Wittgenstein's Conception of Language in Teaching and in the Comprehension of Concepts

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In *Philosophical Investigations* (PI), Wittgenstein explicitly presents his new language conception, describing, right at the beginning of this work, some simple situations about the use of words, such as when we ask someone to bring us "five red apples" from the market, or, when a building constructor asks his helper to bring him different materials. The comprehension of these orders presupposes the mastery of different techniques employed in the use of each word, techniques which are *learned* within a determined form of life (PI 1-2). After describing the acts involved in these primitive processes of the use of words, he makes an unusual analogy between these described situations and the idea of a game, proposing that we think of these primitive processes in the use of words "as one of those games by means of which children learn their native language". These are then referred to as "language-games", in the sense that they form a totality, consisting of the verbal language as well as the activity into which it is woven (PI 7).

Wittgenstein begins to employ the expression "language-game", instead of merely "language", throughout his later work. This apparently simple and innocuous change radically breaks off from the Platonic tradition of thinking, and alters profoundly the referential concept of language, both rooted in the image[1] that there would be autonomous meanings, of an extralinguistic nature, communicated through the different tongues. That is exactly the image I aim to argue against, keeping in mind its implications in current educational theories and practices.

1. Platonic Essentialism *versus* "Family Resemblances"

The Platonic dialogues make evident Socrates' efforts to investigate, with his interlocutors, the essence that would be behind concepts like virtue, justice, courage, knowledge, among others. Nevertheless, even strictly following the dialectic laws, they do not attain an exact and precise definition of the concepts they investigate. In *Meno* (1966), the enquiry into the possibility of teaching virtue ends with the following words from the master of maieutics to his interlocutor Meno: "On our present reasoning then, whoever has virtue gets it by divine dispensation. But we shall not understand the truth of the matter until, before asking how men get virtue, we try to discover what virtue is in and by itself" (100 B).

As we see in this aporetical ending, a precise and exact definition of virtue is an unequivocal condition to deduce any sense that results from the application of this concept: whether it is possible to be taught, or acquired as divine dispensation, among other possibilities. An essence of the concept is therefore assumed, that does not depend *a priori* on any use that has been made of the word virtue. It is against this essentialism that Wittgenstein rebelled, when he realized that this manner of thinking was impregnated in all the areas of knowledge, including in *Tractatus*, whose pretention was to exhibit the logical form, a common fixed essence to language and to the world

(PI 23). Hence, he was opposed to the Platonic essentialism, observing (*schau*) how concepts are effectively employed in their different contexts of application:

> I cannot characterize my standpoint better than by saying that it is opposed to that which Socrates represents in the Platonic dialogues. For if I was asked what knowledge is, I would list items of knowledge and add "and suchlike." There is no common element to be found in all of them, because there isn't one. (TS 302 14)

We can already see, in this passage of the intermediate phase (1930-32), the concept of "family resemblance", that will clearly be expressed in PI, in opposition to the idea of an essence of concepts: we only have different applications of words, related among each other, in several manners, without there being something in common to *all* of them (PI 67). To believe that there is a precise sense of a concept, regardless of its effective application, leads to misunderstandings and confusions, like the belief in the existence of meanings situated in ideal, mental or empirical domains, which could be reached through the application of a teaching method.

2. The Criticism to the Referential Conception of Language

One of the first philosophers to be interested in the relationships among language, teaching and meaning, as we know, was Augustine. In the last of his dialogues, titled *The Teacher*, he delves into the purposes of language and reaches, at least, one conclusion that would influence the greater part of the current pedagogical guidelines: language should essentially teach and recall the meanings that were already *a priori* in some manner within the spirit of whoever listens. Although it is not through language that you *learn*, because words become empty of meaning if there is no contemplative attitude, back to within oneself, the necessary condition so that there is a true access to the contents taught:

> But men make the mistake of calling people "teachers" when they are not that at all, because there is generally no interval of time between the moment of speaking and that of knowing, and because their coming to learn from within follows quickly upon the suggestive force of the speaker's words, they think that they have learned externally from him who spoke those words. (Augustine 2004 59)

It is as if the word had only the function to refer to that which already exists in some manner in the external or internal world. The role of language would only be to evoke these meanings *a priori*. The influence of Platonic essentialism can be perceived clearly in this referential conception of language. However, in Augustine's work, these meanings take the form of supposed mental entities, located in an interior world, which are covered by language with more or less precision. We can see here, a sketch of the possibility of a private language; characterized by Wittgenstein in the following manner:

Someone coming into a strange country will sometimes learn the language of the inhabitants from ostensive definitions that they give him; and he will often have to *guess* the meaning of these definitions; and will guess sometimes right, sometimes wrong.

