as metaphors notwithstanding, the outcome of this reduction is not particular gratifying-putting aside interesting questions about the possible distinctiveness of a particular expressive mode of speaking. On the other hand, the problem about interpretations aiming at a strict differentiation between secondary uses and metaphors is that they tend to construe the phenomenon of secondary uses in a way that to many readers seems to be concurrent with ordinary conceptions of metaphor. This makes it indeed difficult to capture any original feature about the phenomenon. I'm concerned to avoid this pitfall. What I will be arguing is rather that secondary uses should be taken as utterances utterly devoid of linguistic sense, meaning that no logical role is being assigned to the words making up such utterances. What makes the distinction central is that it suggests an expressive use of words in which we fail to say something in a linguistically meaningful way. It only looks as though we contrive to come up with something yielding sense. Thus, the distinction should be thought of as a distinction in *use* - and not one in terms of linguistic meaning.[1]

Taking for granted that there is a salient difference between metaphors and secondary uses as regards the extent to which they are amenable to paraphrase or replacement, many commentators seem base their arguments on theoretical

assumptions on metaphorical use not widely defended today. Take for instance Hark who points out that a difference between metaphorical and secondary use consist in the fact that secondary uses do not refer to comparisons and similarities that can be identified independent of the use (Hark 1990, 188). Another example on this score is Tilghman's reading. As opposed to metaphors, he argues, secondary uses cannot adequately be paraphrased or explained. Moreover, he goes on professing that the difference between metaphors and similes is to be thought of as a superficial one in that both figures bear reliance upon a likeness. Then, as far as secondary uses are concerned, we cannot say that they refer to "similarities or likeness whose existence can be established independent of the secondary descriptions" (Tilghman 1984, 162). Another interpretation supporting the view under consideration is found in Paul Johnston. Using metaphors, he remarks, we are capable of giving an account of the appropriateness of the expression, which is not the case when a word is used in a secondary context. Secondary uses are to be thought of as things that obtrude themselves upon us (Johnston 1993, 121). Looking closer at the arguments it becomes rather obvious that metaphorical meaning is being reduced to the literal meaning of a simile or a comparison. A metaphor is grasped as shortened simile. On such readings metaphorical meaning is something that can easily be rendered in a paraphrase. Secondary uses, on the other hand, are thought of as not being susceptible to paraphrasing-in any case not without a significant loss of meaning. The motivation behind this line of reasoning is the idea that the allegedly secondary meaning of a word is to be regarded as a meaningful event inseparable from a particular context. Interestingly, this way of construing the phenomenon of secondary use seems to be fairly congenial to theories of metaphor stressing a kind of *shift of meaning* when an expression is being used metaphorically. Due to some kind of interaction between different levels of meaning a new meaning is created in such uses.[2] The meaning so expressed is furthermore regarded unique and utterly dependent on the context. That is why it is thought of as not being susceptible to any kind of replacement without suffering a loss of aptness.

The bizarreness of many of his examples of secondary uses might be the reason for the prevalent opinion that secondary uses represent a kind of violation of rules of language. Many interpreters actually take Wittgenstein to be focusing on a sort of category mistake-brought about by the not fitting of two or more concepts. In Tilghman, for instance, one finds the claim that the object of a secondary description is somewhat "logically inappropriate, of the wrong category" (Tilghman 1984, 160). On his reading we are sort of faced with the problem that such secondary uses are fitting and logical aberrant at the same time. The notion of a clash between different *meanings* is also prevalent in theories of metaphor. What's being stressed is the productivity of the

allegedly *semantic clash* facing us with a logical absurdity when trying to understand metaphors. As Ricoeur puts it, the shift in meaning results "primarily from a clash between literal meanings, which excludes the literal use of the word in question and provides clues for finding a new meaning capable of according with the context of the sentence and rendering the sentence meaningful therein." (Ricoeur 1981, 170) The parallel between the way metaphorical uses and secondary uses are being discussed is apparent. Many readers take Wittgenstein to be holding that secondary uses of language basically consist of putting together meaningful concepts bringing about a clash which renders the whole phrase absurd. One reason for not accepting this construal, though, is that it runs counter to Wittgenstein's ingenious view of nonsensicality, that is, his reasons for saying that a sequence of linguistic units is nonsensical. His notion of nonsense goes back to Frege's context principle which says that we should never ask for a word's meaning in isolation. The meaning of a word has to be thought of as the logical role it plays in the sentence as a whole. We could thus say that when the whole sentence lacks sense it becomes impossible to determine the sense of a single word in it. And by the same token; if its parts are senseless-the whole sentence (context) cannot possibly be meaningful. This principle is in compliance with Wittgenstein's claim that there are not logically different kinds of nonsense. If a phrase lacks meaning this is because at least one of its parts has not been given any meaning. One remark goes like this: "Most of us think that there is nonsense which makes sense and nonsense which does not-that it is nonsense in a different way to say "This is green and yellow at the same time" from saying "Ab sur ah." But these are nonsense in the same sense, the only difference being in the jingle of the words." (Wittgenstein 1979, 64)

