Life and Death of Signs and Pictures: Wittgenstein on Living Pictures and Forms of Life

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Even after his renouncement to the Tractarian picture-theory of propositions, Wittgenstein kept on assuming the similarity of words and pictures. I will support this idea by stressing how both words and pictures, in Wittgenstein's later philosophy, need to interact with their surroundings in order to stay alive. I will regard this common condition as a key to the unity of words and pictures in Wittgenstein's philosophy after the 30's.

1. Wittgenstein's picture-theory of language: before and after the 30's

That there should be a connection between language and pictures is quite obvious in the philosophy of the early Wittgenstein: for his overall account of language rests on a "picture-theory" of propositions, whose motto is that "[t]he proposition is a picture of reality./ The proposition is a model of reality as we think it is"[1]. Such a claim is doubtlessly paradoxical, since signs and pictures are usually opposed to one another as two very different varieties of symbolism. Yet, this claim has a lot of advantages, mostly because it supports an explanation of the representational capacity of language, by assuming that a proposition *mimics* the internal organization of the fact it is supposed to express:

> The essential nature of the propositional sign becomes very clear when we imagine it made up of spatial objects (such as tables, chairs, books) instead of written signs. The mutual spatial position of these things expresses the sense of the proposition[2].

In other words, the proposition is something like a "living picture", where "[o]ne name stands for one thing, and another for another sign, and they are connected together"[3].

Yet, although being quite convenient, such a pictorial account of propositional signs is not utterly satisfactory: the later Wittgenstein was therefore to reject it, mostly because of its rigidity. In his *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein observes that "[a] *picture* held us captive. And we could not get outside it, for it lay in our language"[4]. The target of this remark might be the very picture-theory of language, understood as a picture of language embedded in language itself. Such a picture of language creates a distorting effect on what propositions really are, by leading one to the false belief that all propositions are of one kind[5]. The Tractarian picture-theory of propositions thus fails to do justice to the great variety of propositional devices[6], and should therefore be left aside.

Now, does this renouncement to the picture-theory in its early formulation involve a complete withdrawal of the commitment to the pictoriality of language? My claim is that it does not. Quite the contrary: even after the 30's, Wittgenstein maintains that "[t]o say that a proposition is a picture gives prominence to certain features of the grammar of the word 'proposition' ", and that "thinking is quite comparable to the drawing of pictures"[7]. There is more: not only does Wittgenstein, after the 30's, keep on comparing propositions and pictures, but he even seems to grant pictures a priority when it comes to express meanings; to assume that propositions are all the more significant as they are more akin to pictures. In other words, Wittgenstein seems to be taking seriously this hint formulated in the *Philosophical Grammar*:

> So for the picture to tell me something it isn't essential that words should occur to me while I look at it; because the picture should be the more direct language[8].

There is, of course, something wrong with the Tractarian account of propositions: but its defect does not lie in the assumption of a connection between words and pictures. Its inadequacy rather depends on a reductive point of view, demanding that all pictures should work on the same manner. One needn't reject the overall idea of propositions as pictures in order to recover from such a dogmatic attitude. The therapy rather lies in the consideration of the diversity of possible pictures, and consequently of the diversity of possible propositions:

> The proposition as a *picture*. This is not false: but there are still-lifes, portraits, landscapes, geographic maps, diagrams, etc., etc[9].

In other words, both the early and the later Wittgenstein recognize a similarity between words and pictures. But whereas the early Wittgenstein would regard this similarity as a key to the unity of all propositions, the later Wittgenstein regards it as a key to their variety. I will now focus on one given feature that pictures and words have in common, namely their conditions of life.

2. "Every sign *by itself* seems dead. What gives it life?"

One thing that brings signs and pictures together, in Wittgenstein's later philosophy, is the fact that both live a life of their own. In the *Big Typescript*, we may read that "[m]aking pictures for ourselves is part of our lives"[10]. But there is more: pictures are not only *part* of our lives, they also *live* their own life. The same goes for verbal signs: that's why I will now emphasize the analogy between Wittgenstein's respective accounts of linguistic and pictorial *life*.

In his *Blue Book*, Wittgenstein examines Frege's suggestion that a succession of written signs has to be animated in order to compose a genuine and meaningful proposition. Deprived of such a principle of life, signs would remain desperately mute and dead:

[1] (Wittgenstein 1922), 4.01.
[2] *Id*., 3.1431.
[3] *Ibid*., 4.1311.
[4] (Wittgenstein 1953a), §215.
[5] Cf. (Wittgenstein 1967), §444.
[6] Cf. (Wittgenstein 1953a), §23.
[7] (Wittgenstein 1974), I, IX, §113.
[8] *Id*., I, IX, §114 (translation modified).
[9] (Wittgenstein 2000), Ms 120: 48 r-v.
[10] (Wittgenstein 2005), §83, p. 389v.

> Frege's idea could be expressed thus: the propositions of mathematics, if they were just complexes of dashes, would be dead and utterly uninteresting, whereas they obviously have a kind of life. And the same, of course, could be said of any proposition: Without a sense, or without the thought, a proposition would be an utterly dead and trivial thing[11].

Such a suggestion is not irrelevant in itself. Yet, it would be seriously misleading to conclude that "what must be added to the dead signs in order to make a live proposition is something immaterial"[12]: to conceive of such a principle of life as a mysterious and immaterial "soul" insufflating words their meaning. As observed by Wittgenstein in the *Philosophical Grammar*, "[t]he sense of a proposition (or a thought) isn't anything spiritual […].The sense of a proposition is not a soul"[13]. That's why, if signs are to be given a principle of life, the latter won't rest anywhere but in the system of language as a whole. Signs are not born to life until they integrate a whole system, a language:

> To understand a proposition is to understand a language.
> A proposition is a sign in a system of signs[14].

