

Language Change and Imagination

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63. If we imagine the facts otherwise than as they are, certain language-games lose some of their importance, while others become important. And in this way there is an alteration – a gradual one – in the use of the vocabulary of a language.
(OC §63)

This remark from Wittgenstein's *On Certainty* shall be the starting point for some considerations on what at a first glance seems to be a converse intention: change in language and its relation to imagination.

§§ 61-65 of *On Certainty* present a compact account of Wittgenstein's concept of meaning in respect of alteration of language use: A meaning of a word (there may be several ones) is defined as "a kind of employment of it". It is tightly linked to the initial process of learning to employ a word (within a language game), when "the word is [first] incorporated into our language" (OC § 61). The conception of language learning to be primarily adopting language behaviour supports the "correspondence between the concepts 'rule' and 'meaning'" stated in §62.

From this point of view on language, which is backed in a social framework and the conceptual affinity of meaning and rule, alteration is defined as a gradual one; happening bit for bit ("allmählich") in a process of change that is just observable in the long run. One could even find an ironic undertone in the comparison of "the meaning of a word with the 'function' of an official" (OC § 64): if there is change at all, it is slow.

On Certainty focuses on what is characterized as "world-picture", the "river-bed of thoughts" to take up Wittgenstein's metaphor (OC § 97) as opposed to more fluid and changeable sentences (though he concedes there is no sharp division). Therefore alteration of meaning is conceptualized on a broad social and diachronic scope. Change in respect to those sentences that make up a world-picture rather becomes apparent retrospectively as a *fait accompli* than as a current social process.

Staying within the analogy of the 'stream' and 'river bed of thoughts', as opposed to Wittgenstein I want to accentuate the aspect of 'fluidity'. That is not confined to empirical statements as the more fluid sentences guided by logics in accordance to a world-picture. But it does as well imply the possibility of established common beliefs and meanings to "change back into a state of flux" (OC § 97).

Within this short section of *On Certainty* alteration of meaning is described in a double manner. On one hand in a kind of referential way: Meaning is understood in relation to multiple language games, alteration as a shift in importance among these (cf. OC §63). On the other hand in §65 the possibility of language games themselves to change is stated, which consequently results in an alteration of concepts and meanings. This leaves open as well the possibility of a new language game to be established.

Hence there is a dynamics of meaning, which appears from two different perspectives: firstly, from the point of learning a set of language games and practices which are common to a language community in order to be able

to interact through them. This includes learning to assert common evidence and avoid questioning what cannot be rationally doubted among people sharing a similar world-picture. From this point of view alteration of meaning mainly appears on a broad scale as a shift in the relevance commonly attached to different language games. This is the more important argumentation line concerning the question of certainty.

Secondly, beyond this characteristic there is the capability to change language games or establish new ones and alter meanings within them. That now does not refer to the point of view of a language learner, of someone who first needs to become able to act within a language, but of language users adapting familiar language games within actually practising them.

Although the process of meaning change in this case is a social one too, it does not necessitate a broad scale assertion as the transformation of 'hardening' sentences into common evidence or certain ones does. Alteration in this sense appears on a more local than global scope as a new use of vocabulary within a specific context by a partial group of speakers. It does not obligatory have to be gradually. Possibly even a spontaneous character could be ascribed to it.

But what is meant by something as a 'new language game'? The progression from a constructed 'language game' with a limited set of expressions to another more complex one (cf. PI §1-8)? The term is not really helpful to confine a new entity within the 'manifold' of language games. It does just point out a novel practice: a change in the use of language, which can't be fully justified by previous conventions of meaning.

To come back to the quotation from *On Certainty* I started with, there is a remarkable linguistic peculiarity:

"If we imagine the facts otherwise than they are [...]" (OC §63).

Is this more than a figure of speech? Imagination does not appear as a central term to Wittgenstein's line of argumentation, although it is used as a tool within his reasoning in the form of thought experiments. If imagination is discussed explicitly it often appears as a source of wrong conclusions.

Nevertheless the thought experiment on the impossibility of a private language gives an important clue on the relation of language (as essentially social) and imagination. It demonstrates the failure of knowledge claims based on what is considered a 'private sensation', as those cannot be communicated as such, but actually have to be spoken upon by expressions whose meaning is determined socially. But at the same time in the discussion of pain and its expression or substitution within language ("the verbal expression of pain replaces crying and does not describe it" PI §244), imagination is assigned a role which is in a way complementary to the abstraction performed within linguistic meaning being primarily constrained by its use in language games.

Abstraction here refers to the ability to employ concepts independently from the concrete context in which they were acquired or any phenomenal experience associated with them. As well as we are capable to use the concept of an apple, without necessarily thinking of it as red or yellow ..., or to make up a concept of pain that is independent from a peculiar sensation and applicable to different pain behaviour, there is still room and actual use for the ability to picture an apple as red and to imagine, how it feels to be in pain. In regard to language both abilities play an important role in understanding and acting. A key passage in Wittgenstein in respect of this aspect is:

"If one has to imagine someone else's pain on the model of one's own, this is none too easy a thing to do: for I have to imagine pain which I do not feel on the model of the pain which I do feel." (PI §302)

Wittgenstein lays clear the problematic of knowledge claims relying on imagination. But still imagination takes a certain roll within language practice. In regard to questions of epistemology or meaning it seems to be a rather confusing one.

But may imagination support us in a case when apparently no acquired rules of language games fit someone other's utterance? Is it involved into alteration within language by providing the ability to act within an emerging language game, whose rules are (even implicitly) yet unknown?

In this sense, is imagination linked to 'fluidity' within the river analogy? Can it be thought of as means to bring the hardened sentences of the river-bed into flux again (cf. OC §97)?

