

'Operating with words' and the Shopping Scene

Ioana Nafornta, Bucharest, Romania

ioana.nafornta@gmail.com

In §1 of the P.I. Wittgenstein describes the following shopping scene. The narrative "I" sends someone shopping, giving him a slip of paper marked "five red apples". The person sent shopping carries the slip of paper to the shopkeeper. The shopkeeper then opens a drawer with apples, looks into a chart for the word "red", finds a colour sample opposite it and starts taking one apple of the colour sample found in the chart for each numeral from one to five, which he says out loud. Immediately after describing this shopping scene Wittgenstein remarks "– It is in this and similar ways that one operates with words. –".

Mulhall claims that the remark "It is in this and similar ways that one operates with words." implies that the shopping scene "is a paradigm of the ordinary – an everyday tale of buying and selling" (Mulhall 2001, 44). I question this claim and show that it rests on an assumption which is false.

First, note that Wittgenstein himself would *not* acknowledge the shopping scene he describes in §1 as 'ordinary'. In §53 he says:

We don't usually carry out the order "Bring me a red flower" by looking up the colour red in a colour chart and then bringing a flower of the colour that we find in the chart.

If we do not usually carry out the order "Bring me a red flower" by consulting a colour chart, neither do we usually carry out the request "five red apples" by consulting a colour chart. Wittgenstein would thus not call the shopping scene 'ordinary' or usual at all.

Second, the remark "It is in this and similar ways that one operates with words." implies that the shopping scene is a paradigmatic case for '*operating with words*'. In order to claim that this same remark implies that the shopping scene is a paradigm of the ordinary, Mulhall would need to assume that '*operating with words*' is just what we usually do with words. I shall show now that this assumption on which Mulhall's claim rests – that '*operating with words*' is just what we usually do with words – is false.

What we do with words is: to use them. I shall show that '*operating with words*' and '*using words*' are not equivalent expressions; the expression '*operating with words*' refers to only a part of the cases of '*using words*'. I do not want to show that '*operating with words*' is not at all '*using words*'. But, what I purpose to show is that not all cases of using words are also cases of operating with words. In order to show this I shall clarify the expression '*operating with words*'. This expression is in need of clarification because it is not an ordinary expression in English (and neither is its equivalent in German). We talk of operating with machines, with instruments or tools, with numbers and other things. But we do not normally say that we operate with words.

Since we do not have an original language game for this expression in ordinary language, in order to understand what '*operating with words*' means, we need to investigate how this expression is introduced and used by Wittgenstein. I shall do this with reference only to the P.I.

Referring to the *Blue Book* (see Hallett 1977, 75; Baker and Hacker 2005, 54-55; Savickey 1999, 160), is not of much help in this case. In the *Blue Book* (BB 16, 17, 69) the expression '*operating with words*' is introduced with reference to a similar shopping scene as in P.I. §1. Hence the same work of clarification which needs to be done for P.I. §1 needs to be done there too. Neither does it help that in the *Blue Book* the same scene is referred to both as "a simple example of operating with words" (BB 16) and "a case of the use of words" (BB 17) or "our old example for the use of words" (BB 69). This might lead some commentators into thinking that the expression '*operating with words*' is equivalent with the expression '*using words*'. But saying that *one* case of using words is a case of operating with words does not imply that *all* cases of using words are also cases of operating with words. At most it implies that this and similar cases of using words can be called cases of operating with words. And this brings us back to the P.I. §1.

Let us investigate the P.I. now. Wittgenstein introduces the expression to '*operate with words*' in §1. He then uses it throughout the P.I. only once more, in §449. In §449 Wittgenstein says:

[...] – One can't shake oneself free of the idea that using a sentence consists in imagining something for every word. One fails to bear in mind the fact that one *calculates*, operates, with words, and in due course transforms them into this or that picture. (PI §449)

'*Operating with words*' is used here as an equivalent for '*calculating with words*'. The expression '*to calculate with words*' is itself anything but ordinary, and it is used in the P.I. only in this quoted section. So there is little use to explain '*operating with words*' with reference to '*calculating with words*'. Nevertheless from this passage we get the following picture about '*operating with words*': '*to operate with words*' is analogous to calculating or doing a calculus with fixed rules.

If we think about the shopping scene – which is a case of '*operating with words*' – we can say that the way the shopkeeper acts is analogous to applying a calculus with fixed rules. The shopkeeper goes through specific distinct procedures for each of the three types of words. We can imagine him going through the same kind of procedures for every similar request from his clients, whether they want 25 red or yellow cherries, seven green or yellow bananas and the like. And we can say when he has applied these procedures correctly or not.

Bearing this in mind let us look at how Wittgenstein introduces the expression '*to operate with words*' in §1. He introduces it with reference to the shopping scene: "It is in this and similar ways that one operates with words". There is no doubt that this remark refers to the shopping scene, but it is not clear what the German "so" in "So, und ähnlich, ..." refers to. The English translation for "so" is "this way", but there is more than *one* way of using words in the shopping scene. It is commonly assumed – and not discussed – by commentators that "so" refers only to the way the shopkeeper uses words. But it is not clear why only

what the shopkeeper does with the words should be paradigmatic for 'operating with words'. Are there any reasons to claim that the narrative "I" or the person sent shopping do not operate with words?

