Attending to the Actual Sayings of Things

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> The famous saying: "Don't ask for the meaning, ask for the use", might have been and I hope was a piece of advice to philosophers, and not to lexicographers or translators. It advised philosophers, I hope, when wrestling with some *aporia*, to switch their attention from the trouble-giving words in their dormancy as language-pieces or dictionary-items to their utilisation in the actual sayings of things; from their general promises when on the shelf to their particular performances when at work; from their permanent purchasing-power when in the bank to the concrete marketing done yesterday morning with them; in short, from these words *quâ* units of a Language to live sentences in which they are being actively employed.
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> Gilbert Ryle 1968, 114

> If the connection between "our words" and "what we mean" is a necessary one, this necessity is not established by universals, propositions, or rules, but by the form of life which makes certain stretches of syntactic utterance *assertions*.
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> Stanley Cavell 1979, 208

1. Uses of "use"

In the huge literature commenting on, or taking its inspiration from, the philosophy of Wittgenstein, the notion of "meaning as use" or "use theory of meaning" has been understood in a number of different ways. This variety has rarely been noted, in fact there is very little discussion focusing on the concept of use in itself. (An exception to this is William P. Alston 1968. But his overview is limited to normative readings. It is also problematic in its running together of word meanings and sentence meanings.) Use has sometimes been understood along the lines of conformity with a practice or usage, sometimes along the lines of function or role. What is in question may be the use of words, or types of sentence, or a particular uttering of a sentence. Sometimes, the interest in use is descriptive, sometimes normative. The emphasis has been on use as a guide to *what* an utterance means, or as giving a clue to whether two utterances *mean the same* or not, or

whether a word has been *rightly used*, or to whether an utterance *has meaning at all* or is nonsense. Sometimes the relation between use and meaning is described in external terms, by saying that use *determines* meaning, at other times the relation is viewed as internal, *meaning consisting* in use.

It is true that this variety is partly due to the fact that Wittgenstein himself may not have had only one thing in mind in talking about use and meaning. Yet some of the readings are actually in conflict with one another, and are linked to widely divergent views of the nature of philosophy. Rather than going through the different readings systematically, I shall do three things. First (Sec. 2), I want to describe the background that has shaped many of these readings, and suggest why that background is misleading. Next (Sec. 3), I want to outline what I think is the central role of appeals to use in Wittgenstein's thought. After that (Secs. 4-5), I want to argue that a focus on use, if consistently carried through, will lead to the reversal of a widespread view of the relation between word meanings and the meaning of what we say.

2. Meaning is "something"

Philosophers have traditionally taken it for granted that there is a feature, called meaning, that is associated with linguistic expressions and explains how communication is possible, i.e. how speakers learn to use words in communicating with others and to respond to other people's use of words. For me to be able to use some word in speaking, it is thought, I must either be cognizant of some entity in my mind or in the outside world which constitutes the meaning of the word, or I must have internalized some system in which the word holds a certain position. In the absence of this, it would be a mystery how the complex phenomena of linguistic communication are possible.

It might be thought, then, that philosophers should be able to give an account of what meaning is. Against this background, it has seemed natural to read Wittgenstein as though that was precisely what he was providing. What he is taken to be saying is that while meaning is not constituted by intensions, or extensions, or reference, or truth-conditions, or assertion-conditions, it is constituted by something else: by use. And, when

we are told that meaning is use, we naturally tend to take this to mean that use provides a *relation* between a linguistic expression and its meaning. When the matter is put in that way, however, it immediately gives rise to a host of questions: what are the terms of this relation? Are they words or sentences? Are they tokens or types? And on the other hand: what is the nature of the relation: is it one of conformity or functionality? Is it a normative or a descriptive relation? Is it internal or external? etc.

What I shall be arguing is that there is no room for these types of question in Wittgenstein's thought. In bringing use to the fore, Wittgenstein is not proposing an account of the relation between expressions and their meanings, but simply suggesting a way of looking at what we do when we speak.

When Wittgenstein has been taken to provide an *account* of meaning, the concept of a language-game and the problem of rule-following have naturally come to occupy centre stage. What we are being offered, it is thought, is a holistic and practical view of meaning: we are encouraged to look at the rules regulating the use of an expression in the context of some larger activity in which that expression has a role. In pointing to the connection between speech and various forms of non-verbal activity, this account draws attention to the different role of words in different contexts, and more widely to cultural or historical variations among human speech forms and activities.

Among the drawbacks of this account, or should we say, of the way it has been understood both by some adherents and some critics, is the fact that it has lent itself to rather facile ways of dismissing philosophical problems, such as responding to a difficulty by saying, "Well, that's what the language-game is like", or fitting recalcitrant forms of language into ready-made boxes; it has also encouraged some rather simplified conventional or relativist accounts of meaning and culture (criticized by Cora Diamond in her 1999). One of the most incisive critiques of the language-game view is that of Rush Rhees, who argues that it fails to do justice to the ways in which the various aspects of language hang together, and, on the whole, to the deep significance of language in our lives.

