Word-Meaning and the Context Principle in the *Investigations*

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In the *Investigations*, Wittgenstein suggests we should, "let the use of words teach (us) their meaning" (Wittgenstein, 2002, p.187). By drawing our attention to *use*, Wittgenstein believes we will see how our linguistic practices confer meaning on words. Though this line of thought seems promising, there may yet be an issue concerning how we come to understand word-meaning. To clarify how word-meaning can derive from use, I will tie Wittgenstein's notion of meaning-as-use to Frege's context principle; in doing this, I will show how Wittgenstein attributes a broader scope to the context principle that extends beyond mere propositions. I intend to argue that Wittgenstein's meaning-as-use shows how Frege's context principle is open to circularity, while his transformation of it is not. To make this argument, it will be necessary to explain what Frege's context principle is and to show how it operates in conjunction with his other two guiding principles. This explanation will enable me to show how Wittgenstein's transformation of the context principle allows him to claim that our linguistic practices confer meaning upon words without opening himself to circularity.

Frege's first guiding principle is, "Always separate sharply the psychological from the logical, the subjective from the objective" (Frege, p.X). Frege believed arithmetic fell under the laws of logic and that the laws of logic govern all thought. Frege is not concerned with the subjective mechanics of thinking, but only with what is essential to thought in order that judgments have truth-values; judgments have truth-values regardless of whether they are ever thought by individuals (Frege, p.36-38*)*. In contrast with psychology, logic is essentially a subject matter concerned with truth. Frege's first guiding principle is aimed at showing how logic furnishes the laws of thought, which makes possible the claims of truth in any other discipline, including psychology (Frege, p.21).

Frege's second guiding principle (the context principle), enjoins us to 'look for' the meaning of a word only in the context of a proposition (Frege, p.X). While this formulation suggests the possibility that words may have meaning in isolation, Frege nonetheless holds one cannot identify or judge the meaning of a word unless it is in the context of a proposition. At this point, the importance attributed to Frege's context principle is that it helps one avoid violating his first guiding principle. Frege holds that if one takes a word in isolation, one may be tempted to take the meaning of that word to be some idea ('*Vorstellung*') one associates with it. Later in the *Grundlagen*, Frege gives a much stronger formulation of the context principle when he states words do not have a meaning when taken in isolation (Frege, p.71). So, it is not that words have a meaning outside the context of a proposition, but rather, the proposition confers meaning on words. Why is a proposition essential to word-meaning? Why is it inessential that we have intuitions associated with words?

When one takes a proper name in isolation (e.g., 'Tolstoy'), it states nothing; it has no truth-value. Likewise, predicates (e.g., 'wrote *War and Peace*) have no truth-value by themselves. In combination, however, a name and predicate express a proposition that necessarily has a truth-value (e.g., 'Tolstoy wrote *War and Peace*). The meaning of the components goes back to the contribution they make to the truth-value of the proposition as a whole.

So, the name 'Tolstoy' gains its meaning from the fact that it occurs in a proposition with a truth-value (i.e., the proposition has a sense); whatever subjective impressions I have of Tolstoy are irrelevant to the meaning of 'Tolstoy;' and, 'Tolstoy' cannot be placed together with just any words to produce a proposition. For example, 'Tolstoy Gottlob Frege' does not express anything. Rather, a name must be coupled with a predicate in order to produce a proposition. Why is this the case? Is Frege only drawing on our grammatical knowledge of natural language in assessing what is requisite for a proposition with a sense?