Since we have not yet clarified the expression 'to operate with words' we cannot answer this question directly. But since I assume that 'operating with words' is part of what we call 'using words', we can answer the related question, whether there is any reason to claim that the narrative "I" or the person sent shopping do not use words in the shopping scene. Presumably the narrative "I" writes down the words "five red apples" on that slip of paper he or she gives to the person he or she sends shopping. There is no reason to say that writing down words on a paper is not one way of using words. We can say about the narrative "I" that he or she uses words. What about the person sent shopping? This person is given a slip of paper marked with some signs, which he carries to the shopkeeper. It is not straightforward neither that this person uses words, nor that he does not use words. Simply carrying a slip of paper does not make him use the words marked on it. We do not say about the postman that he uses the words marked on our letters he delivers. But if we think about him carrying a slip of paper as something similar to him repeating words (even a string of sounds in a foreign language that he does not know), we could say that he uses words.

And now we come to the second part of how 'operating with words' is introduced in P.I. §1. "It is in this and *similar* ways that one operates with words" (emphasis added). In order to clarify what counts as a case of operating with words we need to show what cases of using words are *similar*, and hence could be called cases of operating with words. And, in order to assess whether everything we call 'using words' is 'operating with words', we need to show whether there are also cases of use of words dissimilar, different, from the family of cases which are similar to the shopping scene.

We can imagine a whole range of uses of words similar to the use of words in the shopping scene (starting from shopping scenes where there is talking instead of handing in slips of paper, where the identification of the colour is done with the help of memory and so on, to scenes of any kind of transactions which imply the use of words). We could say that those using language in these cases apply a calculus with fixed rules. But let us focus on those cases of using words which are dissimilar, different from the way words are used in the shopping scene.

Think of the following use of language: a client comes into a grocery store and asks for seven blue lemons; the shopkeeper replies: "Sorry, we couldn't milk our hen today". This is one way we use words (though maybe only when telling a joke or writing/performing a play). To look for a procedure the shopkeeper goes through or could go through in order to come up with his answer is the same thing as imposing some preconceived idea, a picture of the way language functions, onto the use of language under consideration. Think also of cases of playing with words, cases of freely associating words, writing poetry, telling a strange dream, discussing during a literature or theology seminar and so on. These cases are all cases of using words, but we could not say about them that they are similar to the shopping scene. There is no procedure for each kind of words or for phrases. Hence these cases are not cases of 'operating with words'. Thus, not all cases of using words are cases of operating with words.

If operating with words would be just what we usually do, if the shopping scene would be a paradigm of the ordinary, just like Mulhall suggests, then the way we usually use words should be similar to the way words are being used in the shopping scene. But there is no *one* way we usually use words. And by looking at various cases of using words we see that there are similar but also *different* cases than the use of words in the shopping scene.

According to Wittgenstein "There are *countless* kinds; countless different kinds of use of all the things we call 'signs', 'words', 'sentences'." (P.I. §23). In other words we could not find a paradigmatic case for using words and say that "It is in this and *similar* ways that one uses words". For we use words in *different* ways. On the contrary, Wittgenstein says with respect to the shopping scene that "It is in this and *similar* ways that one *operates* with words" (emphasis added). Thus, operating with words is not the same as using words and the shopping scene is not paradigmatic of the ordinary.

One might feel that since the scene described by Wittgenstein is a scene of buying and selling (and what could be more ordinary than that?), the use of the words in this scene should be ordinary too. After claiming that "It is in this and similar ways that one operates with words." implies that the shopping scene "is a paradigm of the ordinary", Mulhall argues that "nothing could be more extraordinary than this scene of supposedly ordinary life" (Mulhall 2001, 44). Nevertheless, Mulhall attempts at imagining ways for the scene to be ordinary (Mulhall 2001, 46-48). I find this strategy misleading. Instead of trying to account for the ordinariness of a scene which we find to be just the opposite, we should try to account for its extraordinariness.

My suggestion here is the following. "It is in this and similar ways that one operates with words." implies that the shopping scene is a paradigmatic scene for 'operating with words'. The shopping scene is not ordinary because we do not ordinary operate with words, but only – say – in special cases. The purpose of the shopping scene is *not* to present us with an ordinary use of language. Instead, the purpose of the shopping scene is to introduce one picture of the working of our language (an alternative to Augustinian picture). This picture is the picture of using words as *operating* with words and it is meant to help us "shake [ourselves] free of the idea that using [words] consists in imagining something for every word" (see P.I. §449). This picture is not meant to depict how things are, but it has rather a therapeutic purpose.

Literature

Baker, G.P. and Hacker, P.M.S. ²2005 *Wittgenstein: Understanding and Meaning Part II: Exegesis §§1-184* (Volume 1 of an *Analytical Commentary on the Philosophical Investigations*), Oxford: Blackwell.

Hallett, Garth 1977 *A Companion to Wittgenstein's "Philosophical Investigations"*, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press.

Mulhall, Stephen 2001 *Inheritance and Originality: Wittgenstein, Heidegger and Kierkegaard*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Savickey, Beth 1999 *Wittgenstein's Art of Investigation*, London and New York: Routledge.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig 1958 *The Blue and Brown Books*, Oxford: Blackwell. [=BB]

— ⁴2009 *Philosophical Investigations*, Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell [=P.I.]