Unquestionably language-games and rule-following are prominent themes in Wittgenstein's later work. But I would suggest that these notions are best read as metaphors meant to help us get around certain types of phi-

losophical difficulty, rather than as offering an analysis of "what language essentially *is*". Wittgenstein is not trying to advance an account of meaning in competition with those already current, but rather getting us to look at questions of meaning in ways designed to make certain difficulties disappear. Philosophers who read an account of meaning into Wittgenstein's remarks about use, I would suggest, are like the dog who keeps looking at your finger when you are trying to point at something.

3. Look behind the picture!

When we are baffled by the sense of some expression in the course of philosophical reflection, Wittgenstein is telling us, we should look at the way the expression occurs in human conversation. Here is an example from the *Philosophical Investigations* (Wittgenstein 2009):

> 305. "But you surely can't deny that, for example, in remembering, an inner process takes place." – What gives the impression that we want to deny anything? … What we deny is that the picture of an inner process gives us the correct idea of the use of the word "to remember". Indeed, we're saying that this picture, with its ramifications, stands in the way of our seeing the use of the word as it is.

Think about the uses we make of the words "I remember": we may use them to make a judgment or to correct someone else's judgment, to explain what I do or why I am in a certain mood, or we may utter them in conversing about a shared experience, or in testing my ability to remember things, etc. Again, in saying that someone else remembered something or other, we may simply mean, for instance, that she succeeded in carrying out some task or answer a question. Whether or not some specific process of remembering occurred in the person said to remember, this has no relevance to the sense of what is said. In fact, there is no distinctive feature or phenomenon that is shared by all the different cases in which the verb "to remember" is being applied to a person. The conviction that there has to be such a feature or phenomenon seems to be grounded in the idea that something must guide our use of the word "remember"; otherwise, how could we know when to use it or understand what others mean by it? This conviction is what keeps us from looking at what is going on in actual cases.

(On a similar theme, see *PI* §§ 348, 360, 363, 370, 383, 422, 423, 424, 426, 427, 520, Part II, p. 187 f.)

What is it to be responsive to Wittgenstein's reminders? The problem is that we have subsumed the uses of an expression under a unified picture. The suggestion is not that the picture is the wrong one and we should exchange it for another (some readers of Wittgenstein, I believe, have taken the language-game to be intended precisely as a "better picture"). The problem, rather, is that it *is* a picture. It gives us the idea that there is no need for looking at particular cases in all their variety: those cases, we assume, have nothing to teach us, since we already have an overview.

> A picture is conjured up which seems to fix the sense unambiguously. The actual use, compared with that traced out by the picture, seems like something muddied...
> In the actual use of these expressions we, as it were, make detours, go by side-roads. We see the straight highway before us, but of course cannot use it, because it is permanently closed. (*PI* § 426)

4. On being held to one's words

To get clear about the role of appeals to use it is important, I believe, to note the difference between two types of question that may be raised about uses of expressions – or rather, to recognize how deep the difference between them is. The distinction I have in mind has some affinity with that hinted at by Frege in the context principle, but it also finds expression, to some degree, in the writings of Rush Rhees (1998), Stanley Cavell (1979), Cora Diamond (1989), James Conant (1998), and Charles Travis (1999), among others (and in a way too in the later work of Donald Davidson, see his 1996). Those who note this distinction do not always seem to be fully aware of its radical nature, and hence end up with a kind of hybrid view of the problem.

The distinction that needs to be made here is that between the questions that may arise when someone has actually made an utterance by which she means (or is taken to mean) what she says, and those that may arise when a speaker is simply imagined to be saying something, or says something without meaning it (as in a play or in a grammatical exercise).

In the first case, there is a question of the speaker *being held* to her words and what that entails, in the second case there is no question of being held to anything.

Consider two examples:

1: a teacher sends Stella to find an empty auditorium. She comes back, pointing to a door and telling the teacher, "*That* room is empty".

2: in *Webster's Third New International Dictionary*, we find the following definition of the word "empty": "containing nothing : devoid of contents : not filled … *esp.* : lacking typical, expected, or former contents…" (the definition goes on for most of a column).

The dictionary definition is an example of the latter type of claim: it does not *use* the word "empty" but says what someone would mean or might mean if she were to use the word. What is the relation between the dictionary definition and what Stella can be held to? The received view is that, if true, her words are true *in virtue of* the fact which is recorded in the dictionary, i.e. in virtue of the fact that the word "empty" means what it does (and similarly for the other words she spoke). What the dictionary is saying, as it were, is: "supposing someone said [sentence containing the word 'empty'], what her words would mean is [sentence containing other words in place of the word 'empty']". Of course, the dictionary does not list everything anybody ever said and ever will say, but there is no need for it to do so, we think: the dictionary gives a general description that can then be applied in individual cases. It gives the *semantics* of a word, it will be said.