Hence Wittgenstein's conclusion, in the passage of the *Blue Book* mentioned above:

> The sign (the sentence) gets its significance from the system of signs, from the language to which it belongs[15.]

I shall take seriously those Wittgensteinian references to a life of words or propositions. As observed in the *Philosophical Investigations*, "[e]very sign *by itself* seems dead. What gives it life? – In use it is alive"[16]. Now, for a sign to be *used* is to participate in a determinate language-game. This language-game is, so to say, the natural surroundings of signs, and those surroundings are what enables them to flourish. As a result, signs can be viewed as certain kinds of organisms, demanding an interaction with their environment in order to stay alive.

This connection between linguistic and natural systems is, in fact, very strong: Wittgenstein's tenet is not only that signs are unable to live outside a system, but that the system in question has to be a *natural* one. See, for instance, what happens to so-called "artificial languages" such as Esperanto, where some signs are of course fitted into a system, but in an *artificial* rather than a natural one. Such languages are unable to match Wittgenstein's requirements, their words are unable to gain a life of their own:

> Esperanto. The feeling of disgust we get if we utter an *invented* word with invented derivative syllables. The world is cold, lacking in associations, and yet it plays at being 'language'[17].

Such are the reasons why Wittgenstein, in his *Dictations to Schlick*, compares the business of philosophy, when investigating the life of signs, to the business of a naturalist such as Goethe. The upshot of Goethe's efforts, in the realm of botany, is the presentation of a natural organism "in its natural surroundings of forms". Now, "this is exactly what we are doing [in philosophy]: we situate a linguistic form in its surroundings […], and that banishes disquiet"[18]. I will now show how the same conclusions apply to the life of pictures.

3. Living pictures and forms of life

An isolated sign, claims Wittgenstein, would lose any kind of vitality. What about an isolated picture? *Prima facie*, it might seem easier to ascribe isolated pictures a genuine meaning, for pictures convey their meaning immediately: they show it directly to the eye. In those conditions, a picture could be said to speak for itself, regardless of its context. But this is not Wittgenstein's conviction. His idea, on the contrary, is that the meaning of a picture is underdetermined by the picture as such. This point is made in the *Philosophical Investigations*, when it is observed that "[f]rom [the picture] alone it would mostly be impossible to conclude anything at all"[19]. A picture, in other words, is never autonomous: it cannot be significant outside a context. Let us, for instance, examine the picture of an old man on a mountain path. How should I know whether the old man is walking up rather than sliding downhill? "Perhaps a Martian would describe the picture so"[20]: the only reason why I *don't* describe the picture so is that I am acquainted with a cultural context, that I know what hiking is like. The interpretation of the picture does not lie in the picture itself.

Hence a parallelism between words and pictures: to hold that pictures do not speak for themselves is to assume that, no less than in the case of words, their meaning (or their life) depends on their surroundings. Wittgenstein's remarks on the life of pictures are, in this respect, strikingly similar to his remarks on the life of verbal signs. The claim that "without a sense, or without the thought, a proposition would be an utterly dead and trivial thing" is echoed by the following one:

> When one has the picture in view by itself it is suddenly dead, and it is as if something had been taken away from it, which had given it life before[21].

In the case of words, it has turned out that the relevant surroundings likely to give them life was the system of language as a whole. What about pictures? In their particular case, the natural environment they derive their significance from is what Wittgenstein describes as "forms of life". A "form of life" is in fact the broad cultural and inherited background of our beliefs and agreements: it is "[w]hat has to be accepted, the given"[22]. Now, it is precisely because it is embedded in a given form a life that a picture can make sense to those who see it. That was clearly the conclusion of the "old-man-on-the-hill" example mentioned above, and it is equally clear in the following one. When I see the picture of a radio-receiver, the picture cannot *speak* to me unless I am acquainted with a given cultural background. The picture cannot *live* to me unless I integrate it in my own form of life:

> For someone who has no knowledge of such things a diagram representing the inside of a radio receiver will be a jumble of meaningless lines. But if he is acquainted with the apparatus and its function, that drawing will be a significant picture to him[23].

[11] (Wittgenstein1953), p. 4.
[12] *Id*.
[13] (Wittgenstein 1974), I, VI, §84.
[14] *Id*.
[15] (Wittgenstein 1953), p. 5.
[16] (Wittgenstein1953a), §432.
[17] (Wittgenstein 1980), p. 52.
[18] (Wittgenstein 2003), p. 309.
[19] (Wittgenstein 1953a), §663.
[20] *Id*., §133.
[21] (Wittgenstein 1967), §236. See also *id*., §233.
[22] (Wittgenstein 1953a), II, xi, p. 192.
[23] (Wittgenstein 197'), I, IX, §127.

We may thus briefly summarize the parallelism Wittgenstein suggests between words and pictures. In both cases, pictures and words cannot live in isolation, but need to be integrated in a natural environment. As observed in the *Philosophical Grammar*, "[i]t is only in a language that something is a proposition"[24]. The situation of pictures is by no means different: for Wittgenstein's claim is that "[s]omething is a picture only in a picture-language"[25]. The parallelism between words and pictures then extends to the nature of the natural system they need to participate in. In the case of pictures, such an environment lies in the form of life they are embedded in. In the case of words, their "natural surroundings" is the linguistic system to which they belong. In both cases, the reference to forms of life is a key to the life of symbols. In Wittgenstein's idea, "to imagine a language means to imagine a form of life"[26]: and this is true whether the language in question should be a language of words or a language of pictures.

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[24] *Id*., I, VI, p. 84.
[25] *Ibid*., I, IX, §123.
[26] (Wittgenstein 1953a), §19 (translation modified).