

Our 'Form of Life' Revealed in the Action of Language

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The form of life is a concept that although it is usually taken as a fundament to understand the different language games, it is also *experiential*. It is a means of action in our language. This concept cannot be understood without our language, which at the same time reveals our whole world within. There is a strong relationship between our world, our language and languages; and our form of life.

The only form of life that we all share is that of mankind, but on the other side, our different languages reveal that there are diversities within this general form of life. This is how the notion of form of life and our understanding of language can be seen as action, because these change constantly, as do societies and cultures. It is already difficult to understand each other even if we share mankind, it is difficult to agree on something when there are idiomatic misunderstandings, it is difficult to learn other languages and to use them correctly, following the corresponding grammatical rules besides its everyday uses. Then, how can we really expect to 'create' an entire human symbolic language that can be sent to the outer space for extraterrestrials to find it and understand us as mankind? This can be thought to be possible, but, although we humans share one form of life, there are also many other particular forms of life within this general one, in which our different and collective worlds are shown. These are revealed through the way we use our languages.

In order to connect the notion of form of life to action, let us first think of Wittgenstein's idea of language after the *Tractatus*. He points out that our everyday language is not an exclusive or excluded entity. It is dynamic, it is in itself movement. As a creation of humans and while being used for communication, language and its practice changes, and *has* to change along the 'rules of the game', the lives and the histories of human beings. Then, as a result and *evidence* of cultures and movable societies, language is essentially in a continuous movement.

This is why there is a strong correspondence of language to the social activities and our processes of communication and understanding. For a more precise clarification of the connection between the activity of language and form of life, we can refer to the *Investigations* §23:

But how many kinds of sentence are there? Say assertion, question, and command? –There are *countless* kinds: countless different kinds of use of what we call "symbols", "words", "sentences". And this multiplicity is not something fixed, given once for all; but new types of language, new language-games, as we may say, come into existence, and others become obsolete and get forgotten. [...] Here the term "language-game" is meant to bring into prominence the fact that the *speaking* of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life.

The connection Wittgenstein makes between language in its spoken form, the activity of it, form of life, and language games is important. The way in which both 'game' and 'speaking' are italicized gives us a hint at the active nature of language games and language. When we speak a language, we are giving life to it. Language becomes an activity as we speak. This activity of speaking a language shows a form of life through our linguistic behaviour. How-

ever on a different level, our particular culture is also evidenced.

Nevertheless, the notion of form of life is broader than that of language games. Although language and form of life are strongly related, I agree with Glock that "Wittgenstein never identified the notion of language game with that of a form of life." (Glock 1996) It is hence more precise to say that: "Language games are 'part of', embedded in, a form of life (*PI* §§23-5)." Language games are elements of a form of life and constitute the totality of our form of life. Since language games have to do with the fact that speaking or writing a language is part of an activity, we can say as a consequence that this activity is part of a form of life. Moreover, we could say that the active characteristic of language games is to be conceived in any possible combination which forms the reality or the totality of a form of life.

Form of life is then a notion which inevitably interweaves references to culture, world view and language. This correlation can show how it is that language can be understood as a constant motion, in the same way as cultures. The way a form of life can be related to cultural relativity is understood from a perspective of representation. This means that we can only criticize the way a language game is *played* from the outside as a mode of *perception* which can only be cultural, and is not based on a universal rationality. This does not mean though, that the language game analogy should be reduced to cultural relativism.

Among humans, we have the possibility to understand anything we say to each other because we all share at least one form of life: that of being *humans*. But among this form of life, there is also the fact that some groups of human beings have forms of life that are totally different from those of other groups of people. What happens here? Wittgenstein asks how we can really understand each other, when we for example go to another country, where the traditions are completely different from ours. "Suppose you came as an explorer into an unknown country with a language quite strange to you. In what circumstances would you say that the people there gave orders, understood them, obeyed them, rebelled against them, and so on?" (*PI*, 206) Supposing we know the language, we could still not understand the people, because we do not know what is the *sense* behind the words they utter, this is, what kind of form of life, what language games and what rules are guiding the sentences and the structure of their language as they talk amongst themselves and to us.

However, language as well as language games does not only have a spoken/written way of being embedded in a form of life. As we can see within the different cultures and how *behaviour* is indubitably attached to it, the relation between these three notions can also be found in a non linguistic form. *Behaviour*, as another sort of language game as well as a type of activity, is evidence itself of specific forms of life. Furthermore, because of the inseparable attachment between these notions, and the way form of life is related to an essentially movable perception of societies, it is clear for Wittgenstein that if we manage to understand a form of life, this is because there was previously the possibility to understand the rules inherent in the language games, the behaviour and the practices that are

part of them and which are *used* on a daily basis. This is, since language games are embedded in a form of life, it is then possible to say that if we understand the form of life, we had already known how to play the game and that we know the rules of it.