In this way, it might be thought, a dictionary definition will be sufficient as a guide to usage. However, as a guide it is rather crude. The dictionary speaks of "typical, expected, or former contents", but in the present case what matters is not what one might expect to find or what one will typically find in a lecture room, nor what used to be there before, but probably whether there is a class there or some other activity that would prevent one from using the room for whatever purpose one had in mind. Its being right for Stella to say that the room is empty is bound up with the teacher's reason for asking her to check. Are there students lingering there after class? Would that entail that the room was not empty? That would depend on what he needed the room for, and maybe too on the chances of finding an alternative auditorium. On the other hand, if Stella discovered

that all the furniture had been taken out of the room, she probably would not tell the teacher the room was *empty*, even though it would then fulfil the dictionary definition, in lacking both its typical, expected and former contents.

Here it may be retorted that a dictionary definition may still be sufficient *in principle* to determine whether it would be correct to apply some word in a given situation. The definition would simply have to be extended to accommodate all the nuances that might possibly bear on its application; however, there is really no need for such a huge dictionary anyway, since we manage quite well without it. The main point, we think, is that the *kind of knowledge* we need in order to speak and to understand words is of the kind that could, "in principle", be reproduced in a dictionary. (Consider, in this connection, Wittgenstein's remarks about describing the use of the word "God" in his 1998, p. 94e.)

However, this idea is mistaken. Suppose there is a disagreement. When the teacher goes to the room he discovers that it is not empty: there is a group of students there engaged in a lively discussion. Stella tells him she thought that did not matter. Who is right? Suppose there were this huge dictionary listing all conceivable situations described (the type of dictionary we supposedly carry with us in our minds), would that settle it? Everything hangs on how they regard the situation. If they did agree on how to define the situation, there would be no disagreement in the first place; since they do not agree, the dictionary is no use.

The dictionary definition does not, as it were, reach "all the way down": either we must be able to tell whether the definition holds in this case, or alternatively we must be able to decide what else the speaker means; if we cannot, we simply cannot be sure of what she is saying. In a great many everyday situations no problem of understanding arises: our understanding reaches all the way down. The dictionary, then, fails to capture the *character* of our normal understanding. (This point is analogous to Quine's argument for the indeterminacy of translation. If all we have to go on is external facts about the behaviour of language users, our understanding of other speakers could never be more than hypothetical. But of course that is not the predicament we are normally in, as members of a language community.)

What Stella can be held to when she says that the room is empty depends on how we understand the activity to which her speaking those words belongs. Her utterance is part of an ongoing interaction: how words enter into it depends on how that interaction is understood. We cannot lay down the correct use of the word "empty" once and for all because we cannot delimit the varieties of human activity once and for all.

5. The rest is psychology

On the received view, a speaker's utterance is a syntactic and semantic structure which determines the conditions under which it is true or false. Philosophers have often thought about utterances on the model of mathematical expressions, the value of which is uniquely determined by the signs of which they are composed, by their place in the calculus. If somebody tells me I got an equation wrong, my defence must lie in an appeal to the rules for the use of the signs in the formula. However, mathematics leads us astray as a model for speaking. It is sometimes thought that "everyday language" is a crude approximation to the precision of mathematics, words being encumbered by ambiguity, vagueness and shifts in meaning. But this is not the point. The difference between the use of mathematical signs and words is not a difference of degree but of kind: mathematical symbols have a different relation than words to the activity of which they are a part. The context for the use of mathematical symbols is mathematical calculations or proofs (except when they occur in a verbal context, say, in counting objects or giving measurements), roughly in the way the context for a chess move is a chess game and nothing else. This is connected with the point that someone who writes down or reads out a mathematical expression by itself is not *saying* anything, and so the sense of what he is reading or writing is not dependent on *what* he is saying. The mathematical expression has a fixed context, one that is given with its being regarded as a mathematical expression, whereas the context of "That room is empty", if imagined in isolation, is unlimited.

If semantics is what dictionary definitions describe, and if questions of logic are questions about what a speaker can be held to, then what I have been saying is that there are no logical connections between logic and semantics. And furthermore: it is really only with regard to the individual

case that questions of logic can be raised. Semantics, in a sense, belongs to the realm of psychology: it consists in practical advice, based on observations of others' usage or on one's own sense of meaning. (We should note that there are two different senses in which questions of meaning can be (mis)taken for psychological questions. On the one hand, there is what I believe Frege had in mind: the idea that meaning consists in one's associating an expression with some idea or image; what I have been talking about, on the other hand, are generalizations about linguistic behaviour.)

This means that the standard view of the relation between logic and psychology needs to be reversed: it has often been held that logic concerns itself with the general, underlying structure of language, whereas the individual case, the question of "speaker's meanings", is psychological. What I have been arguing, on the contrary, is that there is no generality in logic; the only generality is on the level of psychology.[*]

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