Diamond and Conant have elaborated on a distinction between substantive and austere notions of nonsense which is useful on this score (See Conant 2000, Diamond 1991, 1996). They both argue that Wittgenstein rejects a so-called substantial view of nonsense according to which it is possible to differentiate between substantial nonsense, caused by the words being illegitimately put together, and sheer nonsense, for example the utterance "ab sur ah". An advocate of the substantial view holds that we have substantial nonsense resulting from a clash between logical categories expressed in the utterance. The nonsensicality notwithstanding, the utterance is still thought of as capable of *symbolizing*, that is, the substantial nonsense utterance doesn't fail to reveal the logical category of its signs. (Conant 2000, 190-91) Plain nonsense is, on the other hand, considered totally deprived of such a symbolizing. The signs remain therefore mere sounds to the listener. But as we have seen, the intelligibility of this kind of differentiation is exactly what Wittgenstein denies. Nonsense is to be seen as something resulting from the fact that no meaning has been given to the signs. Or put more generally: a sentence is nonsensical to a person if it fails to symbolize. This is part of what's meant with the austere view. On this view we don't get nonsense from putting

together words of such and such categories. Taking the notion of substantial nonsense into closer consideration, one can see it as resting on the possibility of grasping an illogical thought. One incoherently believes that the categories of the sentence illegitimately combined contrive to say something-"something which the natural [substantive] view regards as an impossibility and which he denies is really sayable at all". (Diamond 1996, 104)

On the background of the distinction between the substantive and austere conception of meaning we might say that the intelligibility of describing secondary uses of words in terms of concepts being illegitimately combined rests on the possibility of a senseless sense. But as Wittgenstein argues, "when a sentence is called senseless it is not as it were its sense that is senseless." (Wittgenstein 1967, §500) So what I'm arguing is that Wittgenstein's rejection of substantial nonsense sort of support interpreting secondary uses of language as cases in which a person *means* nothing by her words.[3] The lack of meaning here has to be seen as resulting from the fact that such utterances fail to symbolize. However, this failure of symbolizing is an external feature of the meaningless expression, a thought in fully compliance with his suggestion to pay attention to how words are actually being used.[4]

My point so far can be put this way: Instead of arguing that some meanings are really put into play, that is, that an absurd thought is somehow expressed when using word in a secondary mode, what the paragraphs suggest is, in my view, that secondary uses should be contrasted with cases in which new or unusual *forms of representation* are taken into use, which also includes metaphorical expressions. One way to differentiate between metaphors and secondary uses is thus to say that metaphors succeed in saying something, i.e., a logical role is assigned to the word making up whole expression (which of course doesn't mean that some metaphorical meaning thus expressed can be paraphrased. I defer from taking a stance on this issue here.). Using words in a secondary sense, on the other hand, there is strictly speaking nothing that our words stand for. A person's adherence to the allegedly familiar meaning of a given word in such a situation should therefore be taken as an admission of her bringing nonsense into play and not a clarification of a particular meaning thought of as playing a contributing role with regard to the meaningfulness of the linguistic sequence as a whole.[5]

Given that we actually fail to say anything when using words in a secondary mode, what kind of understanding can be said to be accomplished in these situations? Besides, on the assumption that secondary uses are devoid of meaning, how come that we still find ourselves relating to something by such utterances? On my reading, a secondary use reveals a particular relation to language-it doesn't let the listener recognize the logical role of the components of the utterance. It might be argued that meeting each

other in language this way should be seen as coming to absorb one another's verbal gestures. According to Wittgenstein, a gesture is not necessarily something instinctive or inherent. It is rather something instilled *and* assimilated. (Wittgenstein 1982, §712) He also likens word and expressions to pictures. All this suggests a closeness to language-a sort of intimacy making us sensitive to the physiognomy of the words. Upon reflecting on what kind of communication secondary uses make possible, one very soon comes to see how fragile this kind of communication really is.