Besides all the types of sentences and expressions we can think of, Wittgenstein also thinks of the *possibility of languages* that only consists of for example orders and reports, or another language that consist only of questions and answers. This comes with the reflection that: "[...] And to imagine a language means (*heißt*) to imagine a form of life." (*PI*, 19) This way language is not a totally mental calculus of *only* intellectual processes. As a form of life it is a natural activity: Wittgenstein likes to compare it with natural activities we do, like drinking or walking (*PI*, 25) and, as such, it is also a part of a process which alludes to constant movement and changes, not to a static notion.

At this point let us, as an example, imagine that I as a Mexican learn Hindi language before I am going to India. I have never heard that language or seen it written before. I have no connection to the country or to the culture or to any of their language rules. All that is related to this country and the forms of life of the people is completely unfamiliar to me (I might have seen pictures or a movie sometime in my life, but the knowledge it gives to me is minimum). After some time learning Hindi, I go to New Delhi and live there for nine months. After only perhaps the second month I start to *use* the language on a daily basis, because all I knew previously was grammatical rules and theory which has not really been practiced. Can I by this moment start to *play* the variety of language games with the people? Not necessarily. Knowing the language does not really give me enough grounding to know the rules of the game or to be able to play the same language games as them. Moreover, this is not yet giving me the possibility of sharing their form of life in any manner. Even if I lived there for years, learnt the language perfectly and started to play their language games with them, it would take a long time until I would start sharing their form of life. Even more, it only depends on my intention to get to share their form of life *at all*. One could ask concerning this example: to what extent did I master the technique of the use of language? To what extent do we presuppose a specific form of life in our inter cultural experiences, and to what extent do we show that in our language?

Can we say that the same way there are uncountable possibilities of language games; there are also different possibilities of existence of forms of life? We have to make clear this differentiation. On the one hand there is the more general form of life: that one related to being human, that one which does not let us understand the lion if he would be able to speak. On the other hand, as we can see with the example of the cross cultural experience, we could say that every new language we learn gives us a *possibility* of understanding a new form of life, with the uncountable language games and the cultural aspect embedded in it. And even more, the knowledge of each language opens also possibilities of understanding particular forms of life within that one language. But this possibility

does not assure that we can approach a form of life every time. There is form of life evidenced also in the activities of particular language games: the use of words within one same language, accents, slang, dialects, regionalisms, invented languages in a particular community and the mixture of two or more languages joined by political frontiers only to mention some cases.

Furthermore, in this example and in the variety of possible language games embedded in the cultural perspective, we can see forms of life in activity. The fact that words are used, reused and misused as they change regions, countries, and also how this happens with languages through time, gives us one more time the sense of language and form of life as action. Sharing a language does not mean that we can *really* communicate with each other, but at the end of the day we share a cultural background and behaviour and in most of the cases, in Wittgenstein's terms, the same *training*. This sharing of training is also related to how we are expected to follow the rules of the game. So as we share the language, culture, background, opinions, training, etc, we could as a consequence, share a form of life. And in this *sharing* we *act* as groups, societies, cultures, as speaking and communicative beings.

As a conclusion, Wittgenstein points out that beyond the notion of sharing a form of life vis-à-vis sharing culture, language and background, we as individuals shall be aware of what has been given to us in a non expected way, or in other words: "What has to be accepted, the given, is – so one could say – *forms of life*." (*PI*, p. 226) It has to be accepted because it might be the only thing we have not chosen in our lives. Let's think now about someone who moves from place to place constantly, that he or she knows many languages and lives in an intercultural experience most of his or her life (for example the daughter or son of a diplomat). This constant activity is evidently embedded in her or his form of life and reflected in the language. But the form of life in which we were born and raised has specific characteristics and always remains with us, no matter where we go, or who we relate to.

To corroborate, language and the use of our particular languages permeates all of our life. It is shown as evidence, in everything we *do*, every movement of our body, every expression of our hands, every look in our eyes; that is how the form of life is manifested in –and through language; it is unavoidable. And it is also historically evident: genes, manners, vocabulary used in the family, tradition, religion, ideologies, all of our life is *formed* and *conformed* by language.

Literature

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