Wittgenstein's views discussed so far mainly focused on language and it's relation to epistemological questions. Now I want to have a closer look on the topic of alteration of meaning in another field: the use of language in (poetic) metaphors.

In *What Metaphors mean* (Davidson 1981) Donald Davidson gave an account of metaphor, that later was took up by Richard Rorty, who explicitly linked it with the use of metaphor in poetry and its interpretation (cf. Rorty 1991). Davidson rejects the idea of a specific metaphorical meaning or a genuine cognitive content conveyed by metaphors.

"We must give up the idea that a metaphor carries a message, that it has a content or meaning (except, of course, its literal meaning). The various theories we have been considering mistake their goal. Where they think they provide a method for deciphering an encoded content, they actually tell us (or try to tell us) something about the effects metaphors have on us." (Davidson 1981, p. 216)

While this way no 'metaphorical' meaning is assumed, metaphors can be thought to evoke some peculiar strategies in attempt to cope with them, which are actually grasped by the different theoretical approaches to metaphor. Hence metaphor and 'metaphorical' use of language are linked to specific practices of language use and understanding. Davidson's concept of metaphor and his negation of 'metaphorical' meaning show similarities to Wittgenstein's account in *Philosophical Investigations*.

Wittgenstein as well denies 'metaphorical' meaning (and avoids the question of truth conditions arising from this assumption). At the same time he makes a distinction between 'primary' and 'secondary' meaning.

"Here one might speak of a 'primary' and 'secondary' sense of a word. It is only if the word has the primary sense for you that you use it in the secondary one.[...]

The secondary sense is not a 'metaphorical' sense. If I say "For me the vowel e is yellow" I do not mean: 'yellow' in a metaphorical sense, – for I could not express what I want to say in any other way than by means of the idea 'yellow'." (PI, p. 184e)

While in this example to know the 'primary' sense (which is more common) is necessary to make use of a 'secondary' one (you would not explain 'yellow' by referring to 'the colour of the vowel e'), 'secondary' meaning within the specific situation of its use can't be reduced to the former. The impossibility to be paraphrased makes a characteristic of metaphor in Wittgenstein's and Davidson's conception. This is not due to a particular 'metaphorical' meaning, but the actual use which differs from its more common employment constitutes that 'secondary' meaning in this specific case. Metaphors thus mark the tangential point of customary language use and the development of new practices of language employment, limited to specific situations and small speaker groups.

In Wittgenstein's example of assigning the words 'fat' and 'lean' to Mondays and Tuesdays (cf. PI, p. 184e) the choice of the words and which to attribute to which day of week seems arbitrarily. Its actual use in this way is not justified by any more than deliberation:

"Now have "fat" and "lean" some different meaning here from their usual one? – They have a different use. – So ought I really to have used different words? Certainly not that. – I want to use *these* words (with their familiar meanings) *here*." (PI, p. 184e)

The words "fat" and "lean" themselves may just be explained by their usual employment. Nevertheless this does not clear up how they are employed here and why in this manner. Obviously there is no way to deduct it from their use in more common language games.

But indeed there is some hint by Wittgenstein, an assumption, which is rather futile in the search for a definite meaning, but enough to keep up interaction: "Now, I say nothing about the causes of this phenomenon. They *might* be associations from my childhood. But that is a hypothesis." (PI, p.184e)

Here the role of imagination sets in. While imagination turns out to be tricky and misleading on the ideas of knowledge and private sensations, it can prove important as means to cope with such an unfamiliar language use. Maybe it even enables us to encounter or create a new language game within interaction (as for this it takes at least two persons not only one).

When facing an uncommon utterance in conversation there actually is the possibility of asking for an explanation, a paraphrase (even if that way what is exactly grasped by describing the vowel e as 'yellow' may be lost). This resort is not available regarding metaphors in written language, especially in poetry.

To classify an utterance as 'metaphorical' is a strategy to cope with an expression that is beyond customary language use and irritating to assert as a literal truth, but not yet considered senseless. Instead it is assigned to a specific situation of employment, having a 'secondary' meaning on a local scope. In this case imagination, associations and the construction of analogies are allowed to be more actively involved in the attempt of understanding

apart from checking the conformity to some well-known language games.

Davidson suggests theories of metaphors and metaphorical meaning to actually relate to the effects that metaphors have on us. In this sense one could understand theoretical accounts of metaphor as describing the practice of dealing with those utterances.

An interesting approach on metaphorical expression, especially as it is not constrained to language but takes into account metaphors in different branches of art, has been proposed by Nelson Goodman.

To give a very brief account, Goodman (cf. 1976, p. 45-95) opposes denotation with his concept of exemplification or expression. The example he uses are colour patches (also referred to by Wittgenstein). Colour patches materially *exemplify* a property (as 'being red', 'being yellow' ...). Exemplification is matched by a denotative sentence as its counterpart. ('The colour patch is red. It exemplifies redness.') By analogy expression (as "expressing sadness") is matched by a denotation, which can be called metaphorical because we would hesitate to call it literally true ('This picture is sad. The picture expresses sadness.')

The interesting point about this conception (most evidently in the case of Goodman's example of a painting) is that it hands over the task of denotation, to determine a meaning, to the observer. So it does well fit a conception

of metaphor as an artistic, poetic or linguistic practice that leads into a creative process of interpretation, where by means of imagination explanations are developed and an 'unfamiliar noise' may not only be imitated as a practice as Richard Rorty said (cf. Rorty 1991, p. 170); But within social interaction it may become part of new language game evolving, bringing along with a different use a change of meaning.

Literature

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