And now, I think, we can say: Augustine describes the learning of human language as if the child came into a strange country; that is, as if it already had a language, only not this one. Or again: as if the child could already *think*, only not yet speak. And "think" would here mean something like "talk to itself". (PI 32)

Going against that concept of language, Wittgenstein resorts to a banal, and at the same time clarifying example, that unmistakably expresses the public character of thought:

Look at the blue of the sky and say to yourself "How blue the sky is!" – When you do it spontaneously – without philosophical intentions – the idea never crosses your mind that this impression of colour belongs only to *you*. And you have no hesitation in exclaiming that to someone else. And if you point at anything as you say the words you point at the sky. I am saying: you have not the feeling of pointing-into-yourself, which often accompanies 'naming the sensation' when one is thinking about 'private language'. Nor do you think that really you ought not to point to the colour with your hand, but with your attention. (Consider what it means 'to point to something with the attention".) (PI 275)

Thus, if we do not *think*, but *look* (PI 66) as we act when uttering perceptive states, we ascertain that we have no doubts of being understood. We just follow rules that were learned in our forms of life and constitute the meaning of the words "blue", "sky", etc. When we teach a child the color blue, we point to different objects with different shades of blue, until the child, when faced with a shade of blue not yet known, is capable of saying: "this object is also blue!" At this moment, you no longer employ the word blue as a label, but establish the concept of blue. In other words, the perception becomes *conceptual*. To understand the exclamation "How blue the sky is!" is simply being able to, before a new situation, operate techniques and procedures already learned.

Therefore, there is not one essential meaning, as Plato and Augustine thought, of blue, common to all, prior to the naming of this color. Some communities do not even distinguish blue from green: simply because they did not *learn* to make this conceptual distinction. They use the same name to express both what we perceive as blue or green. This does not mean that they cannot learn new rules and, therefore, also make these distinctions.

It is in this sense that our perception of the blue sky does not express an interior state as Augustine would declare. W*e learn* the language game of colors by following rules of a conventional nature, which were constituted in a practice that is common, *public* and not private. It is the mastery of different techniques and procedures, obtained by teaching and training that allows the construction of the senses. However, Augustine was a pioneer in mentalist theories of meaning, that still have an impact on the contemporary pedagogical theories of the western world.

3. Rousseau's Ideas and the New School

In 1762, Rousseau published a pedagogical treaty that would influence almost all modern and contemporary educators: *Emílio*. Although this work is essentially a reflection about education, the naturalist philosopher also delves into the issues of language and its relationship with teaching, with echoes of Augustine and Plato throughout this work, as can be seen in these two passages:

Whatever the study, without the idea of the represented things, the representative signs are nothing. However, we always limit the child to these signs, without ever making her understand none of the things they represent (1964 106).

It is from the first word that the child is satisfied, it is from the first thing it learns trusting on the word of another person, without having itself noticed its utility, that its judgement is lost: it will be a long time to shy in front of the fools before repairing such lost. (1964 109)

In these and other passages, Rousseau introduces new guidelines to teaching for the next two centuries: the child must learn through things themselves and not through symbols that represent them. His basis was an essentialist and referential conception of language, assuming, like his great masters, Plato and Augustine, that thought precedes language. However, he moves away from them, when affirming that thought does not have an *a priori* nature, but is developed by stages, which are described by him throughout *Emílio*. In this sense, he is considered a pioneer in the psychology of development, which would inspire several pedagogical trends of the new school, such as the pragmatism of Dewey, Piagetian constructivism and the pedagogy of competencies proposed by the sociologist Perrenoud, predominant guidelines, also in the official documents for education of the Brazilian government.

Heirs to the ideas of Rousseau, these pedagogical conceptions adopted the idea that the development of children's cognitive competencies come about in a natural manner, sufficing the provision of suitable learning situations. Besides this principle, Dewey and Perrenoud also incorporated Rousseau's maxim as well as his teaching method: we must teach what the child perceives as *useful*, and it is from experimentation and empirical observation that meanings are built, seen by them as instruments that are perceived to be more or less efficient to solve the problems demanded by the society in which he or she lives.

Nowadays, these principles have condensed themselves into the idea that there would be a natural rationality within the human being to be developed, which permits the comprehension of meanings common to all, which leads to the same Platonic image of extralinguistic autonomous meanings, reached in a natural way. In other words, there is a *naturalization* of the process of knowledge as can be seen in the following passages of one of the official documents for high schools in Brazil:

The new society, arising from the technological revolution and its consequences in production and in the area of information, presents characteristics that make it possible to assure to education autonomy still not reached. This occurs when the development of the cognitive and cultural competencies required for full human

development begins to coincide with what that we expect in the sphere of production.

The new paradigm comes from the understanding that, more and more, the desirable competencies for full human development approximate themselves to the ones necessary to the insertion in the productive process. (Brasil 1999)

Although this passage can be seen as an isolated voice in this Brazilian document, other texts[2], in the most diverse places on the planet, only reiterate this tone, at same time, boastful and dangerously ideological, presenting in a dogmatic manner a fictitious confluence: the development of the most diverse competencies is proposed as if these referred themselves to something from the natural, empirical or mental world, not considering the diverse techniques and methods *invented,* constitutive parts of the senses which are in reality built within language games. From a Wittgensteinian perspective, understanding what was taught does not come from the development of cognitive competencies that assure the maximum effectiveness of the productive systems. It is only the ability to dominate procedures, that is, be capable of following rules of a *conventional* nature, which could be others, in other forms of life.

Endnotes

[1] Moreno's interpretation of the Wittgensteinian concept of image (1993), as the application of words or expressions which force us to think in only one direction.

[2] See, for instance, the Jacques Delors and Gardner reports, written in the nineties and eighties respectively.

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