The grammatical categories of names and predicates correspond to features of propositions that make a systematic contribution to the truth-value of a proposition. These features are then logical categories that divide the essential logical components of a proposition. Names correspond to the logical category of 'object,' predicates to 'concept;' the meaning of a name is the object to which it refers, the meaning of a predicate the concept it picks out. The crucial point, however, is that 'reference' in both cases is derivative from the sense of the proposition (Dummett, p.5). The reference of 'Tolstoy' to Tolstoy stems from the sign making a contribution to the sense of a proposition; this contribution shows the meaning of 'Tolstoy.' If 'Tolstoy' did not do that, it would be logically inert, meaningless. The name 'Tolstoy' contributes to the meaning of a proposition by picking out an object; the predicate names a concept and thus contributes to the proposition by picking out a property to be asserted of that object. The object-concept coupling yields a full proposition; this calls us to Frege's third guiding principle: "Always distinguish between concept and object" (Frege, p.X). In some sense, this principle is an outgrowth of the second because it tells us what, within the context of a proposition, is essential to its having a truth-value. On my interpretation, Frege's three guiding principles work in concert to protect the logical values of propositions.

Frege builds word-meaning out of a linguistic calculus that focuses on the truth-value of propositions, and this shows how truth-values derive from a proposition's component parts. Wittgenstein takes issue with this view of meaning because the components of propositions are words, and if words are to be used correctly, we must have some knowledge of their meaning if we are to use them correctly. Frege hints at how this could be a plausible conception of meaning when he claims, "the definition of an object does not really assert anything about the object, but only lays down the meaning of a symbol" (Frege, p.78). Since words operate as symbols of objects for Frege, it seems we could grasp the meaning of words by simply looking at their definitions. This calls our attention to Frege's problem of circularity: the meanings of words are just more words that stand in for them (Wittgenstein, 2002, p.12). Frege distinguishes between sense and meaning, but it not possible for us to grasp the sense of a proposition without first knowing the meaning of its constituent words. For Frege, grasping the sense of a proposition is something we ought not to question because it is a psychological matter; this is problematic because it suggests that the logic of grammar itself provides us with word-meaning. For Frege, grasping the sense of a proposition is supposed to lead us to the meaning of that proposition; but we cannot grasp the

sense of a proposition without first knowing how to use words in a meaningful way. Wittgenstein grounds our meaning in use because he realizes no proposition can be understood without some mastery of language. Baker and Hacker claim Wittgenstein turned from Frege's conception of meaning because the various uses a proposition may have cannot be depicted as a mere function of the meanings of its component parts and structure (Baker and Hacker, p.281). To understand the truth-value of a proposition requires that we first know how to use words.

Wittgenstein's focus on use challenges Frege's formulation of the context principle that insists the meaning of a word is tied to the sense of a proposition. For Wittgenstein, "the meaning of a word is its use in language" (Wittgenstein, 2002, p.18). Wittgenstein calls us to "*look and see*" (Wittgenstein, 2002, p.27) how words are used. When we think of actual cases in which we use words, the problem of their meaning disappears; we then can see how words operate in the context of propositions that in turn only operate in a larger linguistic context. Frege's theory of meaning makes it seem as though propositions are intelligible in isolation from the rest of language, but Wittgenstein argues, "There is no such thing as an isolated proposition. For what I call a 'proposition' is a position in the game of language" (Wittgenstein, 1995, p.5) The meaning of a proposition is not to be thought of as something independent of the rest of language; rather, propositions can only be understood in the context of linguistic practices. Our linguistic practices show how we use words, and word-use is directed by the rules of language. Though rules help us understand how to use words, words do not have a fixed meaning or application; words maintain 'family resemblances.' The notion of family resemblances make clear that our application of a word 'resembles' other ways in which we use that word (Wittgenstein, 2002, p.27). Since linguistic practices operate according to the rules of certain linguistic contexts guiding us toward the meaning of words, Wittgenstein describes our use of language in terms of language-games. What are language-games? What do language-games show us about our linguistic practices?

Wittgenstein's use of 'language-game' is not his attempt to offer a systematic account of language, as Frege had done. Rather, Wittgenstein uses language-games to look more carefully at what we do in our linguistic practices while drawing our attention to the limitations of systematic analyses (Stern, p.21). Language-games illuminate the similarities between language and games by calling our attention to the role that rules play in these practices. Though language-games function as heuristic tools, they should not be considered only in this way; 'language-game' employs the use of language itself. Language-games are practices of language, and they exemplify our use of language in certain contexts. By comparing language with games, Wittgenstein underscores the importance of rule-following. How do rules function in language-games, and what impact do they have on word-meaning?