Diamond's discussion of what it is to understand nonsense is very inspiring in this respect. Starting with what it is to understand people uttering sense, she claims that what is typical of such situations is the capacity to render what has been said in one's own words. In brief, one can take it as a fusion of two or more languages. This kind of access to the other's language is not possible when a person is talking nonsense. In such cases the spoken words have as it were no inside. However, if one really wants to understand the person speaking nonsense, one cannot remain outside either. What Diamond suggests is that understanding nonsense is to be seen as an imaginative effort to take nonsense as sense. Remaining outside one only sees the person's inclination to come up with particular words with which she might associate certain feelings, etc. By imaginatively taking the other's nonsense for sense one creates a quasi-fusion of yours and the other person's language, one imaginatively contrive to get *inside*. This is possible by being receptive to the other's inclinations and attraction to particular words. Diamond bluntly admits that this is a very particular use of imagination. In fact, I would say that there is something paradoxical about this kind of understanding. The person trying to understand actually, as she says, "wants to be speaking a language in which the sentence that the other person utters have been given sense, because he wants to mean them himself; yet he also wants to remain in the language in which no meaning has been given to those sentences." (Diamond 1991, 158)

Diamond's reading might also throw some light on the problem of how we manage to relate to something at all when using words in a secondary mode. Although we normally don't attribute any importance to mental accompaniments as to the meaning of a word, such associations and feelings might be responsible for our attraction to nonsensical constructions. Put differently: such accompaniments might often be the reason for our thinking that we actually mean something by such uses. On the other hand we might also say that they are responsible for our taking other people as meaning something by their nonsense utterances. Such accompaniments give us the illusion that a particular nonsense utterance has been given a particular illocutionary force, that is to say, that we come to recognize a particular direction of the utterance. In so doing we manage for example to take something nonsensical as a question or a claim.[6]

By not seeing that the secondary meaning is no meaning after all, not even a primary meaning used in a new way¾one misses seeing the distinctiveness of such utterances compared to, for example, the use of metaphors or creative projections of words reflecting an *individual* stance on some matter. As I have been arguing, the prevailing way of making a distinction between metaphors and secondary uses doesn't work very well. In my view, one should either accept secondary uses as a kind of metaphorical use (whereby the phenomenon would loose some of its attraction) or one should find a way of differentiating them which doesn't relies on the category of paraphrase. I argued on my part that one should consider secondary uses linguistically meaningless without thereby relying on any notion of conceptual clash. One way to do that is to regard the meaningfulness expressed by secondary uses as akin to the expressiveness of a gesture or picture. Construed thus, the distinction between primary and secondary uses of words intimates a dimension of expressive use of language that should be more elaborated on.

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Endnote

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1 At face value this position might be reminiscent of Donald Davidson's dismissal of any metaphorical meaning. A metaphor expresses in his view just a patent falsehood or absurd truth. However, what I'm getting at is that a secondary use actually says nothing. There are only imitations of claims and thoughts. Talking about patent falsehood doesn't apply to such cases. The denial of any metaphorical meaning, however, is somewhat concurrent with my construal of the phenomenon saying that no secondary content is expressed when using a word in a secondary mode, not even one that is not susceptible to interpretation and paraphrase.
2 M. Black's talk about the interaction of different systems of associated commonplaces in the act of interpreting a metaphor should be well-known to many. P. Ricoeur-commenting on modern theories of metaphor-discusses the replacement of the classical theory of substitution by a modern theory -advanced by people like I. Richards, M. Beradsly, M. Black. Those theories focus on the interaction between semantic fields. He himself seems to endorse a modified version of the interactional view.(Ricoeur 1981).
3 Glock holds that "e", taken from the utterance "e is yellow", is obviously not yellow in the sense in which flowers are. The expression "e" is in other words thought of as having the same logical role as for example in "e is not difficult to pronounce". Moreover, by putting together two clashing meanings a secondary meaning is being brought into play. (Glock 1996, 39-40)
4 Take for example the utterance "e is yellow". It is not hard to think of situations in which it would be difficult to discern any symbols in it. On the other hand, we could easily describe situations in which this word sequence would yield a clear meaning. Just suppose we were using letters as abbreviations for different kinds of objects that we wanted to arrange with regard to their colors. In such a context, in which a new form of representation is taken into use, we would for example know what its fulfillment would be like. In a sense thus, the phenomenon of using word in a secondary mode tells us something about the extent to which all speaking depends for its intelligibility on circumstances giving the meaning of a word a certain *direction*, i.e. a particular logical role.
5 Paul Johnston's reason for saying that secondary uses are nonsensical is worth noticing. He claims that such utterances are in a literal sense nonsense due to their obvious falsity. Interestingly, he doesn't draw on any conceptual clash. On the contrary, he must be holding that we actually understand such utterances. How else are we supposed to grasp their falseness? Take for example an expression like "Tuesday is fat". In order to say that this is in literal sense false, one must have succeeded in ascribing a logical role to its components, i.e. interpreted it by some means or other. (Johnston 1993, 121-22)
6 Diamond's discussion is intriguing in many ways. Although she doesn't refer explicitly to secondary uses, it seems likely that she accept such uses as examples of the phenomenon under discussion. Anyhow, her thoughts on how to construe the phenomenon of understanding nonsense provide us with a promising framework with regard to secondary uses, provided of course that one accepts such uses as completely senseless.