Wittgenstein claims, "A rule stands there like a sign-post" (Wittgenstein, 2002, p.34) This claim draws our attention to signs, which help us understand the role that rules play in word-meaning. When dealing with a sign, we need not interpret the rules of that sign in order to obey it; rather, "Obeying a rule is a practice" (Wittgenstein, 2002, p.69). Following a rule is not a matter of guessing at the intended meaning of a sign; rather, our use of a sign that is in accordance with a certain rule involves explicitly formulating the rule one is following (Wittgenstein, 2002, p.69). For example, when one points a finger, it operates

as a sign showing others to look at whatever it may be pointing and not at the finger itself. This elucidates how rule-following operates without inciting widespread ambiguity of a sign's meaning. This is not to say ambiguity never arises; if it does, one must raise questions and provide explanations, but there is no need to explain ambiguity that may arise unless some ambiguity actually does arise (Stern, p.125). Wittgenstein claims: "One may say: an explanation serves to remove or to avert a misunderstanding – one, that is, that would occur but for the explanation; not every one that I can imagine. The sign-post is in order – if, under normal circumstances, it fulfills its purpose" (Wittgenstein, 2002, p.35). The importance that I am attributing to signs is that their meaning is unambiguous because of the role of rule; this point can be made by looking at the role rule play in games.

When rules of a game are taught, one learns a practice that assures obedience to those rules. These practices do not need further explanation because rules guide the moves we make. By following the rules of our language, we can unreflectively understand new propositions and use words without having to raise questions about how we understand their meaning. Wittgenstein argues we show that we understand the meaning of words if we can use them in meaningful ways; issues concerning word-meaning do not arise in our linguistic practices because rules govern how we use words in context. The contexts of our linguistic practices in which our words have meaning are language-games. Whether a word is in accord with or conflicts with the rules of a language-game stems from the more fundamental concept of obeying a rule. If a word is to have a meaning, it must be used in agreement with the rules of a language-game. I take rule-following to be central to the question of word-meaning for Wittgenstein because rules determine what count as valid moves in language-games. Thus, the context of language-games is that which confers meaning upon our various uses of words for Wittgenstein. It is clear Wittgenstein extends the scope of Frege's context principle to consider our use of words in language-games rather than focusing on the logical role words play in individual propositions. This draws our attention to how linguistic practices are similar to games, which underscore the importance attributed to rule-following and the way in which word-meaning is tied to use. Wittgenstein's transformation of the context principle does not open him to Frege's problem of circularity. Frege sought to ground the meaning of words in the logic of our grammar, but Wittgenstein focuses on our use of language. The move from propositions to use enables Wittgenstein to highlight the conventionality of how our words gain meaning. Since Wittgenstein ties word-meaning to our conventional practices, he avoids Frege's problem about how it is that we can grasp the sense of a proposition without first knowing the meaning and use of its constituent parts (words).

Frege's three guiding principles offer an account of word-meaning that stands open to the objection of circularity. I have argued Wittgenstein's meaning-as-use can best be understood as a transformation of Frege's context principle. By focusing on use, Wittgenstein shows that words have meaning because our use of them follows from the rules of particular language-games. Frege sought to establish the context principle to protect the truth-values of propositions and their components parts from the psychological. Frege's focus on the internal logical relations between the words of a proposition to fix their meaning led him into problems of circularity. Wittgenstein,

however, extended the scope of Frege's context principle to underscore the importance that rule-following plays in our linguistic practices, and to situate the meaning of words and propositions within the larger framework of language; "A proposition is a sign in a system of signs. To understand a proposition is to understand a language" (Wittgenstein, 1995, p.131). We understand propositions when we understand the role that words play in a language-game. To formulate propositions, we need to understand the meaning of our words, and we need to know how to use them. Thus, Wittgenstein looks not to propositions for the meaning of words as Frege had, but he focuses on use.

Literature

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